

The Media, Ethnicity and Regional Development in the Lake Victoria Basin

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Abstract

This article discusses how the mass media has been able to assist national and regional development. The concepts of media, ethnicity, and regional development are discussed as critical elements that influence regional development. The discussions focus on how the concept of ethnicity was used by the colonial and independent governments in Kenya to perpetuate conflicts amongst the different ethnic groups through the mass organs of communication. While the colonial regime used ethnicity to consign different ethnic groups to different sectors of the economy, the post independence regimes have refined the use of ethnicity to help sustain their regimes in power and to either support development or frustrate development efforts in specific regions. The article acknowledges the critical role undertaken by the media in rationalizing the politics of ethnicity and how that eventually feeds into national and regional development. Different scholars have reasoned differently on the role of the media in influencing events. The present discussion focuses attention on one of the early argumentations by media scholars. Their argumentation on the role and effect of the mass media is contextualized in the Kenyan media scene and analysed for relevance.

Introduction

The question posed in this article is: can the media influence ethnicity and regional development in a democratic engagement? In discussing the role and impact of mass communication in accelerating regional development, it is important to reflect on the existing communication models that are used to analyse regional development. According to Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model, communication is the transfer of figures and symbols but in actuality communication is indeed an interchange between the sender and receiver where there is neither permanent receiver nor sender. This process implies freedom and equality. This definition also departs considerably from the classical mechanical, vertical model, which is largely obsolete as currently most communication specialists use this model of communication which respects the interchange between the communicator and the communicatee. This article focuses attention on the mass medium as a means of effecting that interchange. Noyoo [1], argues that development as a concept assumes a positive transformation of people's lives that is both quantitative and qualitative when engaging in debates about development. Adjectives that may denote development are: improvement, enhancement, elevation, progress to mention a few. Ideally development should be a process that raises the material and living conditions of people. For development to take place, therefore, other kinds of improvements that can catalyze the developmental process must be present. These include improvements in education, health, access to credit facilities, social welfare and security. There should also be institutions that protect both human as well as property rights. Development also means improved access to life chances and opportunities such as employment and social security. The process of improving access to life and opportunities entails also access to information which validates issues and development initiatives for the public. Hassan [2] argues that most economic crises appear most pronounced in the fields of social welfare, poverty and in standards of living, infant mortality, school enrolment and life expectancy. The success and failure of these life crises determine the level of development and the media to play the role of transmitters of the key indicators of these crises such as infant mortality rate, school enrolment and life expectancy among others. The media has tended to depict these economic indicators from an ethnic perspective mostly analyzing issues from an ethnic perspective such as to what extent are members of the different ethnic groups affected by the indicators mentioned above.

Ethnicity is discussed as an image that is developed by the media in order to increase its street sales the Kenyan media tends to cover politics from an ethnic dimension. Nyambuga [3], observes that the *Nation* and *Standard* daily newspapers have tended to identify political leaders as leaders of the various ethnic groups. This argues has challenged national cohesion since leaders have been portrayed to be only championing agenda for their own different ethnic groups. In discussing ethnicity Davidson [4] perceives it as a negative force and asserts that it is utterly destructive to civil society/media, undermining a country's morality and flouting the rule of law. In this context the media is perceived to be the transmitter of the messages that the civil society package some of which could be containing negative ethnic laced messages. But Glickman [5] takes a more optimistic view by linking it to political processes. He points out that, despite the persistence of ethnic conflicts in the politics of all African states, significant liberalization and democratization are possible. One reason is that the nature of ethnicity in most African states is instrumental rather than primordial. While having a development agenda for your ethnic group is not bad the typification of this as ethnic rather than regional agenda has led to inter ethnic distrust and sometimes animosity rather than regional cohesion and development. The print media are the main outlets for information which the audiences use to make decisions in the development arena.

Analyzing the region's development requires an understanding of the ethnic images that have been transmitted through the media over the years such as those involving ethnicity and conflict. It is argued in this article that these images have been responsible for ideology formulation, political inclinations and basic social behaviours that are evident in the Lake Victoria region from the colonial time to the

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present. The issue of ethnicity is argued to have been a strategy of the colonial rulers to keep the country divided and in essence to facilitate control and governance of the country. The independent governments of the three regimes of Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki have each adopted the strategy of dividing the country into distinct ethnic divisions. As a way of implementing this strategy the regimes adopted a method of manipulating the media through legal, government and political means. These kinds of strategies were perfected by the first two regimes of Presidents Kenyatta and Daniel Moi who practiced a system of using the media to deliberately consign the Western region to what could be termed as a development limbo. Badejo [6] argues that the first President Jomo Kenyatta started the policy of not encouraging the region's development in 1969 following their much publicized fallout with his then estranged Former Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. As a punishment to Jaramogi's followers the people of Nyanza Province were particularly left out in the development program of the country and this further fuelled political disenchantment in the Nyanza province which is now divided into several counties after the promulgation of the new constitution.

In contrast Mwai Kibaki who became President after the 2002 general elections ruled the country in an era of multi-partism. Under multi-party system of government basic liberties such as freedom of expression and freedom of press were restored. The state media namely the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation lost most of its audience to the privately owned media such as the Kenya Television Networks, Nation Television, and the Royal Media group among others. Due to the changed media scene the Government of Mwai Kibaki could not use similar media wedged propaganda against the people of the region.

In addition, during his tenure there has been a noticeable policy shift that has encouraged economic development in all regions of the country. The introduction of free primary education, the constituency development fund and general decentralization of decision making power to the various line ministries has to a large extent assisted economic growth of the Western region. In the Kibaki era one cannot directly attribute lack of economic growth to media manipulation that occurred during the regimes of the first two heads of state.

Political Conflicts and Development

However, it is worth noting that during events of great political contestations such as a general election, the referendum, and political successions, conflicts have always erupted along tribal or ethnic lines in the Western region. These contestations have pitted leaders from the different regions against each other. In their campaigns they have mostly undertaken ethnic mobilization. This has enhanced ethnic consciousness and contributed to political conflicts that have created the ethnic divide in the region. These kinds of conflicts have been noticed between the Luo and the Abagusii, the Luo and the Kalenjin, The Kalenjin and the Abagusii and among the Kalenjin sub tribes, Luo and the Abaluyia. The impact of these conflicts has been the deceleration of the region's economic development. These conflicts have largely been covered by the media and as a result the conflicts have negatively influenced investment in the region. At times the mass media has been accused of being responsible for fueling these conflicts. This article therefore, attempts to show the linkage between ethnicity, conflict, the media and regional development.

The other question reflected on, is: does the media play an unintended role of exacerbating political conflicts thus affecting regional development? The media has a clear watchdog role in a democratic dispensation, but the argument advanced in this discussion

is captured by Curran when he says "... traditional liberalist thinkers argue that the primary developmental role of the media is to act as a public watchdog overseeing the state," in another argumentation that captures the central discussion in this article Eilders [7] and Nyambuga [3] *inter alia* argue that in the process of the media's watchdog role some unintended roles such as political conflicts emerge. These conflicts can be termed as the conflicts of development and the Kenyan parliament has shown quite a bit of it as the debates in there often take the form of political conflicts that are centered on why this or that region has not benefited from this or that development project.

On the other vein it is argued that the media has some intended effects such as that of influencing development. This effect occurs when the media's messages are development oriented in nature. These messages could range from that of different leaders opening new projects such as that of the new Kisumu International Airport, newly built roads, the new sugar Company in Kakamega or even that of the declaration of a new university in Kisii. On the other front are media messages that emanate from the media audience that show incremental issues that portray personal development such as good performance of students in school, the cure of specific diseases through joint contributions by the people. These events serve to show or to portray development that take place in the Western region and how they could result into the spurring of further development for the Lake Victoria Basin.

Evolution of Ethnicity in Kenya

This section on the evolution of ethnicity in Kenya provides praxis of the cleavages that exist in the socio political situation in western Kenya as portrayed by the mass media and their role in influencing the type and level of development. It is important to discuss a brief background of ethnicity, its role and impact in creating an environment for national or regional development in Africa. This discussion will help to create an understanding of the extent of ethnicity in the continent generally and in Kenya particularly. In Africa ethnic conflicts dominate media reports. The conflicts have been experienced in several countries that were hitherto, considered to be relatively peaceful, such as the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Kenya. The cold war seemed to have ensured an uneasy peace in these countries. Murithi states that ethnic conflicts in Africa just like in other parts of the world denote a de-legitimization of governance by the state. These conflicts involve the breakdown of the state into ethnic nations where each has competing interests. Kenya like its neighbors namely Ethiopia to the north, Sudan to the north west, Somalia to the east and Uganda to the west, each have several ethnic groups with competing interests. These interests have often led to conflict that has slackened the pace of regional development such as the cases of the Lords Resistant Movement in Northern Uganda and the Southern Sudan liberation movement in southern Sudan among others. In each of these regions no tangible development has taken place because of insecurity which has affected implementation of regional development.

In order to appreciate how ethnicity has developed in the country it would be necessary to discuss tribalism during the colonial rule in Kenya. The country was colonized by the British who perfected the art of playing one ethnic group against the other. They ensured that different ethnic groups were given different roles, like the Luo, the Luhyas were mostly employed in the Postal services and Railways while the Kikuyus were encouraged to undertake small scale business [6,8]. Apart from the national parastatals such as the Kenya Railways, Kenya Postal Services and the Kenya Army the region has three critical industries that guide development in the basin namely the sugar, tea

and the fish industry. Eco tourism is fast catching on as an alternative stimulus to regional development. This has been evidenced by the many new sites that are being promoted through the mass media by the Kenya Tourism Development Authority such as sites in Mfangano, Got Ramogi, Kit Mikayi, Simbi Nyaima among others.

Reaction against the colonial rulers was in the form of armed resistance by the Mau Mau who were mainly drawn from the Kikuyu and other political parties such as the Young Kavirondo, and the Akamba People's Party among others [6,8]. These ethnic based reactions to colonialism marked the politics of the colonial era and the present political pre-disposition during the multi party era of the nineties and the two thousand periods. The struggle for a multi party system of governance in the country saw a re-introduction of the concept of ethnic balkanization as the main political parties drew their bulk support from regions that their main Party leader originated from. FORD Kenya was the main party in the Western region in the nineties. The majority of MPs from Nyanza and Western Province were members of FORD Kenya Party. This meant that a majority of the people of the region were members of the party and by extension too of the opposition. The government of the day used that reasoning to deny them of critical aspects of development through the slogan "*siasa mbaya, maisha mbaya*" (Negative politics leads to bad life) this slogan helped to consign the region to the back burner of development [9].

During the clamour for the re-introduction of multi-partism in Kenya, Markakis [10] observes that 'invention of tribes' during this period was not simply the result of administrative expedience on the part of the colonial state, but also an African response to radical changes in the socio-economic and political environment. These ethnic groups measured the level and extent of development that came to their various regions and defined their opposition or support to the colonialist based on perceived level of development in their region. These ethnic groups measured the level and extent of development that came to their various regions and defined their opposition or support to the colonialist based on whether they perceived that they influenced development for their region or not. These meant that different ethnic groups reacted to colonization in order to preserve their ethnicity. This scenario created a fertile environment for political conflict. The conflicts were tailored along the line of capturing the ultimate political power, which was the true purpose of the various ethnic based political parties. This was done with a belief that ultimate power would result into increased development in the Lake Victoria basin. This belief could have spurred the conflicts that emerged between the colonial rulers and the *Piny Owacho* group in the Lake Victoria Basin. In order for them to succeed in their pursuit for power they turned to the media like *Ramogi* and *Muiguithania* to popularize their cause.

Identification with the tribe provided a sense of ethnic security and solidarity. These spasms of ethnic nationalism were apparent during the colonial and independent Kenya. Ethnic nationalism manifested itself whenever an ethnic group felt politically or economically threatened. This ethnic consciousness as a result of mobilization which was conducted directly or through the media by community leaders later evolved into organized pro-development proponents [8,11]. Ajulu [8] observes that in the Kenyan context most commentators do concede that ethnic competition has often emerged in periods of acute contestation over resources or state power which incidentally has remained the dominant instrument of dispensing resources and patronage. These times of contestations have mostly been during general elections or national referendum. Politicians have tended to

rally their various ethnic groups to different political standpoints for selfish and individual gain.

Okondo [12] a former minister for labour in the Moi regime describes ethnicity as the use of tribe to discriminate against other ethnic groups. He alleges that this kind of patronage was rampant in the period of the Kenyatta and Moi Presidency. Okondo's examples were a reference to negative ethnicity which has often led to ethnic conflict. These politicians have largely used the media to publicize how the existing government has developed their own communities, thus ethicizing development and allocation of national resources. This has made the presidency a much contested position since it is perceived to be able to influence regional development.

In an argument that focuses on ethnicity in the lake Victoria Basin, Ogot [13] discusses the origins of Luo ethnicity. He says that Luo ethnicity has significantly deepened since the country attained independence in 1963. He argues that successive regimes have isolated the community and denied them resources unlike other communities. Ogot alleges that this has caused self consciousness among them and at times promoted politics of rebellion as witnessed in the past three general elections of 1992/1997 and 2002. This made Luos as an ethnic community, to develop a belief which they still hold to date, that they can exist without the government support. This view is corroborated by a popular Luo saying; *Adak makata ionge*. which when directly translated means, 'I can live without you.' This is the extent to which the Luos had been pushed by the previous governments to a situation where they believed they had nothing to gain from the government.

Meanwhile in areas such as the Central Region the Kikuyu faced marginalization during the Moi regimes, as argued by Oyugi [14]. Oyugi [14] further contends that marginalization by the Moi government led to political tensions in the country. Different media articles focused on perceived community conflicts which served to entrench ethnicity in Kenyan politics [9]. Government policies that are aimed at frustrating specific ethnic groups perceived to be opposing the government, have largely been responsible for an increase in the level of ethnicity which have from time to time resulted into ethnic considerations when drawing up the Lake Basin's Development agenda. Such differences continued to haunt the country up to the referendum of 2005, where ethnicity played a crucial role in the campaigns and in the media Cottrell and Ghai [15]. This period saw the politics of distribution of districts. Those areas which were perceived to be loyal were awarded new districts and constituencies in order to solidify support for the central government. The media was largely used to persuade potential voters in the 2005 referendum on the perceived advantages of the newly created districts.

Kiraitu Murungi former Minister for Constitutional Affairs, observed, "We cannot pretend that ethnicity is not an important factor in Kenyan politics. It is part of our historical and social reality". Ethnicity was manifested in the country's political alliances and subsequent jostling for power that was witnessed in the 1992, 1997, 2002 and the prelude to the 2007 general elections. The prelude to the 2007 general elections has been evidenced with bare ethnic maneuvering like that by Musikari Kombo holding state house at ransom on political appointments from his ethnic group; or the horse trading witnessed in the Orange Democratic Movement Presidential nominations Obonyo [16].

The results of the 2005 referendum polls showed that all ethnic groups except the Meru, Embu, and Gikuyu voted against the draft constitution [15]. It is argued here that ethnic messages in the press

could have resulted into people from the western region feeling of togetherness resulting into a regional anti draft constitution feeling. These could have arguably compelled the government of President Mwai Kibaki to sack all their leaders from government. This act signaled the return of the region to the opposition. It meant regional marginalization which, however, did not reach the magnitude of the Kenyatta and Moi eras. This contributed to a regional anti-government feeling, giving birth to the term Luo Nyanza and the other communities in the area. The media served to popularize ethnic labeling further consigning the region into a development limbo.

Politics in Kenya has been ethnicized, as described above. The leader's political pronouncements as reported in the media tend to appeal to ethnic chauvinism, thus causing inter-ethnic competition and by extension conflict amongst the different ethnic groups since the groups are portrayed as competing. Ethnicity, as was practiced, resulted into possible political tensions and conflicts in Kenya.

Kenya's former Minister for Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Kiraitu Murungi [18] in an article published in *the Daily Nation* argued that Kenyan politicians pretend to be nationalist while in real sense they actually act on the basis of their tribal and personal interests. In essence, the Minister was acknowledging the presence of ethnicity and its influence in the distribution of development.

Ethnicity, Conflict and the Media

This article reflects on the issue of how development was influenced by the media. In order for the political and ethnic actors to galvanise public support, the media had to play a central role in shaping public opinion and attitudes. Terzis and Smeets [18] serve that the media plays an important role in negotiating the structural factors as well as generating and facilitating the triggering factors that lead up to development. They argue that the media plays a significant role in development situations not only by provoking panic, hatred and even violence, but also in promoting stability, conflict resolution, management and transformation. These roles that have been ascribed are definitely grand and critical; they indeed encourage discussions and debate on the influence of the media in regional development.

The media are often accused of having undue influence on its audience but different scholars have failed to prove this linkage between the media and its audience. Scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet have conducted research on media effects. They concluded that for the media to have effects such as causing incremental development on its audience three distinct processes namely activation, reinforcement and conversion take place. Activation is the act of presenting compelling arguments for a position. This is the case when propaganda is represented in the mass media as media campaigns and personal persuasion. In development situations, political convictions cause incremental development. During the prelude to the 2007 elections in, Kenya violence flared up. The role of activation in those developments can be traced to different kinds of mass media messages. Noelle-Neuman [19] discusses how the media lead to either loud or silent audience in her theory on the spiral of silence. One important influence on our opinions is the media, media has helped to influence who we are today. This theory focuses on what happens when people provide their opinion on a variety of issues that the media have defined for the public. The theory postulates that one view dominated the public scene and others disappeared from the public awareness as its adherents became silent. In other words, the people fear of separation or isolation those around them, they tend to keep their attitudes to

themselves when they think they are in the minority. This process is called "Spiral of Silence".

This theory is relevant in this discussion as it portrays the way the vocal idea or issue in the press can silence the less vocal and popular idea. The people who hold the less published or reported idea or hold minority viewpoints on public issue tend to go silent and remain in the background where their communication will be constrained. Those who believe they hold the majority view will be encouraged to speak by the media focusing more on majority views by reporting on their opinions and activities but underestimating the minority views thereby leading to a downward spiral of communication. This causes development as people who hold different ideas differ on all kinds of issues not the least the right to express those ideas. The press is meanwhile the uncanny transmitter of the various positions.

Reinforcement is here defined as the provision of arguments that motivate pre-held opinions and notions. Lazarsfeld et al. [20] assert that conversions are undertaken through clever use of words, emotional appeals or even rational. It is pre-supposed in this statement that in order for the readers to change their opinion on an issue, messages are deliberately framed to persuade. The framing is done to closely follow the reader's pre-existing notions so as to make them feel the message is in conformity with their pre-held notions. National and regional development is a good example of how reinforcement can take place. Stereotypes of how different communities view each other are reinforced when such stereotypes are regularly covered in the mass media and negatively portrayed. Examples are when newspaper analysts argues that people from Nyanza are lazy and just like fun, or the Luhyas are good at being watchmen. A former secretary general of the Kanu political party, Joseph Kamotho once referred to the Luhya community as a tribe of watchmen and cooks which has stereotypically stuck in the public mind making Luhyas feel belittled among other tribes. These arguments play into the notions and perceptions of people and cause conflict in the politics. These remarks which are also normally circulated in the media tend to cause ethnic tension which is not conducive for regional development and national cohesion. Media gatekeepers should censor and filter information and only relay information that can enhance positive ethnic perception.

Conversion is the final product of activation and reinforcement. Conversion is the achievement of commonality in the communication process and the accompanying change of thought to reflect that of the message sender. It is argued here that this is the stage where positions are taken on issues and actual development can be promoted. Conversion is thus the end target in the development paradigm.

Conclusion

The argument advanced in this article is that the media influences the socio political situation that western Kenya finds itself in. Political conflicts that are experienced in Kenya have a definite ethnic dimension and their origin can be easily traced to the media where they are played out through deliberate news framing engaged by the various media houses. These images have also resulted in the acceleration or a deceleration of regional development. The editorial policies of the media houses have been easily used by the media owners to control the nature and slant of reportage. The media is certainly an important institution in attitude formulation and in influencing people's actions and activities, though the influence might be indirect. Scholars have continued to pose divergence in this contention but this article argues that perhaps what is in question is whether the media posses direct or indirect influence on the audience. Arguably the media has an important

role in what people think and how they act in different instances such as during political conflicts. Therefore issues the media stress so much on will influence public direction of thought and in most cases, action.

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