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NEWSPAPER AUDIENCES' GAINS FROM READING NEWS ABOUT PARLIAMENT IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Gate-keeping in journalism is of vital importance in the media environment today. In Kenya, the role of media in the safeguarding of transparency of democratic processes in modern-day politics and society cannot be underestimated. However, in building linkages between the people and their representatives, the gains for audience have remained clouded. This Study sought to analyze the newspaper audiences' gains from reading news on Parliament's activities. The Study was anchored on Habermasian Theory of the Public Sphere as well as the Herman and Chomsky's 'Manufacturing Consent – A Propaganda Model'. Constructivist research philosophy adopted a mixed method design in which triangulation of tools was used. This study was conducted within Nairobi County, Kenya. The two main newspapers which were chosen were The Nation and The Standard. The results showed that overall public perception on Parliamentary reporting by print media had a negative score which in quantitative percentages would translate to 37% positive, 11% negative and 52% undecided respondents. The study concluded that Kenyans are not just passive consumers of parliamentary news. Instead, they question - and even react to – news that are likely to have great impact on their lives. The study thus recommended that vernacular newspapers be set up to specifically report on Parliament, so as to enable more people, especially those not conversant with either English or Kiswahili, to understand what happens in Parliament.

Key Words: Propaganda model, fourth estate, parliamentary reporting, Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

The role of media in the safeguarding of transparency of democratic processes in modern-day politics and society cannot be underestimated. By so doing, the media plays its 'watchdog' role. The watchdog allegory confers to the media the role of being a medium for dialogue, investigators of bad behavior, an opponent to power domination and knowledge and the defenders of freedom, democracy and truth. Edmund Burke emphasized this traditional idea of a 'fourth estate' when he stated thus: "There are three estates in Parliament, but in the reporter's gallery yonder sit a fourth estate more important than they all." (Carlyle, 1841, cited in Donohue et al., 1995:118). (Media as a Government Watchdog: Introduction, 2020).

Gate-keeping in journalism is of vital importance in the media environment today. Gatekeepers create and determine what should be disseminated to the public and hence, decide the social reality of the public, as well as their world view (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). However, the rise of the social media in news dissemination in recent years has blurred the line that distinguishes journalists and the media audiences (Tutheridge, 2017). Reliability of news sources is essential to enable the public access information which they can trust, as well as to protect the public from fake news (Tutheridge (ibid.) The question, then, arises: How much gate keeping of parliamentary news (if any) is practiced within the Kenyan media outlets? This study sought to explain the dynamics involved in parliamentary media coverage and gains by readers of such news.

Parliamentary debates are essentially of public interest. Therefore, media houses view Parliament as a valuable news source that provides them with information that is worth reporting. To the (Kenyan) citizen's mind, the concept of Parliament has always been of that hallowed place filled with honourable members who congregate to make laws and debate the welfare of citizens. However, over time, there has developed a perception of Parliament as being a place where personal interests supersede national interests, hence the reference "MPigs" to denote greed among Members of Parliament (*Daily Nation* 4th September 2020). A trend has emerged whereby the media in Kenya reports a lot about Parliament whenever there are conflicts or controversies. But even as the Kenyan Media reports about conflicts and controversies, it must not forget that the most important duty of Parliament is to legislate laws and to scrutinize the government's actions, policies, and spending.

According to *Fondation Hirondelle* Newsletter (2020), it is vital to create a genuine relationship of trust between citizens and their representatives, not only to help prevent crises, but also between legislators and scribes who are vital in building linkages between the people and their representatives. In the exercise of democracy, serious tensions can crop up between politicians, the media and also citizens. This could result in group reactions that can poison public deliberations. Media, therefore, should uphold its rightful role of creating spaces for education, information, dialogue, analysis, and peaceful interactive debates, as well as facilitating the participation of citizens and direct contribution to parliamentary work by developing new participatory technologies. This study wished to provide some insights into the relations between the two institutions and the public perception of Parliament, specifically the gains people make from reading news about parliament in Kenya.

Problem Statement

By reading news on Parliament, audiences/readers become more informed about their representatives, the Government, and the policies and issues that are of importance to them. An informed citizenry is an enlightened citizenry, able to confront its representatives about the failure to enact laws and policies in Parliament that could benefit the populace. Similarly, newspapers play an important role in publishing and therefore informing citizens about the work of their representatives in Parliament. Furthermore citizens reading and digesting news about parliament proceedings could either be well-informed or considerably mis-informed as has been seen globally, regionally and locally. Specifically, the study sought to establish the gains made by audiences in reading parliamentary news from the Kenyan parliament channeled through the main print media of Kenya, the Nation and the Standard newspapers.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- To analyze the newspaper audiences' gains from reading news on Parliament's activities
- To establish the role of media organizations in parliamentary reporting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was guided by the Habermasian Theory of the Public Sphere supported by the Herman and Chomsky's 'Manufacturing Consent – A Propaganda Model'. In summary, Habermas' theory of the public sphere remains a major element for the understanding of public communiqué and deliberation, the public sphere is a creation of its era. In essence, the press serves the whims of the dominant ruling political and business class and both scholars posit that, in a world of intense wealth and key conflicts of class interests, to fulfill this role requires well organized propaganda.

Whereas Habermas' theory of the public sphere remains a major element for the understanding of public communiqué and deliberation, the public sphere is a creation of its era. Additionally, Habermas theory is faulted on its assumption that the public is a "passive audience" with no input into the political debating arena. However, the main flaw in Propaganda Model, according to this researcher, is that inasmuch as it explains the factors that may come into play during reportage of parliamentary news by the media, it neither explains nor weighs the impact of such news to the Public. To some extent, it has been pointed out that the Model leaves a lot of questions on how the Public is affected by what comes out of parliament through the Press resources. Both theories were relevant to this study in analyzing the newspaper audiences' gains from reading news on Parliament's activities as well as the role of media organizations in parliamentary reporting.

By reading news on Parliament, audiences/readers become more informed about their representatives, the Government, and the policies and issues that are of importance to them. An informed citizenry is an enlightened citizenry, able to confront its representatives about the failure to enact laws and policies in Parliament that could benefit the populace.

Newspapers play an important role in publishing and therefore informing citizens about the work of their representatives in Parliament. Inevitably, through objective reporting of parliamentary proceedings, newspapers confer shared responsibilities to both MPs and voters, in that the former will be more exposed to the latter concerning their performance. For example, a report on best performing and worst performing MPs given prominence in Daily Nation or Standard is likely to draw the attention of the whole country and elicit varied reactions from different quarters. While the best performers will most likely be basking in glory, the report will most likely be met with anger and derision from those MPs who have been portrayed negatively.

METHODOLOGY

The study through constructivist research philosophy adopted a mixed method design in which triangulation of tools was used to provide answers to the research question "What are the gains by the audience from reading news about Kenya's parliamentary proceedings?"

This study was conducted within Nairobi County. The location was chosen because it houses Parliament Buildings, as well as the headquarters of the two main media houses under study, that is, the Daily Nation and The Standard. Additionally, Nairobi, being the capital city of Kenya, is multi-ethnic and hence, an ideal location for the investigation on public perceptions on parliamentary reporting. In addition, many people read newspapers in Nairobi County more than in any other county since literacy levels are high in the city. This was therefore a site with literally majority of newspaper audience.

Since the study applied triangulation, the study employed purposive sampling to gather data from the top 10 key decision makers of Parliament – that is, the Speaker of the National Assembly, the Speaker of the Senate,

the Majority Leaders of both Houses, Minority Leaders of both Houses, the Chief Whips of both Houses, and the two Clerks of both Houses, as the Key Informants from parliament. Further, primary research comprised six scribes from each of the two main media houses cited for this study, with both *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard* producing three apiece. The study also sought to interview two senior journalists/managers, at the level of a Managing Editor or equivalent, from each of the two media houses. Finally, the study drafted 10 questionnaires for each of Nairobi's 11 Sub-Counties, making a designated sample total of 110 questionnaires from the general newspaper reading public.

Concerning Secondary Data Collection, publications and newspaper reports on Parliament, dating back 120 months from the date of the commencement of the research, were the main sources

Analyses and Interpretation of Data

Quantitative data was analyzed by tabulation of the instances of “positive”, “negative” and “neutral” coverage of Parliament in the last 10 years. The tabulation generally revealed that most of the coverage on Parliament was “negative.”

Qualitative data was analyzed using Content analysis. For example, commonality of opinion and/or convergence of views by Key Informants about the research questions were used to draw general conclusions that helped validate research findings.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Measure Validity and Reliability

Validity of this design was achieved by taking into account factors that could influence the results of this study and interfere with the interpretation of the results. This was achieved by mixing both qualitative and quantitative research data. With the reliability test, it was observed that the volumes of the published stories on Parliament were so huge that it was practically impossible to gauge the perception index of all of them. Consequently, it was operationalized that only those stories of 10 paragraphs and above would be studied reliably.

Operationalization of the Desk Research

By a brief look through the first three paragraphs, the researchers were able to gauge whether a news report/story was positive, negative, or neutral on Parliament/Parliamentarians. For instance, a story on MPs increasing their salaries was flagged as negative since the move by the legislators was most likely to have been fueled by selfish interests. Conversely, a story on MPs passing a law to spur youth employment was marked as positive since it was in the interests of the Kenyan public. In cases where the research assistant was unsure whether a certain news report/story was positive or negative, the story would be marked neutral.

There was also a column titled “Justification” that required the research assistant to use a brief statement such as: “The story is negative because it reflects MPs’ greed and selfishness” or “The story is positive because it shows the MPs are concerned with public welfare” or “The story is neutral because it simply highlights issues of public concern.”

Qualitative Outcomes

This survey was conducted in all the 11 sub-counties of Nairobi between June 2 and July 20, 2022. The survey's designated sample size was 10 Informants per each sub-county. These were staff working within the precincts of the sub-county offices under the jurisdiction of each of the 11 Deputy County Commissioners (DCC), where any sub-county employee from the level of a DCC to messenger was eligible to offer feedback to the questionnaires. Final sample sizes ranged from four to nine respondents per sub-county.

The respondents in the 11 sub counties of Nairobi County responded in verbatim as follows in the next paragraphs.

Ian (Assistant Sub-County Administrator): I get to know about Bills and Acts of Parliament on time. I also get to know how our Members of Parliament are performing in terms of passing laws and introducing new Bills.

Kevin (Clerical Officer): There are hardly any gains since there is very little coverage of parliamentary proceedings.

Gabriel (Administrative Officer): Newspapers capture more details on Parliament that we do not see on television.

Risper (Clerical Officer): I get to understand more about our country and what always goes on in Parliament.

Elizabeth (Social Development Officer): I get more information about the proceedings of Parliament, especially on how Bills and laws are passed in Parliament.

Amos (Clerical Officer): I get to understand how Bills are discussed and passed in Parliament. I also get to understand key roles and responsibilities of the Kenyan Parliament, as well as updates about ongoing proceedings in the House.

Julius (Clerical Officer): I get to know about the Bills passed by Parliament, as well as those which are pending before the House. I also get updated on the Budget and fund allocations to counties.

Issack (Registrar): I get updates on current Bills and upcoming ones. I also get informed about the status of politics in the country.

Caroline (Administrator): I get to learn about Parliament's operations, as well as about how laws are made.

Peter (Assistant County Commissioner): I get information on parliamentary proceedings as MPs legislate on behalf of Kenyans. I also get to know about the kind of Bills passed and Amendments made.

Stanley (Surveyor): I gain nothing from reading newspapers because what they report is not what is important.

Erick (Receptionist): I get to read news about how Parliament operates, as well as news about things happening in the countryside.

Noah (Clerical Officer): I get to know about the Bills being passed in Parliament by MPs, as well as how revenue has been allocated. Also, I get to know how issues of concern have been resolved in Parliament, as well as how Parliament has exercised its oversight role.

Shamim (Clerical Officer): None. I do not read newspapers and have no time to read them.

Sharleen (Registrar): Through such reports, I get the current information on what is happening in Parliament, and on current affairs discussed. I also get the feeling of inclusion on what is going on in Parliament – it feels like being part of the discussions.

Ken (Senior Clerical Officer): I get day to day information on what happens in Parliament. I also gain by knowing which Bills have been passed by Parliament and signed by the President, as well as Motions which have been Tabled or brought to Parliament for discussion.

Samuel (Registrar): Through interaction with newspapers, I am able to keep pace with current affairs on legislative matters.

Ubah (Assistant County Commissioner): Through newspapers, I get a clear idea and understanding of what is happening in the country. Newspapers provide news about the country's economic situation, sports and trade. Newspaper reading generally improves knowledge and makes it easy for me to relate to other people and get their views about current events and politics.

Quintin (ICT Officer): I gain insight about what happens inside Parliament, and am kept aware of the progress of parliamentary actions. I also get exposed to the management of the Government.

Wesley (Human Resources Officer): Newspapers are very informative, so I get well informed about Parliament and its activities.

Stephen (Assistant County Commissioner 1): Newspaper reports are very informative and educative. Through such reports, I am able to understand the level of representation of various Members of Parliament and also get informed on issues that affect the whole country.

Lucinta (Human Resources Officer): Newspapers provide me with information with regard to general knowledge. They help in keeping me up-to-date with what is happening in the Kenyan Parliament. Newspapers also act as intermediaries between citizens and the government because not everyone can afford to buy televisions, radios, or other expensive communication tools.

Maurine (Clerical Officer): Newspapers keep me updated on what is happening in the country. Newspapers target a wider public market than radio and television.

Teresia (Assistant County Commissioner 1): Newspaper reports are informative, so I get well informed when I read news about Parliament and its activities.

Rosemary (Children's Officer): By reading newspapers, I am able to get detailed and comprehensive information about any new law passed in Parliament. Newspaper reporting allows for such details to be captured, something that cannot be achieved in other media such as television.

Neununah (Children's Officer): By reading the newspapers, I get basic knowledge about Parliament. I also get to know about daily parliamentary proceedings, as well as the Budget, the State of the Nation, and daily politics.

Thomas (Assistant County Commissioner Cadet): Newspapers are informative. Most of the time, they simplify the information passed from Parliament for the common man to understand easily. Newspapers report on Parliament without leaning on any side. They break down the laws passed, and go further to tell us the pros and cons of the activities happening in Parliament.

Wycliffe (Clerical Officer): Through newspapers, I am able to get timely information as it occurs. It is easier to refer to newspaper reports in case I need clarifications. Newspapers give us detailed information about the proceedings of Parliament.

Margaret (Clerical Officer): Newspapers increase my knowledge in Parliament's proceedings, so that I can have better informed opinions about any issues arising. Newspapers also give updates about developments in science, technology, and the country at large. Reading the newspaper regularly helps me in developing creativity and logical reasoning.

Alexander (Assistant County Commissioner): Newspaper news offer me more knowledge about operations of Parliament and especially on how laws are made. Through such news, I gain more knowledge on national issues.

Owino (Probation Officer): Newspapers help with the latest information about laws generated in Parliament and the conduct of parliamentarians. They help me gauge the level of support parliamentarians have from the voters through introduction and debating on Bills.

John (Clerical Officer): Through newspapers, I get to know about certain issues I have been taking for granted, and which are discussed in Parliament. Through such reports, we also get to know which members are not performing their roles as mandated by the people, those who never ask questions, or contribute to any Motions.

DISCUSSION

Feedback received from the sub-counties revealed that newspaper news about Parliament help to create awareness among readers about the activities of Parliament. Specifically, such news makes the populace to be enlightened about the process of law making. This is important because MPs, as people's representatives, play an important role in lawmaking. Bills and Motions brought to Parliament usually have great impact on the public, hence, creating a high level of interest from people keen to know about the stand of their representatives on such Bills and Motions. To quote Stephen, one of the respondents from Kasarani: "Newspaper reports are very informative and educative. Through such reports, I am able to understand the level of representation of various Members of Parliament and also get informed on issues that affect the whole country." Carstens of Dagoretti said: "I get to learn about the enactment of new laws, as well as about all Bills ostensibly being discussed and passed by Parliament. Print media is a way of encouraging a reading culture."

Media organizations got an overwhelming seal of approval from the respondents, with 61.9 per cent of the respondents lauding them for playing their reporting role well. Conversely, those who opined that the media had failed in its role of parliamentary reporting were almost in tandem with those who were not sure.

On what measures should be taken to ensure a more robust coverage of parliamentary news by Parliament, the respondents gave various proposals, including increasing the number of pages dedicated to covering parliamentary news in daily newspapers; setting up special newspapers to exclusively cover parliamentary affairs; and lowering the cost of newspapers to make them affordable to the majority of Kenyans. Other proposals included using local/vernacular languages to report parliamentary business instead of English or Kiswahili, so as to reach a wider Kenyan audience especially those who cannot understand the two national languages; setting up online newspapers instead of publishing hard copies, so as to reach a wider market; training journalists on parliamentary reporting, and paying journalists well, so that they could report parliamentary business well!

On overall perception of parliamentary reporting by the two newspapers, slightly more than a half (52 per cent) of the respondents said they had a "Neutral" opinion about the issue, while those with Positive and Negative opinion polled at 37 and 11 per cent, respectively. The high number of "Neutrals" can be attributed to the fact that many of the respondents confessed that they had not had access to the two newspapers for quite some time after the Government stopped providing the same to Government offices. Therefore, many of the respondents were not able to give a judgement, instead opting for the safest option of "Not Sure."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of the research, contrary to the Habermasian theory of Public Sphere which classifies the public as just people waiting to be fed with news, Kenyans are not just passive consumers of parliamentary news. Instead, they question -- and even react to -- news that are likely to have great impact on their lives. For instance, reports about corruption in Parliament will not go unnoticed and the culprits forgiven, since most Kenyans know about the implications of corruption on their livelihoods. MPs who risk finding themselves in negative limelight often face the wrath of the electorate, and are most likely than not to be rejected by voters during subsequent elections.

A good number of respondents felt there was a need to establish a daily newspaper aimed at specializing on parliamentary reporting. This would ensure that Parliament gets exclusively reported, instead of the current situation where the House competes for news attention with other interests.

Proposals were also made that more pages be allocated for Parliamentary news in the dailies. This will ensure that more stories about Parliament find their way in the newspapers.

There was also a recommendation that vernacular newspapers be set up to specifically report on Parliament, so as to enable more people, especially those not conversant with either English or Kiswahili, to understand about what happens in Parliament.

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DISCLOSURES

Conflict of Interest Statement

This paper is written in free view of the parliamentary procedures reporting with no specific persons or bodies opposed to the write up. In particular, the author wishes to confirm that there is no conflict of interest in the production of this academic manuscript from the site location as well as the parent university from where the scholar commenced the write up of the paper.

Data Access Statement

All data in this article was obtained with respondent consent and acknowledgement for any references or citations fully done. Similarly, the data used in the article were derived from field where all government permits were acquired to carry out the data collection exercise.

Ethics Statement

In conducting the data collection exercise for this article, all ethical requirements as prescribed in Kenya were met. The respondent at the site location in Nairobi City County were fully informed of the academic nature of the exercise with their consent fully obtained and confidentiality observed all through the exercise.

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