

Examining the Perceptions of Readers on the Contribution of the *Daily Nation's* Peace Messages to the 2013 Elections in Kenya

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of readers on the contribution of the *Daily Nation's* peace messages to the 2013 elections in Kenya. The study relied on descriptive research design, which is a design in qualitative research and premised on Agenda Setting theory by Mc Combs and Donald Shaw. The study population consisted of respondents from four marked newspaper-vending points within Nakuru town and the selected contents from the *Nation* newspapers. These newspapers carried messages advocating for peace between the periods of February and April 2013. Purposive sampling was used to choose newspaper contents with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. Focused Group Discussions and Interviews were used as research instruments. Content and textual analysis was the primary form of data analysis in the study. Research findings showed that *Nation* newspapers carried peace messages in news and feature stories, editorials, opinion and advertisements. The conclusions of the study show that although media experts and scholars accused the media of 'indulging' in peace advocacy and forgetting their watchdog role, the respondents praised the role media played in ensuring after-poll calm, peaceful coexistence and tolerance.

Key Terms: elections, newspapers peace reporting, perception

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INTRODUCTION

In Kenya, newspapers lead in covering elections. Elections cannot be avoided in any democratic society, and the media is always out to ensure fair, free and democratic election processes. It is presumably based on fair and free elections that leaders are elected into political offices to supervise the affairs of any independent nation, and Kenya is no exception. Different media groups own Kenya's leading television channels. Royal Media, a Kenyan multimedia house, own *citizen*; NTV is owned by Nation Media Group, a Kenyan media company. KBC is owned and operated by the government, which is similar to Britain's BBC. Also, KTN is owned by the Standard Group, a regional media company which also publishes the *Standard* newspaper.

Apart from the television stations, in print media, the mainstream newspapers are privately owned. *The Daily Nation* was started in 1958 as a Swahili weekly called *Taifa* by the Englishman Charles Hayes and was bought in 1959 by the Agha Khan and became a daily newspaper. The newspaper, additionally, has an electronic platform where news and current events in Kenya are published over the internet, further increasing the total number of readers by a significant figure. This newspaper is owned by the Nation Media Group which publishes more than eight newspapers in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda. These include *Daily Nation*, *Saturday Nation*, *Sunday Nation*, *Taifa Leo*, *Taifa Jumapili*, *Business Daily* and *Daily Metro*. The *Nation* newspaper is one of the mainstream newspapers in Kenya with the highest circulation as at 205,000 readerships on average per day with a market share of 74% (Maina, 2006).

In the run-up to the 2007 general election, the UNDP contracted Strategic Public Relations & Research Limited to conduct monitoring from September through December 2007, to inform journalists, public, and politicians to ensure "enhanced fair and accurate media reporting on electoral issues." Balance, accuracy, impartiality and fairness was the

goal of the exercise, with a focus on equitable access to media by political parties. Media monitoring reports were issued regularly with quantitative and qualitative assessments of political news in six newspapers, four television channels, six English/Swahili radio stations, and ten vernacular radio stations.

The media monitoring operation specifically aimed to influence journalists, editors and media owners to provide accurate, impartial and fair reporting, and to encourage adherence to professional standards by journalists. By publicizing results periodically during the months preceding the election, the monitoring operation aimed to alert citizens to question their sources of information and to encourage parties and candidates to refrain from negative campaigning. The UNDP project also sought to advocate for new legislation to protect freedom of the press, the right to information, and the right of expression.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Functions of Newspaper Headlines

Newspaper headlines play a vital role in determining the readership of an issue (Harrower, 2009). They are usually packaged with unique linguistic characteristics. A well-written newspaper headline must be able to attract the attention of the reader. In most cases, newspaper headlines are unusual, sensational and short. There are four functions of a headline that scholars are mostly interested in (Harrower, 2009). First, headlines should be crafted in a way that they grab the attention of the readers. The best tool for a headline to capture the reader's focus is to select words that present the readers' self-interest. For example, search engine scholars have realized that the word "free" attracts a lot of viewership and readership for the newspapers (Kahneman, & Tversky, 2000; Hamilton, 2004). Another thing that captures the attention of a newspaper headline is the news item because readers are always waiting to see and read about something new. In Kenyan elections in 2013, such words as free and fair polls

frequented the newspaper headlines and attracted a lot of attention from the readers. A headline should select the newspaper and story readers. ☐

The headlines are supposed to be specific to screen viewers and readers. Moreover, a headline should deliver a complete message because most people read headlines, and few read the story under the headline (Harrower, 2009). Headlines are also supposed to draw the reader's attention through style and creativity. Styles such as humour, curiosity and suspense intrigue the readers. This is usually done by posing a question or suspending an issue and promising to give it later in the story. By controlling the knowledge of the readers through stories, the newspapers can also control the understanding of such an audience (Kahneman, & Tversky, 2000). Therefore, if the news media and political as well as other elites access news fail to provide detailed information about the interest of any country. Scholars agree that the control of one's knowledge through media is a crucial element of controlling the discourse of understanding. Beyond knowledge, there are essential forms of what is generally called social cognition and specially shared opinions, which are traditionally known as attitudes.

Newspaper headlines provide a summary of their stories, yet this theoretical conception seems to be too narrow, based on three complementary reasons. Firstly, even the most prototypical news headlines, those that appear in the so-called 'quality newspapers' do not always provide a summary of their stories. Some headlines outline a single detail extracted from the story, while others contain a quotation decided upon by the editor decided to be promoted to the foreground. Some headlines may even contain material that does not appear in the news item itself. Different writers have noted the fact that headlines do not always summarize, but sometimes highlight or quote. Bell (1991), for example, makes a distinction between headlines which “abstract the main event of the

story”, and headlines which “focus on a secondary event or a detail”. Nir (1993) distinguishes between headlines which function as “a summary of the story” and “Headlines which, rather than summarize the story, promote one of the details of the story”. Second, the traditional notion of headlines-as-summaries does not capture the function of headlines in more popular newspapers, and especially in tabloids. Different writers, most notably by Lindemann (1990), have made this point. As Lindemann shows, tabloid headlines rarely summarize their stories, are not always telegram-like, and in many cases are not even informative. Lindemann discusses the function of tabloid headlines in poetic terms: They present the reader with a “complex riddle”, which, first, triggers frames and belief systems in the reader's mind, and, then, gets resolved in the ensuing text. This is a classic example of how the *Nation* newspaper carried their stories in the run-up to the 2013 elections. ☐

Lindemann's analysis implicitly assumes that the function of tabloid headlines is so radically different from their function in quality newspapers, that the two cannot be theoretically unified. The relevance-based analysis will allow exactly for that to anyone's mind, a very welcome theoretical result.

The other reason to reject the traditional conception is the simple fact that headlines seem to have an additional, pragmatic function, beyond the semantically oriented function, which is supposed to be captured by the headline-as-summary analysis. Bell (1991) says that headlines are a “part of news rhetoric whose function is to attract the reader”. Nir (1993) claims that the headline has to attract the attention of the reader and provoke the reader to read the whole story. In a sophisticated analysis of the semiotics of headlines, Iarovici and Amel (1989) explicitly contend that the headline has a double function: ☐

1. The implicit convention between author and reader regarding the intention of correlating a text to another text as a headline, and regarding the

formal marking of this quality by a privileged position, concerns the double function of the headline.

2. A semantic function, regarding the referential text, and a pragmatic function, regarding the reader (the receiver) to whom the text is addressed.

The two functions are simultaneous, the semantic function being included in and justified by the pragmatic function. The primary function of the headline is to alert the reader, who is the receiver to the nature or the content of the text. This is the pragmatic function of the headline, and it includes the semantic one. The headline enables the reader to grasp the meaning of the text. The headline functions as a plurality of speech acts (urging, warning, and informing). The challenge posed by the above assertions is that of theoretical unification. At least two questions are involved:

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1. Can we functionally define the headline in a way, which would transcend the above distinctions between the different semantically- oriented functions? In other words, is there a generalized function, which summarizing headlines, localizing headlines and quotation headlines have in common?
2. Can we define the headline in a way, which would transcend the distinction between the above semantic function and the parallel pragmatic function, which headlines fulfill? □

Consumption of Newspaper News

Newspaper readership has drastically reduced over the last 20 years around the world. The decline seems to be on a continuous trajectory due to technological advancements. In particular, the so-called 'popular' newspapers are no longer popular now as they once were. Yet the quality press' ability to sustain overall readership levels also looks unimpressive considering the rise in the number of graduates in the population over the last 20 years. It could

be argued that this is healthy for most countries' democracy. It means that the ability of newspapers unfairly and unaccountably to sway the outcome of an election is now much diminished. It also means that fewer people are exposed to their supposedly cynical coverage of politics that discourages people from participating in politics at all. However, this seems too dismissive a picture. Popular newspapers were once a mechanism whereby information about politics could reach those with little inclination to follow political matters. Now they are increasingly unable to fulfill that role. Instead, the readership of newspapers in Britain and other parts of the world, including Kenya, is increasingly confined to those with interest in politics. For years politicians have worried about the power of the press. But perhaps, instead, it is time for them to be concerned about its weakness.□

According to Sparks (2010), the newspaper audience is increasingly inclining towards a need for sensationalism, but during elections, the audience expects a lot from media and is continually expecting new information and counsel from the media. Since headlines are meant to be sensational, headlines pass a message to the audience that ensures viewers evaluate such stories as objective and believable (De Kantzow, 2000). During elections, any political news is news, and people are eager to know what is happening with the other party or the party they support. In fact, the election process brings with it hype and a lot of sensational materials coming from the politicians through the media engage the minds of the affected society into a political hype (Uribe, & Gaunter, 2007). This is where the media can make an effort to control and direct the society's minds to think, behave and act in a certain way. In this regard, the *Nation* newspapers, over the entire period of study propagated peace messages across the various sections of the paper ostensibly to drive the peace agenda during the electioneering period in 2013.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used in the study. The population of the study was twofold: everybody who could read the *Nation* newspaper but the target population was Nakuru town and the *Nation* newspaper editions that carried contents of peace messages, but the target population was the *Nation* newspaper editions that were published in the period between February, March and April 2013. The researcher chose Nakuru town for the study because it was the heart of former Rift Valley province and the bedrock of the infamous 2007/2008 post-election violence according to Krieglger and Waki Reports (2009). The researcher used purposive sampling to select *Nation* newspaper contents with peace messages and to select newspaper readers in Nakuru town. The sample size of newspaper readers consisted of respondents from four marked newspaper vending points (Section 58, Huduma Centre next to the National Bank of Kenya, Afraha stadium junction and Kenya Farmers Association roundabout) within Nakuru town. With the help of the newspaper vendors from each vending points, the researcher was able to identify frequent *Nation* newspaper readers, which formed the Focused Group Discussion and the participants in the interview sessions. The researcher, therefore, selected between 6 and 12 participants at four newspaper vending points to form four FGDs in the study.□

With regards to the sample size of the *Nation* newspaper contents with peace messages, the researcher selected a total of 33 excerpts from the *Nation* newspapers (*Daily Nation*, *Saturday Nation* and the *Sunday Nation*) between the period of February, March and April 2013. These excerpts were then grouped into five categories, namely: headlines, opinion pieces, editorials, news stories, and Advertisements. With the help of the newspaper vendor, the researcher engaged the respondents in Focused Group Discussions. Since the main aim of the study was to examine the implications of *Nation* newspaper peace

reporting in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya, the study used descriptive research design to solicit for qualitative data in the study. Therefore, to arrive at the sample size of the study, the researcher focused on analyzing peace messages one month to and a month after the elections. In this case, the researcher analyzed peace messages in February, March and April 2013 from *Nation* newspaper cuttings purposively in one month.□

The study used Focus Group Discussions and interviews as research instruments to collect data from the selected respondents from Nakuru town. The FGDs consisted of male and female respondents comprising of 6-12 respondents per group. In using this technique, the researcher formulated a list of question guides that were posed to the participants after they were shown the newspaper cuttings of the peace messages from the *Nation* newspaper. Through the Focused Group Discussions, the researcher was able to get the respondents reactions to the messages that called for peace in the run-up to the 2013 elections in Kenya and to determine the readers perceptions on the contributions of the peace messages to the 2013 elections in Kenya which the researcher needed to collect for his second and third objectives respectively. The researcher also used the interview schedules to collect his data; however; the interview questions were almost similar to the FDGs questions. The aim of the interview was basically to establish the respondents' reactions to the peace messages that were carried in the *Nation* newspaper cuttings and to establish whether the peace messages informed their behaviours before, during and after the 2013 elections. The interviews were supplemented by issuing the respondents with *Nation* newspaper cuttings with the peace messages they carried in the run-up to 2013 general elections. The contents were selected from newspaper cuttings from Egerton University Nakuru Town Campus library and archives section and photocopied the relevant contents for the study. The researcher collected

newspaper contents from the publications in February, March and April 2013. ☐

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Role of Media in Peace Advocacy

As per whether print media is well placed in advocating for peace, most participants agreed that the media is well placed in advocating for peace though they were of the view that the large percentage of Kenyans do not access print media. As per their views, print media in Kenya is mainly through the newspaper and more so the *Nation* newspaper, which they termed to be costly for the ordinary Kenyan. These respondents argued that advocating peace messages by using community newspapers can facilitate ease of access for people in different areas, even those with different languages. This is a direct way of addressing people, and their personal experiences and lives can be incorporated much better. The danger of inflammation and manipulation of ethnic tensions, however, cannot be ignored. Another advantage of local print media is that in border areas, it is possible to convey peace messages to passing fighters and refugees. Democratic media structures need more than this; it is vital that the use of information within a society is not solemnly passive but that the population gets actively involved in creating content and passing it. ☐☐ Although some respondents argued that print media is well placed in advocating for peace, they were for the opinion that electronic media would have done better. According to them, electronic media reaches many Kenyans as compared to print media; at the same time, electronic media in Kenya is disseminated even in vernacular. At least every tribe in Kenya has a vernacular radio today. For instance, one respondent argued that: *Sisi kwa wakale tuna Kass FM lakini hatuna gazeti ya kikalenjin.* (We Kalenjins have a radio station known as Kass FM, but we do not have a newspaper written in Kalenjini). ☐

Peace Messages and Conduct of Kenyans before and after 2013 Elections

On whether the respondents considered media messages in their conduct during and after elections, every respondent argued that during elections, peace messages dominated the media. This continued shortly after elections during the presidential disputes in court. Thereafter, the media went silent on the subject. According to the respondents, peace building should be an everyday activity and not an activity of before, during and after elections. Concerning whether the respondents thought that other Kenyans were influenced by the peace messages during and after elections, the respondents/ interviewees were for a common opinion that Kenyans were greatly influenced by the messages. One interviewee said: *Kila wakati sio kwa magazeti peke yake, lakini hata kwa redio na TV tulikuwa tunaonywa tusipigane. Ujumbe kwa media ilitufanya tusipigane na wakenya wengi walitii.* (Every time, in newspapers, radio and TV we were warned against violence. The media messages prevented us from resorting to violence).

Handling of Peace Reporting by Newspapers in 2013 Elections

On how the media handled the reporting of the elections, the majority of FGDs participants felt that during the 2013 elections, the newspaper handled the reporting of the campaigns keenly and carefully. They further argued that the media had been warned prior by the state on reporting suspicious news that would bring about tension upon citizens like hate speeches. Hence the media was cautious about what they were reporting. Besides, there were tremendous changes that were done on the constitution of Kenya that put restrictions on Kenyan media reporting, especially when it comes to sensitive matters like campaigns. ☐☐ A few participants argued that the newspaper was of great assistance in reporting campaigns and peacebuilding. However, they argued that their power was limited, as they were not allowed to report beyond

certain circumstances, especially the negative side. The newspaper would only be a useful tool in a healthy and functioning environment, but more is needed than ethical and responsible reporting to ensure lasting peace and safety. The role of the media (newspaper) is twofold: on the one hand, the media report and reflect on pressing issues and can help to question established concepts and ideas. On the other hand, they can be used for propaganda purposes and instead of revealing truths, try to cover things up and by this curtail people's freedom and right to information. The newspaper was suppressed on the second fold during the 2013 elections, this way; the newspaper was underutilized to this point in time. All the respondents in this study were of the view that the dominant messages from the media were advocating for peace. The *Nation* newspapers were not an exception; its dominant messages were advocating for peace as well. □

Media as Peace Advocates or Not

Concerning some people's argument that the media should not have advocated for peace, all respondents were of the common view that the media is critical in advocating for peace and any other course. According to them, the media is the only means, which can reach all or most people in the country. Although it has a double effect, meaning it can also be misused, they agreed that it had been premised on maximizing good and minimizing harm. There has been a debate by analysts that many journalists, editors and other information gatekeepers do not perceive the undesirable news values and counterproductive effects of the media from a peacebuilding perspective. Kenyans see that media, despite its strong influences on the society, for several reasons is handicapped in the role of peacebuilding in that the media tends to choose frames that are not compatible with the nature of peace processes. The role of Media as 'watchdog' of campaigns and other events during elections is a necessary ingredient. The appropriate coverage of the protest events with the value-added opinion formation of the public, besides practical suggestions for sustainable

solutions, is destined to become a factor of relief and peace for the whole society. □□ From the FGDs, the participants agreed that media played a role in quenching the violence in 2013, and it was felt that they never did this in the 2007/2008 election time. The participants felt that media, all times of media, are potential advocates of the right course. One participant intimated that if all media collude to drive a campaign, they will succeed because they are highly regarded by the audiences.

Discussion of the Results

The third question was whether the *Nation* newspapers messages on peace contributed to the formation of different perceptions of the readers on the 2013 elections in Kenya. The findings of the study show that the messages did significantly contribute the Kenyan's conduct before, during and after the 2013 general elections in Kenya. The FGDs and the interviews show that Kenyan's were considering the messages seriously. Most respondents said if the messages were not broadcast with such a frequency, probably there could have been violence in some places. The most conspicuous of the parts of newspapers were the front-page headlines that carried peace messages inattention, capturing sizes and fonts. In the literature, it was established that the manipulative function of the newspaper headlines are positive in the sense that they manipulate the readers and the audience at large to be tolerant, accommodative and embrace peace in looming crisis. Moreover, it is to be noted that newspaper headlines play a critical role in determining the readership of an issue (Harrower, 2009). Newspaper headlines are usually packaged with unique linguistic characteristics, as seen in the headlines for the *Nation* newspaper. A well-written newspaper headline must be able to attract the attention of the reader. In most cases, newspaper headlines are unusual, sensational and short.

There are four functions of a headline that scholars are mostly interested in (Harrower, 2009). First, headlines

should be crafted in a way that they grab the attention of the readers. The best tool for a headline to capture the reader's attention is to select words that present the readers' self-interest. Therefore, language, as used in the headlines can never appear by itself - it always appears as the representative of a system of linguistic terms, which themselves reflect the current discursive and ideological systems. It is at this point, where agenda setting takes place as seen in the theoretical framework. Van Dijk, (1996: p.11) as established in the literature reviewed argued that in order for a mass medium to have the readers react the way they want, they should be particularly useful when the readers "do not realize the nature or the implications of such control and when they change their minds of their own free will, as when they accept news reports as true or journalistic opinions as legitimate or correct". This was particularly true in the study because most respondents engaged in the FGDs were not aware of the implications of believing newspapers and mass media. According to Kahneman and Tversky (2000) it becomes essential to study and consider the mental representations, including the so-called social cognitions such as attitudes and ideologies, shared by groups of readers or viewers, and this was why the researcher engaged them in Focus group discussions so that they could discuss the raised issues freely and then the researcher could draw some conclusions. The results were that the readers were observed to support the ideals that were found to be homely to their affiliated political party ideals.

This becomes important in the analysis because the evaluation of social power in media together with its symbolic dimensions requires going beyond a narrow social or political approach to power and control. If we can relate more or less explicitly such mental representations, as well as their changes, to properties of news reports, essential insights into media power can be gained. It is from this standpoint that the influence and control that newspaper messages during the selected period in the study was to be

examined for some understanding. Because of the message usage by the newspapers, the findings of this study show that the messages contributed to the peace and calm witnessed during the run-up to 2013 elections in Kenya. The subject of peace at the time was taken as a dominant and necessary ethic to guide Kenyans on their conduct. This is in agreement with the agenda-setting theory that factors of political interference, personal interests, media law and ethics may determine the amount of agenda setting, an exercise that can be both useful and dangerous. It is helpful if it shields audiences from harmful information and threatening if, it shields the public from the truth. For this case, the peace messages produced favourable results, although most scholars have argued that media overdid it and forgot their watchdog role.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to determine the perceptions of the readers on the contribution of these messages to the 2013 elections in Kenya. The results of the findings show that the peace messages contributed to the peaceful conduct of Kenyans before, during and after elections. The findings are supporting the literature reviewed that newspapers can use their power as media to set agendas that can shape people's perceptions and conduct during times when the society is supposed to act in a certain way. As for the objective of this study, which was to determine the perceptions of the readers on the contribution of these messages to the 2013 elections in Kenya, the researcher concludes that the *Nation* newspapers contributed in one way or the other, to the conduct of Kenyans in the run-up to 2013 election. The respondents argued that the messages they received from the *Nation* newspapers helped them to unite and made them value tolerance, calm and peace instead of reactionary and violent approaches to election disputes.

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