

Election year and media agenda setting

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Michael Joseph, the former CEO of Safaricom, once described Kenyans as having peculiar calling habits. According to a recent media survey by Ipsos Synovate, Kenyans seem to have another peculiar habit, watching news. The quarter four Kenya Audience Research Foundation (KARF) report shows over 80% of Kenyans read and watch local news. That news is politics.

An election year, 2012 will be a make or break especially for the media who were accused of taking sides in the build up to the 2007 elections that was followed by post election violence claiming the lives of about 1 500 people and displacing over 300 000 others.

Agenda setting

With politics being the most consumed media content in Kenya, the issue of agenda setting and responsible reporting is very important. Agenda setting was a topic of discussion during a recent media round table forum held in Nairobi that brought together media players and scholars.

In defining agenda setting, theorists Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw say the media (mainly the news media) aren't always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about. A look at the Kenyan news content shows what Kenyan audiences are thinking about - who will be Kenya's next president.

So who really sets the agenda for Kenyan media? "Agenda setting starts with the reporter who is the first gate keeper," says Andy Kagwe, a senior production editor at *The Standard* newspaper and a panellist at the media forum. Kagwe says Kenyan media should take lessons from the 2007 experience; "journalists should balance their news reports objectively." In Kenya, it is common for politicians to call journalists and news rooms to complain about coverage.

The politician's agenda

Prof. Robert White, a media scholar, says in Kenya the agenda is set by politicians. "Politicians amplify local problems, influence opinion leaders and use vernacular media platforms to engage their constituents. It is these issues that the media picks and amplifies. An election can be based on a single issue that the politician uses to stir up the masses."

Prof. White's observation is right in many ways. Most politicians in Kenya talk about "bringing development" to their areas if they are elected. Issues of health, infrastructure, dealing with corruption, education, and creation of the jobs feature prominently in election campaigns and media reports. Journalists give audiences things to think about by imploring the

masses to vote for leaders with a development track record. By entrenching these views, the media seems to be actively setting the politicians agenda.

Jane Thuo, executive director of the Association of Media Women in Kenya, says a lot is expected from the media as far as setting the agenda is concerned. "We want to see more debates and objective reports. Apart from echoing what politicians say, they should interrogate and even question their sources of wealth. The Kenyan media should move beyond simple reporting of who said what when."

The real scenario

The general feeling during the forum was that the Kenyan media needs to be objective. However, that is easier said than done. Dr. Harun Mwangi, executive director of the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), says agenda setting has a lot to do with ownership of media. "Ask yourself who owns the media in Kenya? It is the elite and whose agenda do you think they set? How possible is it for them to give issues of public interest prominence?" wonders Mwangi while noting that the Kenyan media is mostly event driven and rarely spends money and time to discuss ideas.

Mwangi also accuses the Kenyan media of having selective memory. "After 2007, we no longer hold our leaders accountable based on the statements they made. Journalists need to interrogate those statements."

To improve the state of journalism in Kenya, the MCK will be launching a manual that will include guidelines of interviewing and a monthly mentoring report on election coverage. "We are not going to wait until violence happens to say what was happening. This time we are going to start monitoring early to avoid a repeat of 2007."

Although a date has not been set for the Kenyan election, political discussions have spilled to social media where people seeking elective posts have targeted their campaign messages. The quarter four KARF report shows a significant increase in internet usage with most using their mobile phones. About 98% of the respondents in the report are members of Facebook and 20% are on Twitter. Alternative sources of media are the places to watch as the election tempo peaks in Kenya.

Indeed in Kenya, media has been successful in telling us what to think about and the question begging to be answered is: whose agenda?

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