



Article History
Received: 2026.06.14
Accepted: 2026.07.10
Published: 2026.08.17

Issue no: 01 | Vol no: 07 | August 2026: 96-109

Story Selection Processes as a Determinant of Political Bias in Broadcast Programmes in Nakuru County, Kenya

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Cite this article in APA

Maingi, W. J. (2026). Story selection processes as a determinant of political bias in broadcast programmes in Nakuru County, Kenya. *Editon consortium journal of media communication studies*, 7(1), 96–109. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjmcs.v7i1.743>

Abstract

This study examined the influence of story selection processes on political bias in broadcast programmes in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study was guided by Agenda-Setting Theory and Gatekeeping Theory, which explain how editorial choices determine the salience, visibility, and interpretation of political information. A mixed-methods descriptive design was adopted. The study targeted heads of stations, editors, producers, reporters, presenters, and Media Council officials at five local radio and television stations in Nakuru County, as well as listeners and viewers of political broadcasts in Nakuru City. Census sampling was used to include all 74 media professionals, while 385 listeners and viewers were selected from identifiable consumers appearing in the five stations' programme-engagement records during the study period. The total sample comprised 459 respondents. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from the audience, while interview schedules were used to obtain qualitative data from media professionals. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS Version 30, while interview data were analysed through manual thematic coding. Findings showed that unclear editorial criteria, selective prioritisation of politically convenient stories, the omission of sensitive issues, and political pressure led to bias in broadcast programmes. In contrast, transparent selection criteria and broad issue coverage reduced it. The study concluded that story selection significantly influences political bias because it determines which political realities audiences encounter and which are suppressed or minimised. These findings are significant for broadcast editors, media regulators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen editorial independence, fairness, and public trust in county-level political broadcasting in Kenya.

Key words: Agenda-setting, broadcast programmes, gatekeeping, political bias, story selection.



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INTRODUCTION

Broadcast stations are expected to provide balanced and objective political information that enables citizens to make informed decisions. Professional journalism requires editors and producers to select stories according to public interest, relevance, factual importance, and diversity of perspectives. Yet political bias continues to appear in broadcast programmes through selective coverage, unequal visibility of political actors, the omission of sensitive topics, and the prioritisation of stories that align with institutional or partisan interests. The scale of this concern is not merely anecdotal: the Media Council of Kenya's State of the Media Survey found that 73.6 per cent of Kenyans considered coverage of government affairs unfair or biased in 2024, evidence of how widely political bias in broadcast and other news content is perceived by the public (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). In Nakuru County specifically, some broadcast programmes appear to give prominence to high-profile leaders, campaign activities, and politically convenient controversies while giving limited attention to governance failures, public policy debates, smaller parties, independent candidates, and citizen concerns.

Broadcast media remain central to political communication because they provide citizens with information that shapes their understanding of leaders, parties, public policies, and governance performance. In county-level political environments such as Nakuru County, radio and television programmes are especially influential because they reach audiences in familiar languages and offer immediate interpretation of public affairs. Political news bulletins, morning shows, interviews, call-in programmes, and panel discussions do not merely transmit events; they select, order, emphasise, and interpret them. For this reason, the process through which political stories are chosen for broadcast is a major determinant of whether audiences receive balanced information or partisan representations of political life.

Story selection is the editorial decision-making process by which journalists, editors, and producers determine which political events, actors, controversies, policy questions, or governance issues should receive airtime. These decisions involve assessing news value, public interest, timeliness, conflict, prominence, proximity, editorial policy, audience appeal, and institutional priorities. In principle, story selection should be guided by professional criteria that support fairness, accuracy, pluralism, and public interest. In practice, however, story

selection can become a channel for political bias when certain actors receive repeated attention. At the same time, others are ignored when controversies involving preferred leaders are minimised, when public-interest issues are displaced by political drama, or when stories are framed to advance a particular ideological position.

The global literature on media bias shows that political slant is not always produced through direct falsehood or visible editorial endorsement; it often emerges through routine choices about inclusion, exclusion, placement, tone, and repetition, and is intensified in many democracies by commercial competition, political polarisation, and pressure to retain audiences. Cagé et al. (2025), analysing two decades of French television and radio broadcasts, found that outlet-level editorial decisions, rather than individual journalists' personal preferences, account for most of the differences in political coverage across broadcast media, indicating that newsroom routines are a stronger driver of political slant than any single reporter's views. The Reuters Institute's Digital News Report similarly shows that trust in the news remains fragile in many countries and that audiences often gravitate toward outlets whose coverage matches their existing political views (Newman et al., 2023), so that story selection can deepen echo chambers by repeatedly exposing audiences to narratives that favour one side of political debate.

African broadcast environments face similar dynamics, compounded by ownership concentration, state influence, advertising dependence, and weaker institutional safeguards. In Nigeria, Cervi et al. (2022) show how the close intertwining of political actors and news outlets shapes which stories and figures receive editorial priority. On the other hand, in Ethiopia, Kiflu et al. (2021) show that hosts of televised political deliberation programmes face pressure from government authorities and from guests reluctant to speak openly, so that politically sensitive topics are softened or avoided. Kenya's broadcast sector, though vibrant and relatively plural, is not exempt from these pressures. During election periods, Kenyan broadcast stations have been criticised for unequal airtime, selective reporting, and story framing that favours particular parties or coalitions.

Gicheru and Nyabuga (2023) note that Kenyan media continue to operate under political and economic pressure, with some outlets facing threats over their coverage of government and opposition activity and

journalists facing harassment that has a chilling effect on reporting. Such pressures can produce uneven visibility for political actors and weaken editorial independence even where a formally diverse broadcast sector exists, demonstrating that media plurality does not, by itself, guarantee impartial political reporting.

Nakuru County provides a relevant setting for examining the role of story selection in political bias. The county is politically active, demographically diverse, and served by several local and regional broadcast outlets, including Radio Amani, Sauti ya Mwananchi, MBCI, Egerton Radio, and Kass FM, which play an important role in informing audiences about county politics, development issues, party competition, and public accountability. Because county politics often involves close relationships between media workers, advertisers, owners, and political elites, editorial decisions about what to air may become vulnerable to partisan influence. Audiences in Nakuru County have expressed concern that some stations highlight certain political leaders while underreporting others, focus heavily on campaign events and political controversies, and avoid stories that could embarrass influential actors — patterns that indicate story selection is not a neutral technical routine but a site where political visibility is negotiated.

Existing studies in Kenya have examined media ownership, election coverage, and national-level political reporting, but considerably less empirical attention has been given to the county-level story selection process. This gap is significant because local broadcasters operate in proximity to county politicians, advertisers, and audiences, relationships that may affect editorial independence in ways that differ from national media houses; without empirical attention to how political stories are chosen, prioritised, or excluded at this level.

Previous studies have not established which specific dimensions of the editorial process — criteria-setting, story sequencing, topic-range restriction, or deliberate omission — are most implicated in producing bias in county broadcasting, as distinct from simply noting that national and county contexts differ geographically. Thus, this study addresses that gap, with the specific objective of examining the influence of story selection processes in promoting political bias among broadcast programmes in Nakuru County.

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, describes the mixed-methods descriptive design and procedures used to collect and analyse data, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes with recommendations for broadcast stations, media regulators, and future researchers.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory explains how media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive attention. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that the media may not directly tell audiences what to think, but they powerfully influence what audiences think about. In political broadcasting, this occurs when editors repeatedly select certain stories for prominence while giving little or no attention to others. The more frequently a political actor, conflict, scandal, or policy issue appears in broadcasts, the more likely audiences are to regard it as important. Recent field research confirms that this influence operates not only through the issues covered, but also through repeated exposure to the specific news factors that make a story appear newsworthy in the first place (Geiß, 2022).

The theory is highly relevant to story selection because the first level of agenda-setting concerns issue salience. When a station consistently leads with stories about a particular political leader, coalition, or controversy, it elevates that subject in the public mind; conversely, when issues such as health service delivery, corruption, education, youth unemployment, or county budgeting receive minimal airtime, they become less visible in political debate. Agenda-setting also operates through repeated exposure: if audiences in Nakuru County repeatedly encounter stories that present certain leaders as active, influential, or central to development, they may come to view those leaders as more politically significant than others, while opposition voices, smaller parties, independent candidates, or civic groups that are rarely selected for coverage may be assumed to be less relevant.

Political bias therefore arises not only from negative or positive language but also from patterns of repeated visibility and invisibility. In this study, Agenda-Setting Theory provides a framework for understanding how story selection processes in Nakuru County shape political bias by determining which political issues and actors become salient.

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping Theory focuses on the processes through which information is filtered before reaching the public. In journalism, gatekeepers include reporters, editors, producers, programme hosts, station managers, and sometimes owners or political actors who influence editorial decisions. The theory assumes that news does not pass automatically from events to audiences; it moves through several decision points at which some stories are accepted, modified, delayed, minimised, or rejected. This theory is directly applicable to broadcast story selection because only a small portion of daily political events can be aired, and editors must decide which events have news value, which voices to include, which stories should lead bulletins, and which issues should be discussed on talk shows. These decisions may be professional but may also reflect ideological preferences, commercial considerations, audience expectations, ownership interests, or external pressure, so that gatekeeping can produce political bias when the filters are neither transparent nor balanced.

Gatekeeping is particularly consequential in local media contexts, where county-based broadcasters often depend on political sources for information, access, advertising, and programme sponsorship. This dependence may influence whether certain stories are considered acceptable for broadcast: sensitive stories involving powerful leaders may be softened or dropped, while stories that favour allied actors may be amplified. Gatekeeping Theory also helps explain omission as a form of bias, because political bias is not limited to what is said; it also includes what is left unsaid. This study therefore uses Gatekeeping Theory to explain how editorial filters among Nakuru County broadcasters may promote political bias through the selective inclusion, exclusion, prioritisation, and suppression of political stories.

Complementarity of the Two Theories

Although Agenda-Setting Theory and Gatekeeping Theory address different aspects of media influence, they complement one another in explaining story selection processes in this study. Gatekeeping Theory explains the internal, largely invisible editorial decisions through which political stories are filtered, prioritised, or excluded before broadcast.

In contrast, Agenda-Setting Theory explains the external, observable consequences of those decisions — the

shaping of public perceptions of which political actors and issues matter. Gatekeeping therefore describes the mechanism of bias, while agenda-setting describes its effect on audiences. Read jointly, the two theories provide a fuller account of how the internal newsroom process of story selection produces the external outcome of political salience and visibility among audiences of broadcast programmes in Nakuru County, and together they guided the design of the survey and interview instruments used in this study.

Empirical Review

A growing body of empirical work supports the view that story selection is a major driver of political bias. However, studies vary in how directly they attribute this to editorial versus structural causes. Røsok-Dahl and Kristine Olsen (2024), studying a public broadcaster's newsroom, found that editorial gatekeeping now operates as an ongoing process across production and distribution, with journalists continuing to shape a story's visibility even after it is first published. On the other hand, Cagé et al. (2025) found that editorial choices made at the outlet level, more than the preferences of individual journalists, are the main source of unequal coverage of political actors and events. Read together, these studies indicate that bias is best understood as an institutional and continuous process rather than a discrete decision made by any single journalist — a point that later Kenyan-focused studies in this review have not always made explicit, tending instead to describe bias as a static feature of coverage at one point in time.

Studies in African media contexts confirm that story selection is shaped by political and economic pressure. Still, they do not speak with one voice on how far this pressure translates into biased content. Cervi et al. (2022) found that Nigerian political actors and news outlets have become closely intertwined, with political affiliations affecting the coverage of parties and candidates and narrowing the diversity of issues reaching audiences. Ahmad et al. (2025) similarly found that Nigerian newspapers' campaign coverage was pulled toward candidates' own social media activity rather than independent editorial judgement.

In contrast, Wamunyu and Wahutu (2019), examining digital newsroom practices in Kenyan commercial media houses, found that many journalists continued to apply conventional professional gatekeeping norms despite commercial and technological pressures, suggesting that

structural pressures on newsrooms do not automatically or uniformly translate into partisan story selection. This divergence indicates that the link between political-economic pressure and editorial bias is conditional rather than automatic, and that local newsroom culture may moderate the effect, a nuance the present study is attentive to in interpreting its own findings.

In Kenya specifically, political bias in story selection has been linked to ownership interests, electoral competition, and editorial pressure. Gicheru and Nyabuga (2023) report that Kenyan journalists continue to navigate political pressure, including threats to broadcast licences and harassment linked to coverage of government and opposition activity, and the Media Council of Kenya (2024) documents that a majority of the public perceived government-related coverage as unfair as recently as 2024.

Consequently, Cohen et al. (2024), studying citizen journalism in Nairobi's Kibera settlement, show that community journalists often step in where mainstream broadcasters underreport local governance concerns, highlighting gaps in the visibility mainstream coverage affords to ordinary citizens' issues. Taken together, these Kenyan studies confirm that story selection can determine which leaders, parties, and issues become visible to citizens, but, consistent with the critical reading above, they have mostly examined national media houses, election-period monitoring, or ownership structures rather than the routine, day-to-day editorial process at the county level.

This is the specific gap the present study addresses. Nakuru County's media environment includes community, private, religious, and regional stations whose story selection routines may reflect local power relations in ways that national-level studies cannot capture; for instance, a station may prioritise the campaign activities of influential local leaders, underreport critical county-governance issues, or avoid stories involving local sponsors and political allies. What prior research has not established is how these dynamics operate through the specific mechanics of story selection, the clarity of editorial criteria, the sequencing and prioritisation of stories, the breadth of political topics covered, and the deliberate omission of sensitive stories at the county broadcasting level. By examining these dimensions directly among broadcast programmes in Nakuru County, this study extends the literature beyond

general observations about political-economic pressure toward a more precise account of how story selection, as an editorial practice, produces political bias.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Nakuru County, Kenya, and specifically among broadcast audiences and media professionals within Nakuru City, the county's principal urban and media hub. Nakuru County is a major political, commercial, and media centre within the Rift Valley region, and its cosmopolitan population and active political culture make it an important setting for studying political communication. The county hosts several local and regional radio and television stations that broadcast political news, talk shows, interviews, and public affairs programmes, serving urban, peri-urban, and rural audiences and therefore contributing significantly to how citizens understand county and national politics. The study focused on broadcast programmes because radio and television remain influential sources of political information in the county, with local broadcasters having direct contact with audiences and providing political content in languages and formats residents easily understand. This influence also raises concerns about bias, especially where political stories are selected according to partisan, commercial, or ownership interests rather than public interest.

The study adopted a mixed-methods descriptive research design, combining a descriptive survey component with a qualitative interview component. The design was appropriate because the study sought to describe existing perceptions, practices, and patterns in story selection without manipulating any variables, and to explain those patterns in participants' own words. The descriptive component enabled the researcher to measure the level of agreement of media professionals and audience members with statements relating to editorial criteria, transparency, political pressure, and topic diversity. Using structured questionnaires; the qualitative component, drawing on interview schedules administered to listeners and viewers, provided deeper explanations of how political stories are selected, how certain stories are prioritised or avoided, and why audiences perceive some stations as biased. Integrating the two strands within a single mixed-methods descriptive design strengthened the interpretation of the findings through triangulation.

The target population comprised media professionals and audiences connected to political broadcast programmes at

five local radio and television stations in Nakuru County, namely Radio Amani, Sauti ya Mwananchi, MBCI, Egerton Radio, and Kass FM. The study also included listeners and viewers of political programmes broadcast by these stations within Nakuru City.

The media professional population comprised station heads, editors, producers, news reporters, presenters, and Media Council officials. The population comprised 74 media professionals, as shown in Table 1. Because this population was relatively small and accessible, census sampling was employed. Consequently, all 74 media professionals were included in the study.

For the audience component, the target population comprised regular listeners and viewers of political programmes broadcast by the five selected stations within Nakuru City. The accessible audience population consisted of identifiable consumers appearing in the stations' programme-engagement records during the study period. These records included programme call-in registers, SMS/USSD participation records, and programme-specific social-media engagement records. Duplicate entries were excluded where multiple records referred to the same individual.

Because a complete enumeration of all eligible listeners and viewers was not feasible, the audience sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for a large population:

$$n_o = Z^2pq / e^2$$

Where n_o is the required sample size, Z is the standard normal deviation at the selected confidence level, p is the estimated proportion of the population possessing the characteristic of interest, $q = 1 - p$, and e is the acceptable margin of error.

At a 95 per cent confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), with $p = .50$, $q = .50$, and a 5 per cent margin of error ($e = .05$), the calculation was:

$$n_o = [(1.96)^2(.50)(.50)] / (.05)^2 = 384.16$$

The calculated sample was rounded upward to 385 listeners and viewers. Using $p = .50$ yields the most conservative sample estimate when the population proportion is unknown. The resulting sample was considered adequate for examining audience perceptions of political broadcast content, including story selection and perceived bias.

The 385 audience respondents were selected from the identifiable eligible consumers recorded through the five stations' programme-engagement channels. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were regular consumers of the selected political programmes and could provide informed responses relevant to the study objective. Convenience sampling was subsequently used to recruit eligible participants who were accessible and willing to participate.

The overall study sample therefore comprised 459 respondents, consisting of 74 media professionals and 385 listeners and viewers.

Table 1: Target Population Distribution (N = 74)

Category	Heads of Radios/TVs	Editors	Producers	News Reporters & Presenters	Total
Radio Amani	1	2	3	7	13
Sauti ya Mwananchi	1	2	3	8	14
MBCI	1	2	3	9	15
Egerton Radio	1	2	4	6	13
Kass FM	1	2	3	8	14
Media Council Officials	0	0	0	5	5
Total	5	10	16	43	74

Data were collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. Questionnaires were administered to media professionals, including station heads, editors, producers,

reporters, and presenters. They contained structured items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from

strongly disagree to strongly agree, focusing on the clarity of story selection criteria, transparency, political pressure, diversity of political topics, avoidance of sensitive issues, and the perceived influence of story selection on political bias. Interview schedules were used to collect qualitative data from listeners and viewers, enabling respondents to explain the types of political stories they commonly encountered, whether important issues were ignored, how story selection affected fairness, and whether political actors influenced what was aired. Before the main data collection, the research instruments were reviewed to ensure clarity and relevance to the study objective, and to align with the concepts of story selection, gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and political bias.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 30. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise categorical responses, while means and standard deviations were used to interpret Likert-scale responses to story selection and political bias. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed thematically: responses were reviewed to identify recurring ideas, patterns, and explanations relating to political story selection, with themes including personality-driven coverage, omission of sensitive governance issues, unequal visibility of political actors, political influence on editorial decisions, and lack of transparency in newsroom selection criteria.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative analysis enabled triangulation: quantitative results showed the extent to which respondents agreed that story selection contributes to political bias. In contrast, qualitative

findings explained how the bias is experienced by audiences, together providing a more complete understanding of the role of story selection processes in broadcast programmes in Nakuru County.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study before data collection. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee, and research authorisation from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) was obtained before data collection commenced. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured by excluding personally identifying information from questionnaires and interview transcripts and by reporting findings only in aggregate or as unattributed illustrative statements. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequence. Where required, the study was conducted in line with the relevant institutional research ethics approval.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics on Story Selection Process

The study used a five-point Likert scale to examine the perceptions of the 74 media professionals regarding how story selection processes influence political bias in broadcast programmes. The statements focused on editorial criteria, transparency, range of political topics, political pressure, and independence in story selection. Table 2 presents the frequency, percentage distribution, mean, and standard deviation for each statement.

Table 2: Story Selection Process on Political Bias (N = 74)

Statement	SA n(%)	A n(%)	N n(%)	D n(%)	SD n(%)	Mean	SD
Lack of clear criteria for story selection leads to increased political bias in broadcast programs.	27 (36)	25 (34)	13 (18)	9 (12)	0 (0)	3.9400	1.01840
Transparent and fair story selection criteria help minimize political bias in media coverage.	32 (44)	21 (28)	12 (16)	9 (12)	0 (0)	4.0400	1.04900
Limiting the range of political topics covered increases political bias in broadcast programs.	33 (44)	22 (30)	9 (12)	7 (10)	3 (4)	4.0000	1.16058
Covering a wide variety of political issues helps reduce political bias in broadcasts.	16 (22)	40 (54)	9 (12)	9 (12)	0 (0)	3.8600	0.90373
Direct influence from political actors on story selection increases political bias in media content.	22 (30)	22 (30)	9 (12)	18 (24)	3 (4)	3.5800	1.26314
Independence from political pressure in story selection reduces political bias in broadcasts.	13 (18)	40 (54)	12 (16)	9 (12)	0 (0)	3.7800	0.88733

Overall Mean = 3.8667, Overall SD = 1.04703

Key: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

The findings show that respondents generally perceived story selection as a strong determinant of political bias in broadcast programmes. The overall mean of 3.8667 indicates agreement that the way political stories are selected, prioritised, and excluded affects the neutrality of broadcast content. The highest mean was recorded for the statement that transparent and fair story selection criteria help minimise political bias (M = 4.0400, SD = 1.04900), suggesting that respondents strongly valued openness and consistency in editorial decision-making; where audiences understand that stories are selected using professional criteria, perceptions of hidden bias are likely to decline.

The statement that limiting the range of political topics covered increases political bias also recorded a high mean (M = 4.0000, SD = 1.16058), indicating that respondents associated narrow political coverage with biased broadcasting. If political programmes repeatedly focus on campaign rallies, party rivalries, and prominent leaders while ignoring governance issues, policy debates, minority voices, or public accountability concerns, the public receives an incomplete political picture. This result supports the argument that political bias can occur

through restriction of topic diversity rather than through explicit partisan language.

The findings also show strong agreement that lack of clear selection criteria increases political bias (M = 3.9400, SD = 1.01840), implying that respondents viewed unclear editorial routines as a risk because they give editors, managers, owners, or political actors room to influence decisions without accountability. The statement that direct influence from political actors increases political bias had the lowest mean, though it still remained above the neutral point (M = 3.5800, SD = 1.26314); the relatively higher standard deviation indicates more variation in responses, with some respondents having directly observed political pressure while others may have inferred it from coverage patterns.

These findings are consistent with Gatekeeping Theory because they show that control over what reaches the audience can be exercised both within and beyond the newsroom.

Frequency of Political News Comparison

The study sought to determine how often the 385 sampled listeners and viewers compared political news

from more than one media outlet, as this behaviour is an important audience response to perceived bias.

Table 3: Frequency of Political News Comparison (N = 385)

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Always	124	32.2
Often	167	43.4
Sometimes	75	19.5
Rarely	12	3.1
Never	7	1.8
Total	385	100.0

The findings show that 75 per cent of respondents always or often compared political news from different media outlets, suggesting that a majority of the audience in Nakuru County were aware that political broadcasts may contain bias and therefore sought alternative sources to confirm or challenge what they heard. This is consistent with recent evidence that deliberate cross-checking of sources, rather than passive exposure to a station's coverage, is what helps audiences form their own judgement

about a story's political slant (Bruchmann et al., 2023). The finding has two implications: first, it demonstrates a degree of media literacy among listeners and viewers, who are thereby better positioned to identify omissions, framing differences, unequal airtime, and inconsistencies; second, it indicates a problem of trust, since the need to compare political stories across outlets

suggests that no single station is perceived as fully reliable or impartial. From an agenda-setting perspective, cross-media comparison may reduce the power of any one station to determine public priorities. Still, when several stations reproduce similar political narratives due to shared pressures or dominant news values, comparison may not fully eliminate bias. Broadcast media in Nakuru County, therefore, need to strengthen internal fairness rather than rely on audiences to correct imbalances through multiple-source consumption.

Determinants of Political Story Prioritisation in Broadcast Programmes

The study also examined the views of the 385 audience respondents on what determines the order and priority of political stories, since the sequencing of stories is important, as leading stories tend to receive greater attention and may appear more important to the audience.

Table 4: Perceived Influences on Political Story Priority (N = 385)

Factor	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Political interest	106	27.5
Editorial policy	87	22.6
Viewer ratings	74	19.2
News value	68	17.7
Not sure or other factors	50	13.0
Total	385	100.0

The findings show that political interest was the most cited factor influencing which political stories aired first (27.5%), followed by editorial policy (22.6%) and viewer ratings (19.2%), with news value accounting for 18 per cent. These results suggest that respondents did not view story priority as purely professional or public-interest driven; instead, many believed that political considerations and institutional preferences affected the

order of broadcast stories. If audiences believe that stories are led because they serve political goals, they are likely to interpret broadcasts as partisan even when the reporting style appears neutral, because placing a story at the beginning of a bulletin gives it symbolic importance and can create agenda-setting bias by amplifying preferred actors or narratives.

Editorial policy was also identified as an important influence: this is not inherently problematic, since professional guidelines are necessary for consistent news judgment, but where editorial policies are unclear, undocumented, or shaped by ownership and political pressure, they may become instruments of selective reporting. Viewer ratings were also seen as influential, reflecting the effect of commercial pressure, as stations may prioritise dramatic political conflicts because they attract audience attention, even when public-interest issues deserve greater prominence. The relatively lower percentage for news value suggests a concern that

professional criteria may not be the dominant factor in story priority, pointing to the need for stations to clarify how they define news value in political coverage.

Avoidance of Certain Political Topics or Figures

The study asked the 385 audience respondents whether they believed some stations avoid reporting certain political topics or figures, since avoidance is an important form of story selection bias that operates through silence rather than visible partisanship.

Table 5: Whether Some Stations Avoid Reporting Certain Political Topics or Figures (N = 385)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	217	56.5
No	130	33.8
Not sure	38	9.9
Total	385	100.0

The findings show that 56.5 per cent of respondents believed that some broadcast stations avoid reporting certain political topics or figures, while 33.8 per cent disagreed and 9.9 per cent were unsure. This means that more than half of the respondents perceived selective omission as a feature of political broadcasting in Nakuru County. The result is important because omitted stories can be as politically significant as aired stories; when sensitive issues are excluded, audiences are denied information necessary for informed judgment. Avoidance may occur for several reasons: a station may avoid stories that could harm its owners, advertisers, allied politicians, or preferred candidates, and journalists may avoid sensitive topics for fear of losing access to political sources or of facing intimidation. In some cases, avoidance may be justified by lack of verification or legal risk. Still, persistent patterns of omission create perceptions of bias; the problem arises when politically sensitive issues are filtered out not because they lack public interest but because they threaten powerful interests.

This strongly aligns with Gatekeeping Theory: editors and producers act as gatekeepers by deciding what enters the public domain, and when this gatekeeping is influenced by political caution or partisan loyalty, the broadcast agenda becomes incomplete. Because audiences rarely know why a story was not aired, they interpret patterns of absence through their broader perception of station credibility; clear editorial standards,

public-interest criteria, and regular content audits would help reduce suspicion and promote accountability.

Qualitative Insights

The qualitative interviews offered deeper explanations of how story selection processes promote political bias. A dominant theme was the preference for high-profile political personalities over issue-based reporting: respondents observed that many political broadcasts focused on speeches, rallies, party rivalries, and public conflicts involving prominent leaders rather than development projects or citizen concerns, indicating that story selection often favours drama and personality visibility over substantive governance content.

“Political stories usually focus on the leaders and their rallies, rather than what affects ordinary people.” (Listener 4).

This observation illustrates the tendency for personality-centred political coverage to receive greater visibility than issue-based reporting. The implication is that personality-driven selection narrows political understanding. Such that, when audiences repeatedly encounter stories centred on powerful leaders, they may come to view politics mainly as competition between individuals rather than as a process of policy-making, accountability, and public service, benefiting politicians with visibility, resources, and access to media platforms while marginalizing issue-based actors, civic groups, and

ordinary citizens, and promoting polarisation. This is because political conflict becomes more newsworthy than shared public concerns.

“Some governance issues disappear from the news when they affect people who are politically powerful.” (Listener 112).

A second theme was the underreporting of important governance issues. Respondents mentioned that matters such as corruption, health, education, service delivery, and county resource allocation were often discussed only when linked to prominent politicians, and that some issues appeared to disappear from coverage when they reflected negatively on influential leaders. This has serious implications for democratic accountability: broadcast media are expected to monitor power and provide citizens with information about governance performance, and if important issues are omitted because they are uncomfortable for powerful actors, the media's watchdog role is weakened.

“You can tell which politicians a station prefers because they are given more airtime than others.” (Listener 181).

A third theme concerned unequal coverage of political actors: respondents reported that some politicians appeared frequently in news bulletins and talk shows. In contrast, others were barely mentioned, even when they held public events, and that the choice of stories clearly revealed which side a station supported. Unequal visibility is a subtle but powerful form of bias: a leader who receives repeated coverage may appear more active, popular, or important than competitors, while limited coverage may make other actors appear irrelevant, distorting public perception especially during election periods. This finding is consistent with Agenda-Setting Theory because repeated coverage influences which actors and issues audiences consider important.

Political influence on story selection was another key theme, with some respondents believing that political actors influenced which stories were aired, particularly during campaign periods, describing instances where stations appeared to prioritise campaign rallies of candidates allied with powerful local leaders or to avoid stories that could damage certain politicians' images.

Such influence undermines journalistic independence: when political actors can shape what is aired, broadcast

stations risk becoming platforms for political marketing rather than public-interest journalism, and even when the influence is indirect- through advertising, sponsorship, access to sources, or ownership ties- the effect can still be biased coverage.

Finally, respondents perceived the story selection process as opaque, noting that audiences rarely know why some stories are prioritised while others are ignored. This lack of transparency fuels suspicion, as audiences may assume hidden interests are at work when editorial decisions seem to be made behind closed doors. Transparent editorial standards would not require stations to disclose every newsroom decision. Still, they would clarify the principles that guide political coverage, including the public interest, relevance, balance, verification, diversity of actors, and the avoidance of partisan suppression. Overall, the qualitative findings support the quantitative results by showing how unclear criteria, restricted topics, political pressure, and the omission of sensitive stories promote perceptions of bias, and by indicating that audiences in Nakuru County are attentive to patterns in political broadcasting, making story selection a critical area for reform.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that story selection processes significantly influence political bias among broadcast programmes in Nakuru County. The overall mean score of 3.8667 shows that respondents generally agreed that editorial decisions about which stories to air, prioritise, or omit shape the political slant of broadcast content, a result consistent with the argument that media bias can be produced through ordinary newsroom routines rather than only through overt political endorsement. These findings support both theories guiding the study: the high agreement that transparent and fair selection criteria reduce political bias supports Gatekeeping Theory, since editors and producers control the flow of information and, in the absence of clear rules, the gatekeeping process becomes vulnerable to bias and external influence.

Additionally, the perceived influence of political interests on story priority supports Agenda-Setting Theory, since audiences interpret story sequencing as part of political messaging, with the order and frequency of political stories shaping how audiences rank leaders, issues, and controversies rather than being neutral decisions.

The finding that limits the range of political topics increases bias echoes Cagé et al.'s (2025) finding that outlet-level editorial decisions, more than individual reporters' preferences, drive unequal political coverage, including a tendency to privilege drama and elite conflict over substantive issues; in Nakuru County. Qualitative responses similarly suggested that programmes often highlight political personalities while underreporting health, education, corruption, development, and citizen concerns.

However, the present findings differ in emphasis from Wamunyu and Wahutu's (2019) account of Kenyan commercial newsrooms, which found that many journalists continued to apply conventional professional gatekeeping norms despite structural pressure. In this, their study points to the resilience of professional routines, the audience-facing perceptions captured in this study — 56 per cent believing some stations avoid certain topics, and political interest cited as the leading determinant of story priority — suggest that, from the audience's vantage point, professional norms are not always sufficient to prevent the perception, and likely the practice, of politically inflected story selection at the county level.

A plausible explanation for this difference is contextual: national commercial newsrooms studied by Wamunyu and Wahutu (2019) operate with more institutional layers and professional oversight, whereas Nakuru County's local stations operate in closer physical and social proximity to county politicians, advertisers, and sponsors, leaving fewer buffers between political pressure and individual editorial decisions.

The study also found that 75 per cent of respondents frequently compared political news from more than one outlet, showing that audiences are not unaware of bias and actively seek alternative information sources, even as this behaviour signals declining trust in individual broadcasters. The finding that 56 per cent of respondents believed stations avoid certain political topics or figures confirms that omission is a major form of bias, aligning with Røsok-Dahl and Olsen's (2024) account of gatekeeping as an ongoing, filtering process in which a story does not need to be falsely reported to produce bias; it may be left out, delayed, minimised, or denied prominence. In political broadcasting, silence around sensitive issues can protect powerful actors and deny citizens crucial information, which is especially

problematic in county politics, where local media may be among the few platforms capable of holding leaders accountable.

The qualitative findings deepen this interpretation by showing that audiences perceive political coverage as predictable, with some respondents reporting that they could anticipate which stories a station would air depending on its perceived alignment, which is a sign of editorial slant, since a professional newsroom's political coverage should not be easily predictable along partisan lines. The findings also connect to the broader political economy literature: although this study focused on story selection, editorial choices do not occur in isolation; ownership interests, advertising dependence, political relationships, and audience competition may all shape which stories are selected.

Similarly, both Gicheru and Nyabuga (2023) and the Media Council of Kenya (2024) note that Kenyan journalists often operate under political and economic pressure that complicates independent editorial decision-making. Particularly, in Nakuru County, such pressures may be intensified by local proximity between media houses and political actors, a contextual factor that appears specific to county-level broadcasting rather than shared uniformly across Kenya's national media landscape. This suggests that reforming story selection requires both newsroom-level guidelines and institutional safeguards for editorial independence.

Synthesising across the quantitative and qualitative strands, the findings confirm that story selection is a central mechanism through which political bias is constructed in broadcast programmes: bias emerges through what is selected, what is omitted, what is placed first, what is repeated, and what is framed as important. This synthesis supports the study's dual theoretical framing — gatekeeping as the internal mechanism and agenda-setting as the external effect — and indicates that reducing bias requires deliberate editorial systems that promote clarity, balance, diversity, public interest, and accountability at the point where these two processes meet: the newsroom's day-to-day story selection routine.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concluded that the selection of stories influences political bias in broadcast programmes in Nakuru County. The procedures used by editors and producers to choose, prioritise, and exclude political

stories affect the fairness and neutrality of broadcast content: when political stories are selected without clear criteria, audiences are more likely to perceive coverage as biased, especially where certain leaders, parties, or issues receive repeated attention while others are ignored. The study further concluded that limited topic diversity contributes to political bias, since broadcast programmes that focus mainly on prominent politicians, campaign events, party rivalry, and political drama provide a narrow view of politics and restrict the audience's access to balanced information on governance performance, corruption, health, education, public finance, and service delivery.

The study also concluded that political pressure and opaque editorial processes intensify perceptions of bias, with respondents believing that some stations avoid sensitive topics or figures, suggesting that omission is a major form of bias in local political broadcasting and that the absence of transparent selection procedures creates room for political actors, owners, advertisers, and institutional interests to influence which stories are aired.

Finally, the study concluded that fair and transparent story selection can reduce political bias: respondents strongly agreed that transparent criteria, broad issue coverage, and independence from political pressure enhance impartiality. Read together with the theoretical framework, these conclusions confirm that gatekeeping practices within Nakuru County's broadcast newsrooms directly shape agenda-setting outcomes for audiences, supporting both Gatekeeping Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory as complementary explanations of how story selection produces political bias. Improving story selection practices is therefore essential for strengthening the credibility of political broadcasts, supporting democratic debate, and ensuring that audiences in Nakuru County receive a balanced account of political developments.

Recommendations: The study recommends that broadcast stations in Nakuru County develop and implement written editorial policies to guide the selection of political stories. These policies should define clear criteria for newsworthiness, including public interest, factual relevance, issue diversity, balance, verification, and fairness to all political actors, to reduce arbitrary decision-making and help editors justify why certain stories are aired, prioritised, delayed, or rejected.

Second, stations should strengthen editorial independence by insulating story selection from political pressure, ownership interference, and advertiser influence, empowering editorial boards to make decisions based on professional standards rather than partisan expectations, and station managers and owners should respect the autonomy of editors and producers, especially during election periods and politically sensitive moments.

Third, broadcasters should widen the range of political issues covered so that campaign rallies, elite conflict, and personality-centred stories do not dominate political programming. Stations should deliberately include governance issues, policy debates, service delivery, public expenditure, youth concerns, gender issues, minority voices, and citizen experiences, reducing agenda-setting bias and making political coverage more useful to audiences.

Fourth, stations should conduct regular content audits to examine patterns in political story selection, assessing airtime distribution, issue diversity, frequency of coverage for different political actors, omission patterns, and the placement of stories within bulletins or programmes, with the results guiding internal reforms and helping identify emerging bias before it becomes institutionalised.

Fifth, the Media Council of Kenya and relevant regulatory bodies should support training on ethical gatekeeping, editorial independence, election reporting, and public-interest journalism, equipping editors, reporters, presenters, and producers to identify subtle forms of bias, including omission, repetitive framing, unequal prominence, and politically motivated story sequencing.

Sixth, broadcast stations should introduce mechanisms for audience feedback on political coverage, providing listeners and viewers with accessible channels to raise concerns about omitted stories, unbalanced topic selection, and perceived partisan slant, which can help stations identify credibility gaps and demonstrate a commitment to transparency, fairness, and accountability.

Finally, future studies should extend this line of inquiry by conducting comparative research across multiple counties to test whether the patterns of story selection

bias identified in Nakuru County generalise to other county-level broadcast markets in Kenya. This is by tracking story selection practices longitudinally across electoral and non-electoral periods to isolate the specific effect of election cycles on editorial gatekeeping; and by combining audience-perception surveys of the kind used here with systematic content analysis of actual broadcast	output, so that perceived bias can be directly compared with measured patterns of story selection, airtime allocation, and topic coverage.
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