

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Ethnic Polarization in Kenya: Media Framing in Political Interviews Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology

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### Abstract:

*Ethnic polarization is a common and growing issue in Kenya due to heightened political contentions surrounding general elections held every five years. A popular media genre employed in political communication is the 'political interview' that involves the journalist (as the interviewer) and the politician (as the interviewee). Often, several politicians representing opposing factions are engaged. This article investigates the frames used by the media in ethnic polarization in Kenya. News framing analysis is used to find out these frames. The political news interview is a specialized genre that is used to disseminate political information. Among the key findings is that the media practitioners are guided by the competitive nature of the industry. For them to be profitable they have to pull a huge audience to their programmes because for them the audience is a product for sale to the advertiser. This leads them to select contentious topics as well as controversial figures who will defend, with firm stances, the parties they represent. The interviews are also broadcast over a long time as compared to normal news programming. The result of this kind of framing is a polarized audience.*

**Keywords:** Ethnic Polarization, Kenya, Political news interview, Framing

### 1. Introduction

The popular image of Africa is that of a continent with countries incessantly rent by ancient ethnic enmities that complicate and retard the development of national consciousness (Ogot and Okoth, 2000). Many countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Egypt, South Sudan, Burundi and Kenya have, in the recent past, experienced deep turmoil due to political instability. Conflicts in Africa are largely attributed to, among other issues, religious, political and ethical differences; unequal distribution of resources; bad politics. The media including news and social media channels, take advantage of these moments to increase their popularity but, in many instances they only aggravate conflicts when they provide negative coverage and misplaced social mobilization of the populace. Many examples in Africa prevail in countries like Rwanda, Kenya, South Sudan and Egypt to mention but a few.

Whenever nations are at war, mediation takes place. In Kenya, for example, when ethnic polarization reached its peak in 2007, in a post-election violence, there was concern from the citizens and the international community that the country resolves the crisis. International mediation began where perceived symbols of peace including Desmond Tutu (South African religious figure), John Kufuor (former president of Ghana), Kofi Annan (former UN Secretary General), were invited to preside over the mediation. It was Kofi Annan's team of Eminent African personalities that gave rise to the power sharing deal that saw the creation of the Grand Coalition government (Oyugi, 2013).

While these efforts momentarily suppressed the ethnic tensions, political tension still persists through hate speech and ethnic profiling, where political leaders have been heard or quoted uttering polarizing remarks via mass media platforms in Kenya such as newspapers, radio and television. Various media genres and/or formats such as news (broadcast and print), talk show discussions and interviews, documentaries, features and profiles are deployed for political communication and political analysis. News media channels such as television are central in political communication because politicians understand the influence of the medium to retaining power and influencing citizens (Mcnaire, 2010). Television helps to create a new reality populated by spin doctors, pollsters, pundits and media consultants. Eventually political life begins to conform more closely to the image of politics that television portrays it to be. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. This paper analyses frames used in selected political news interviews aired on Kenyan TV platforms three months to and three months after the 2013 General elections in Kenya.

### 2. Research Context

Kenya became a multi-party state in 1991 after a long battle between activists and the regime of the time. Activists had for a long time fought for freedom and democratic space. From 1992 to date, there has been a proliferation of political parties. These parties have been formed by renowned figures like Raila Odinga, Kijana Wamalwa, Sineon Nyachae, George Anyona, Kenneth Matiba, Charity Ngilu, Mwai Kibaki, James Orenge among others. When these parties are formed, the pioneers mobilize their ethnic communities for support. The results have been a country with parties identifiable to ethnic communities. The media in Kenya has also played to this tune and their coverage of news, selection of events and news makers in relation to politics are based on their perception of ethnic

leanings. One of the media genre that has been used to disseminate political information in Kenya is the political interview. Major media stations in Kenya according to the popularity index of Communication Authority of Kenya (Citizen, Kenya Television Network (KTN), NTV, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and K24) air political interviews each week. These interviews are aired during or after prime time news, usually on topical events of the day. These events are carefully selected by the media personnel on the basis of newsworthiness. These events that are usually based on conflict and they draw audiences to them by framing a picture of disunity among political figures. They increase in frequency and intensity in the periods surrounding General Elections in Kenya. This study is based on the period before and after the 2013 General Elections of Kenya.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Media framing a second level of agenda setting (McCombs, 2004) is a mechanism of influence in which journalists employ a frame of confrontation in presenting an issue to the public. In other words, media coverage is characterized by an active construction, selection and structuring of information to organize a particular reality in a meaningful manner for the public (Gamson, 1992). Framing occurs when media make some aspects or particular issues more salient than others to promote a certain problem, problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommended (Entman, 1993).

This selection of particular attributes of a story give important information about the perspective of the media sources. These perspectives of the media in turn can make selected attributes salient and shape public opinion differently in political contexts with varying coverage. A limited set of media messages can lead to a narrow range of activated attitudes in the collective public opinion as Entman (1993) states.

Tinkam and Weaver (1993) note that media framing can also influence opinion through the choice of news sources. This is because sources differ in credibility and those that are seen as more credible can be more persuasive or influencing opinion. Entman in Severin and Tankard (2010) states that framing does affect the news in many ways for example in the choice of topic, sources, language and photographs. Tankard in Griffin, Ledbetter and Sparks, (2015) defines framing as:

*The central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration.*

In the selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration, the writer, reporter or anchor transforms the message to suit particular motives or goals. This paper uses these ideas to establish whether framing leads to ethnic polarization in the Kenyan context.

Street (2001) indicates that a neutral media presents a fair account of the facts. He however notes that to achieve neutrality is impossible for the following reasons: First, he says that the practicalities of the media's daily routine mitigate against giving full account. This is because the media are constituted as businesses who have to serve a market (audiences and advertisers), and this means tailoring the reporting to the needs of the market. Therefore long, factual accounts may drive viewers away. There are also deadlines to be met. It is observed then that these pressures compromise a complete factual account. Another reason is that reporters cannot record all the facts because a singular event contains a myriad of facts. Hence these facts have to be selected on some criterion of relevance. These selected facts become part of a story with a narrative that links them together. This process of selection and interpretation causes reporting to deviate from the idea of recording facts.

These tenets of media framing guide this study to determine how Kenyan media frame issues in the political news interviews that would lead to ethnic polarization.

#### Methodology

In this study, five media stations were studied namely KTN, Citizen, KBC, K24 and NTV. These are the most popular television stations in Kenya according to (CAK, 2012). Six political interviews were analyzed using Gail Jefferson's convention (1972) as cited in Perakyla (2004) and content analysis was carried out to identify different frames. Five journalists that carry out political news interviews were interviewed to give information on their selection of topics, events, as well as the interviewees for their programmes. Audience analysis was carried out in form of focus group discussions to establish the interpretation the audience gives to the political news interviews and the effect the frames may have on the audience. Political analysts who appear as experts on political matters were interviewed to give information on the effect of framing.

### 4. Findings

In this study, media frames were identified from the sampled political news interviews during transcription. Information from the journalists, audience survey and political analysts was used to determine the frames and their general impact on the audience.

The media focus attention on certain events and they place them within a field of meaning. This field of meaning can have an effect on the audience's beliefs and behaviour by connecting a particular meaning or interpretation of an issue (Entman, 2009). Frames determine what is selected, excluded, emphasized hence presents a packaged.

Journalists reported that they had to select parts of the events that would be considered attractive. Journalistic practices call for prominence, timeliness and conflict among other news values. This is why particular types of stories were chosen and not others. In all the interviews selected, there were other events that would have been given focus but the reporters and interviewers chose other events that were more attractive to the audience and hence attractive to advertisers. This is congruent with what Van Dijk (2008) observed. He says that newsworthiness is based on ideological and professional criteria that grant preferential media access to elite persons, organizations and nations, thereby recognizing and legitimating their power.

#### ➤ Interview 1

It begins with a narration that describes a political party. It gives a detailed report on its formation by especially emphasizing the fall outs that had taken place and highlighting the conflicts that were witnessed before it got to its current form. The interviewer chooses particular salient aspects to ask like devolution, the youth agenda, democracy and development.

➤ Interview 2:

In discussing the presidential ticket of two politicians, both the interviewer and the interviewee made reference to predicted consequences if they would actually win the elections:

*IR: What will that do to us INTERVIEWEE? Let's say we wake up on March 5<sup>th</sup>, we have president POLITICIAN 2 and deputy president POLITICIAN 3.*

*IE: Ahh, we'll have to live with it. But what that means is that we become a barrier state. The Americans and Britons have told us that 'we will give you sanctions'.*

*And what that basically means is that everything we have been doing for the last five years or so under POLITICIAN 5 will have to be jeopardized.*

In this manner, both the interviewer and the interviewee are packaging the information in favour of one political group's frame of reference.

In another instance of framing in interview 2:

*IR: But isn't POLITICIAN 1 the one who surrendered POLITICIAN 3 to The Hague? Who let him to the dogs?*

*IE: He had to let him do that because POLITICIAN 3 was one of his kingmakers. So he had to actually destroy the kingmaker and the king in waiting.*

Such remarks would not go down well with supporters of POLITICIAN 3. They would feel betrayed and set up for destruction.

They continue by saying:

*IE: the first criteria for whoever we choose as president must be a guy who will not spoil what he has done and that is the reason why when he looks at POLITICIAN 2 he thinks there will be politics for the next ten years.*

In this manner, they discredit POLITICIAN 2 who seemed to be a popular choice by a section of Kenyans. This election is framed as a two horse race between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga.

➤ Interview 3

The topic of discussion was chosen out of a press conference where a political party was giving an evaluation of the government's performance. A remark that seemed to ethnically profile a journalist was picked and it became the subject of discussion in the interview. The rest of the details of the press conference were left out completely. The contentious topic of discussion invited heated discussions.

➤ Interview 4

The IR starts by describing the topic of discussion as 'elephant in the room' giving the audience certain expectations and discusses an emotive issue on public appointments.

➤ Interview 5:

The interviewer selected topics to be discussed including Anglo-leasing, Devolution, and government performance. These topics were very contentious and would attract a heated exchange between the interviewees.

➤ Interview 6

The interview involved three politicians, two from the government side and one from the opposition wing. There was also one political analyst. The interviewer chose to select a contentious item from many items and dealt with devolution. While the opposition side claimed that the government was undermining devolution efforts; the government side defended their decisions by saying that there was corruption in the counties.

These observations are in line with what Entman (as cited in Severin and Tankard, 2010) observed. He said that this portrait of framing has important implications of political communication. Frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audiences to have different reactions. Politicians seeking support are thus compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames. Entman (as cited in Severin and Tankard, 2010) adds that framing occurs when media make some aspects of a particular issue more salient in order to promote a certain problem definition, causal interpretation, and moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

The audience members felt that there are more positive issues that can be discussed in these interviews. They noted that the fact that same politicians are featured all the time meant they were there to protect interest of their political parties and hence secure and maintain support.

Interviewers were guided by the news values of timeliness, prominence and conflict. Therefore, the choice of interviewees was based on their status, whether popular or controversial. The choice was also determined by the interviewer's ability to represent well the motivations or objectives of the parties on whose behalf they spoke.

It was therefore observed that journalists and media houses had reduced the political discourse to concern two coalitions before and after the 2013 elections as if they were the only ones. It is observed that there were more than two political parties at that time and that there were more than two presidential candidates who contested the 2013 elections. Journalists indicated that their stations' policies would not tolerate a dull or boring and seemingly neutral guest because they will lose the audience. This is why most of the interviewees who graced the shows were controversial or those that held hard-line stances. This is in line with Norris, Kern and Just (1993) who provide the following explanation: The selection of particular attributes of a story gives important information about the perspective of the media sources. These perspectives can make selected attributes salient and shape public opinion differently in political contexts with varying coverage. A limited set of media messages can lead to a narrow range of activated attitudes in the

collective public opinion. This is why in Kenya it almost seems that through the media framing that there are only two political factions yet they are so many.

Journalists also argued that they are objective in the way they present issues. However, audience members felt that journalists do not achieve neutrality. This was echoed by the political analysts who stated metaphorically that 'the media has gone to bed with the government and politicians' and that what they give the public is not for the public's sake but for the media and the sake of the political class and therefore are used to broadcast biased messages.

Journalists however defended their work by saying that they cannot record every fact as every event has several facts to it. Street (2001) offers insight on why it is difficult for journalists to achieve neutrality. He starts by saying that a neutral media will present a full and fair account of the facts but this is impossible. This is because the media are constituted in business who have to serve a market (audiences and advertisers) and this means tailoring the reporting to the needs of the market. Hence long, factual accounts may drive viewers or readers away, besides, there are deadlines to meet. Secondly, the fact that there is an infinite number of facts to any event, the criteria of relevance has to be selected. Unfortunately, the study found out that the audience members do not have knowledge of these technical aspects of news processing. And therefore what they receive through the media and hence the political interviews is seen as the only facts and the natural form of events.

Clayman and Heritage (2004), Heritage and Clayman (2010) also agree with the above view. They say that although most people assume that an interviewer should be completely neutral, this is not achievable. Heritage (2010) notes that questions will inevitably always contain some reference to particular attitudes or assertions. However the advice that all IRs should strive to achieve neutralistic stance and therefore they can balance their choice of interviewees and ask questions or make statements that are devoid of biases.

Journalists added that they also call in people who will account for their actions or those of the parties they represents. Montgomery (2007) states that accountability is one of the key principles of a democratic society. Hence responsible people are held accountable in various institutionalized activities. In this regard politicians are expected to justify their decisions and actions. This was exhibited in the political interviews in this study. The results of cases where politicians were called to account for their or for the parties they represented ended causing controversy on air which is interpreted as real controversy by the audience hence causing polarization.

It was found out that audience polarization occurred when members of the audience took sides with their leaders without objectively looking at the issues being discussed. Polarization was in form of hate speech, name calling and stereotypes against ethnic communities in Kenya. This was seen in the different commentaries given by members of the public as well as through feedback sent to the television stations during interviews.

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