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Digital Media and Public Opinions: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Performance of Jubilee Government of Kenya (2013-2015)

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Abstract:

Recent years have seen a great deal of academic interest in the possibility of using digital media to measure public opinion on politics. Different scholars have attempted to use digital media data to predict election results in Kenya. However, limited analysis has been done in terms of situating public opinions in themes, ideologies, attitudes and language patterns that inform political positions and power asymmetry. This paper presents public opinions drawn from three Kenyan digital dailies-Nation media, Standard media and Star digital media on the performance of Jubilee Government of Kenya between April 2013 and December 2015. This study used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches and software to examine these themes. One thousand opinions were uploaded into software and analysed using Teun van Dijk's, Norman Fairclough's and Ruth Wodak's Critical Discourse Analysis approaches. This study revealed that digital media reflects salient opinions of the public that influences and shapes political behaviour of Kenyan citizens, public demands on performance government and evaluation of existing government policies.

Keywords: CDA, digital media, jubilee government, public opinion

1. Introduction

Human behavior is a complicated phenomenon whose understanding requires constant research. However, through analysis of opinions, it is possible to understand and predict behavior as revealed by human activities. Politics is one field of knowledge that is linked with opinions concerned with power relations, control of resources, decision making and influence over other people's behavior as well as their values. This paper analyses opinions on the performance of Jubilee government of Kenya from local digital dailies based on language patterns.

2. The Relevance of using Digital Media to Measure Public Opinion

Due to unclear political opinions presented by digital media, political behavior in Kenya has been associated with conflicts and ever widening social cleavages. Digital media reports have not been useful in aiding the politicians to make correct decisions a part from enhancing their control and manipulation of public perceptions about others (Taiwo, 2007). However, since political influence flows from the use of ideas that shape the beliefs and behavior of others, digital media reports if constructively used could serve as the right vehicle for politicians to mold acceptable political behavior (Van Dijk, 1997). This therefore implies that politics is inherently dependent on opinions committed to nurturing positive behavior between the governed and those who govern them.

These challenges have provided for a political landscape defined by stiff competition in elections as individuals and political parties compete for power. Political campaigns have become quite instrumental as platforms for political candidates to market and popularize themselves as well as their political parties. Recent years have therefore witnessed a great deal of academic interest in the possibility of using digital media to measure public opinion (Behera, 2015).

However, such studies have been criticized for a number of reasons. It has been argued that digital media research on public opinion involves arbitrary methodological decisions such as which political parties to include in the study (Baker and McEnery, 2005). This problem is made more acute, critics argue, because research is often conducted after the event studied. Additionally, it has been noted that the user base of social media is not representative of the voting population and, as yet, no methods exist to correct this (Behera, 2015).

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research tool has gained favor among discourse analysis researchers in addressing methodological challenges associated with analysis of opinions from digital dailies (Fairclough, 1989). This tool sees discourse as a form of social practice and argues that all linguistic usage encodes recurring themes, ideologies, attitudes and language patterns in representing perceptions from different points of view. Critical Discourse Analysis has made it possible to establish opinions that have been used by different political organizations to market their political ideas, influence public relations and develop issue-based political campaigns (Fairclough, 1995).

These have been enhanced to a large extent with the explosive growth of digital media which has seen increasing use of digital media by individuals and organizations to influence public opinions on political developments (Liu, 2010). It reveals the connection between ideas, language, power and the ordering of relationship within society. It also unveils the underlying ideological prejudices and the exercise of power in the discourse thus providing scholars opportunity to understand what goes on in the minds of the populace (Wodak, 2000).

Van Dijk (1997) defined opinions as evaluative beliefs that feature an evaluative concept. Any belief that presupposes a value and that involves a judgment about somebody or something is evaluative. In some cases, judgments are evaluative only indirectly or in specific situations, such as when someone or something is believed to be small or large, light or heavy, and when such a factual belief itself presupposes, a value judgment. In the same way, opinion analysis can be done to understand political situation in a country (Wodak, 2000).

4. Digital Analysis of Opinions on the Performance of Jubilee Government

Online dailies have been very useful in evaluating the performance of Jubilee government. As opposed to print dailies they allow readers to post comments on their website. These comments provide additional information to subsequent readers in the form of opinions. Kenya has more than 100 newspapers and magazines distributed either, daily, weekly or monthly. However, two publishing houses, Nation and Standard media groups, dominate the print media and have the largest market share.

The Daily Nation, the East African Standard and the Star Digital are all written in English and available online. From these digital dailies information on the performance of Jubilee government has been derived. When the Jubilee Government assumed power in 2013, their supporters and the rest of the citizens hoped for a fulfillment of the promises made during their campaigns and enlisted in their manifesto. The said government has been in power for more than 4 years and the citizens have expressed different views and opinions on democratic governance, leadership style, personality of the head of state, transparency and accountability. The opinions also define public expectations on the performance of Jubilee government.

Language analysis from these dailies expressed distinct opinions on the idea of the government. This was reflected in the use of words like ‘Kenya’, ‘government’, ‘president’, ‘one’, ‘public’, ‘people’, ‘national’, ‘political’, ‘constitution’, ‘must’ and ‘Kenyan’. When these are analyzed, varied meanings are derived which explains public opinions or perceptions on government.

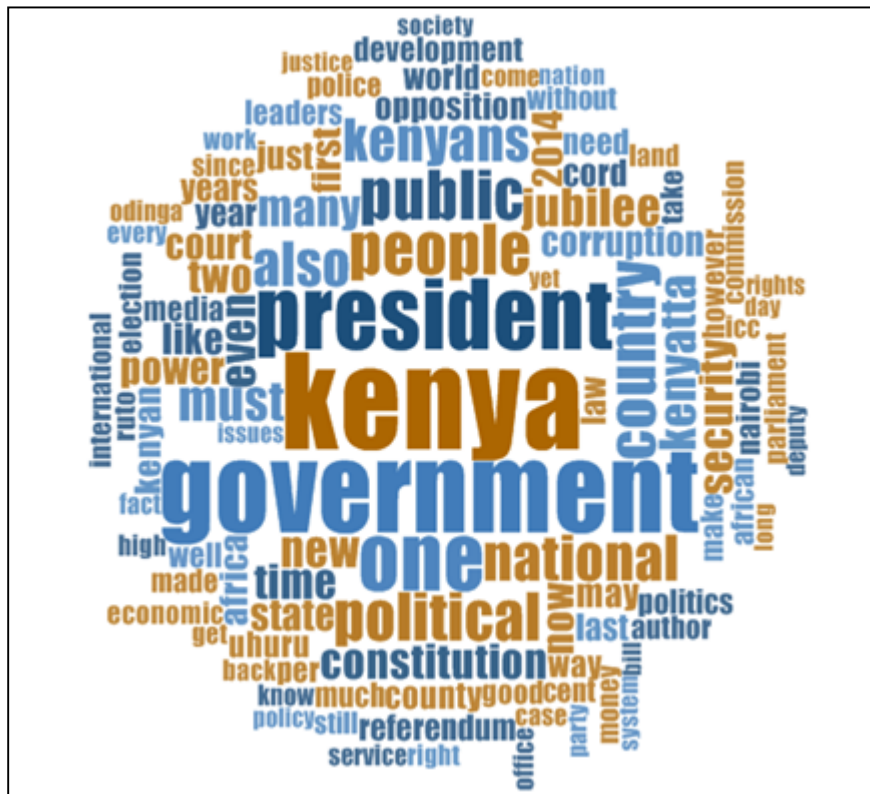


Figure 1: Word cloud 1000 opinions from NVivo

In a deeper analysis, using WordSmith model, as displayed in Figure 1, the word 'Kenya' was the most frequent in the opinions with 3028 counts followed by 'government' which had 2646. The common use of the word 'Kenya' from this instrument has very deep implications reflecting basically the concerns of the public on the performance of Jubilee government. It explains the fact that the public expects Jubilee government to address the concerns of all Kenyans and should not be limited by politics of ethnicity, party of coalition arrangements in discharging its responsibilities to the citizens. This speaks of the desire for the government to uphold the spirit of collective nationalism.

The popular use of this word also reminds the Jubilee government to be at peace with itself and the international community, celebrate the extraordinary unity that was enjoyed during the struggle for independence and respect for all freedom fighters based on their contribution in the liberation struggle and not on their ethnic backgrounds and affiliation with the government. Jubilee government is thus expected to meet the aspirations of all regardless of their political affiliations and to establish competent political leadership.

Kenya is therefore bigger than the Jubilee party and the success of the party is seen as the success of the nation Kenya. Any meaningful success of Jubilee government should be a celebration of all Kenyans and not only for the supporters of the ruling party. The government is also reminded of the nostalgic independence of the nation from colonialism and encouraged to sustain this extraordinary victory in the life and hopes of all its citizens through respect to human rights and protection of citizens from external aggression.

The use of the word "Kenya" in these dailies has been linked with collocates like 'partner', 'progress', 'independence', '50th birthday', 'new liberal constitution', 'fragile economy' and 'fourth president'. These reflect on public expectations on the government and challenges associated with the performance of this government. It appears that the public believe that Jubilee government has to partner with other development agencies, governments and the international community in resolving its internal challenges. They also appear to believe that Jubilee government should partner with other political parties which are part of the democratic space to address national challenges in order to realize sustainable progress. In other words "progress" which has also been captured by WordSmith in this analysis appears to be a major concern in public opinions standing above the limitations placed by political and party differences. The celebration of 50th birth day of the nation Kenya involves all Kenyans and holds no particular identity with Jubilee government. It is therefore a reflection of past endeavors of nationalists whose fruits the Jubilee government is expected to thrive on. This celebration in the views of the public should entrench the principles of the liberal constitution for sustainable democratic progress. Even after the fifty years of struggle, the Kenyan economy is still fragile and in terms of public opinion the Jubilee government is expected to improve on its associated challenges. President Uhuru Kenyatta is thus reminded to shoulder these challenges in order to leave a mark in his tenure as the fourth president of the republic of Kenya.

The word 'the' appears to be the biggest collocate of the word 'Kenya' (Figure 3). 'The' denotes 'Kenya' as unique nation and could also indicate that the word had already been mentioned or assumed to be common knowledge. 'The' could also imply period whereby 'the Kenya of today' is compared to the 'former Kenya' politically. In light of the political performance of Jubilee government, the use of the word 'the' to refer to Kenya, could have been used to emphasize the important space that any elected government occupies in the life of its citizens.

In light of this reference, Jubilee government is expected to uphold virtues that sustain the significant image of Kenya as a nation, condemning negative ethnicity and addressing intractable problems that could be a challenge to nationhood. Experiences of corruption therefore demonstrate a different Kenya far from the public expectations. 'The' in political context speaks of a nation that is capable of fixing its security challenges, depends on a good constitution and is committed to equity and equality in provision of employment opportunities and resources. It thus explains a departure from the old phase of the nation to a new phase which in this case is a mark of positive transition in terms of development and democracy.

The other word that appears to have been used frequently in the opinions is 'one'. It was used to imply 'togetherness' for example; 'Kenyans to unite themselves as one nation and one family of God'. Closely related to this word was the word 'president' which appeared 2130 times in the 1000 opinions. In Kenya, the primary role of the Presidency is the organization and coordination of Government operations. The effectiveness and efficiency of this office impacts on the performance of all other public sectors, since it is responsible for policy formulation, review and decision-making. The word 'president' may have appeared frequently in the opinions because the performance of the Presidency is central to all government functions and ultimately transcends all facets of public sector management.

The Presidency is significant in ensuring the president achieves his prime objectives. The roles and mandates of the Presidency have increased over the years in response to emerging challenges, needs and aspirations of the Kenyan citizens. The expansion has also dictated the need to give the Office more coordination and supervisory powers over other ministries and departments. There has also been pressure to transfer some departments or units to the Presidency to give him more influence to perform his functions.

This has over the years led to the expansion in size, functions and responsibilities of the Office of the President. Consequently, the office has in the past undergone fundamental changes over time in terms of organizational structure, staffing levels, and in the manner, it has managed state affairs. More recently however, the Kenyan new constitution has radically altered the structure of governance in the country where the President, in addition to holding the positions of Head of State and Government, has been elected in a new framework that specifically separates the executive from the legislature as was the case in the previous dispensation.

This distinction has necessitated the need for a radical overhaul of the previous structure of executive governance to establish the terms of engagement of the Presidency within the new constitutional order. At the same time, the implementation of a devolved structure of government operating within the ambit of an executive Presidency similarly demands the establishment of key competences to support the President, to secure the cohesiveness of national policies and programs as well as the operations of a cohesive government.

The word frequency query also revealed that the word 'Jubilee' appeared 1016 times in the corpus of 708,719 words. The Jubilee Alliance is a multi-party coalition which was established to support the joint presidential elections ticket of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto in the 2013 Kenya general elections. At the time of the election, its members were The National Alliance, the National Rainbow Coalition, the United Republican Party, United Democratic Front and the Republican Congress.

The word 'Jubilee' was expected to be the most used word since all the 1000 opinions that were analyzed were addressing Jubilee Government's performance from April 2013 to December 2015 however that was not the case. Other words like 'Kenya', 'government', 'president', 'one', 'people', 'public', 'country', 'politic*' and 'must' appeared to have been mentioned more frequently than the word 'Jubilee'. It was also noteworthy that in terms of frequencies, 'Jubilee' appeared between 'must' and 'Kenyatta' consecutively. The limited use of the word Jubilee could perhaps imply that the performance of Jubilee government could have contradicted public expectations particularly in light of abuses of democracy, International Criminal Court proceedings, corruption, marginalization of other political competitors from the opposition parties, tribal appointments in government offices. In the few instances that the word Jubilee was used, negative connotations were derived.

the murderous attacks are all part of a Jubilee strategy to rally the country member revisiting the issues is a Jubilee Government mole". At the as Raila. The war of words between Jubilee and CORD over the latter's blockade on Nairobi's Ngong Road by Jubilee supporters on Monday referring to remarks made by Jubilee strategist Moses Kuria, was on social media rapidly spread by Jubilee adherents to feed the growing schools without rooftops and electricity? Jubilee lovers would rather say Cord is public seeking to find an excuse for Jubilee's poor performance in were strong with demands from Jubilee MPs that the planned Cord 29 , Ruto tried to intervene to get Jubilee members of the National Corruption holds Jubilee government captive By in terrorism for a dozen years greeted Jubilee's first year in office. The crime debts in modern history. Why is Jubilee in a hurry to sign these 'deals'? Kanu. Like Kanu governments before it, Jubilee is a government with contempt impose an illegal project on Kenyans, jubilee choirmasters are all over him raise his family. This is laughable. Jubilee administration rode onto power Cord, perhaps forgetting that just like Jubilee, Cord has a large following as return from the US at the end of May, Jubilee social media activists went into election. It sickens anyone when the Jubilee top echelons persistently claim no intention of fulfilling. But it's the Jubilee team that's in power; not the as pie. When it comes to the youth, the Jubilee Alliance is as clueless and lost bankrolled or helped to purchase the Jubilee government. Plutocracy is the they are enthusiastically joined by the Jubilee majority in both Houses of the FDR's "Happy Days are Here," the Jubilee tune had two distinct

Figure 2: Concordance for 'jubilee'

The word 'Jubilee' collocates with 'government' to depict that the opinionates understand that Jubilee alliance formed government. Cheeseman (2014) observes that the Jubilee name was a campaign strategy for the party since Kenya was to celebrate 50 years of independence. All elements of Uhuru Kenyatta's name aroused independence in the Kenyan context, and Jubilee's implicit celebration of independence was accompanied with an explicitly nationalist rhetoric which focused on the ICC and cast Kenyatta and Ruto as victims of neo-colonialism.

Finally, the use of the word "his government" was noted. 'His government' could mean that President Uhuru is the one who has constituted the Jubilee government through appointments and that he is the overall authority and the government institutions are under him. This is different from the scenario in the USA for example where it is believed that the government belongs to the people rather than the president. This observation indicates that there is an attachment between the people and the government depending on its performance.

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