Displays of Might, Glitz and Deceit: What was the Print Media’s Role in Kenya’s Volatile 2007 Post-Election Violence?

Sammy Gakero Gachigua
Egerton University
Abstract

Kenya’s political campaigns leading to the volatile 2007 elections – which resulted in one month violence that left 1000 people dead, over 350,000 people displaced from their homes, many others physically or emotionally scarred and the country on the brink of a full-fledged civil war – were unprecedented in several ways: firstly, they were the most competitive in Kenya’s electoral history. Secondly, unprecedented amounts of money were spent by the competing political parties, running in the excess of 5.6 billion shillings (about 86 million US dollars). Thirdly, the campaigns received by far the largest amounts of media coverage and opinion polling in Kenya’s history. Fourthly, the political campaigns of the competing parties employed unparalleled displays of might, tricks and publicity stunts. Widely held general public opinion about the role of the media in election campaigns and elections point to either the complicity of the media in getting sucked into the unbridled competition for power by political parties or lost opportunities in steering the campaigns in a more enlightened direction. This paper, therefore, using the ideal of the role of the media as an arena and actor in the democratic public sphere, makes a critique of campaign news and opinion poll reporting by the two leading and oldest Kenyan newspapers – ‘Nation’ and ‘Standard’. It situates the critique in the context of the prevailing political environment and the state of the media in the run-up to the 2007 elections in highlighting some failings of the media in reporting campaign news and opinion polls. The paper argues that some of the media failings arise from adopting a hard news model in reporting news and opinion polls, a model that politicians through the use of media consultants and spin doctors manipulated to their advantage and to the detriment of the election process. Such modeling of campaign news by the media and the manipulation of the news model by politicians make it easy for sensationalization of politics, provocation of passions and uncritical news reporting, which may have contributed to the 2007-2008 post-election violence. The papers also questions the conduct and reporting of opinion polls by the newspapers, arguing that the shortcomings in the two respects may have debased the election process thus contributing in creating the volatile atmosphere that degenerated into post-election violence in Kenya.
Introduction

A close link exists between the public sphere, media and democracy. The public sphere is the existence of a social space (whether real or imagined) where matters of public importance can be discussed to determine the public interest (Stevenson 2002). The classical public sphere, as Gripsrud (2002) and Stevenson (2002) argue, is tied to the idea of democratic public sphere, which rests on the premise that every citizen is to take part in the formation of public opinion in a free and independent manner by making a judgment on information and arguments presented on an issue. The essence of public discourse is, therefore, to make out the general public good through critical reflection on issues of public concern without the hindrances emanating from one's social status or financial strength. The decisions of this process are to be arrived at through informed consensus. This formulation of the public sphere, as both authors observe, is an ideal of how the public sphere might best operate and not a description of how it has operated in a real historical context, though some historical moments and societies can be said to be closer to the ideal than others.

The media in society is both an arena and actor in the public sphere. The media accomplishes this role by mediating arguments and information, in other words, facilitating discourse in the public sphere. The media, therefore, in facilitating public discourse aids in enlightening as well as providing a forum for information exchange, in addition to shaping opinion formation among the public. In this formulation the media becomes critical in the public life of modern society; given that it is a critical link to an informed citizenry who are an important component in the operation of a democracy (Gripsrud 2002 and Stevenson 2002).

This conception of the role of the media as both an actor and arena in the public sphere is an important backdrop against which media in modern democratic or aspiring democratic societies can be appraised. This appraisal becomes even more pressing during an electioneering process, since this process marks an important cycle in a democratic dispensation in which political actors, mainly through the media, sell their socio-political and economic programmes to citizens so that they can be given a mandate to govern. The appraisal is also important given that the media, especially the news media, operates on the basis of principles that resonate with those formulated as representing the role of the media in the public sphere. These principles revolve around ideals and responsibilities which the news media ardently claim to subscribe to. These include objectivity, neutrality, public good, public’s right to know, society’s watchdog, freedom of the press, among others.
However, according to Habermas, as discussed by Gripsrud (2002: 235 – 239), by 1960 in the western societies (a situation that can also be said to prevail in other free societies that have fairly free media), two processes had squeezed air out of the public sphere, effectively transforming the public sphere in a direction at variance with the ideal. One process eroded the ideal of common good as a result of increasing perceptions of the role of major actors in the public sphere such as parliamentary and labour movement representatives, “not … as truth-seeking individuals but as representatives of a social class and its interests”. In this regard, the public sphere became “an arena for struggle and compromise between privately (non-publicly) defined interests…. Debates in public sphere, then, appeared more of a tug of war between social interests where the goal was more or less acceptable compromise, rather than consensus.”

The second process that squeezed the air out of the public sphere is directly related to the media, where the media had become commercial enterprises. In this process, commercial and profit concerns increasingly override the contribution to enlightenment and formation of public opinion. This transformation has consequences to how the media comes to function, as Stevenson (2002: 50) comments of Habermas’ writings:

Whereas once publicity meant the exposure of domination through reason, the public sphere is now subsumed into a stage managed political theatre. Contemporary media cultures are characterised by the progressive privatization of the citizenry and the trivialization and glamorisation of questions of public concern and interest. The Hijacking of communicative questions by monopolistic concerns seemingly converts citizens into consumers and politicians into media stars protected from rational questioning.

Political processes are, therefore, reported in the media as personal conflicts, emphasizing the dramatic, the sensational and theatrics in what is referred to as ‘tabloidization’ or ‘dumbing down’ (Kevin 2003: 229-233). The media becomes an arena for displays, glitz and entertainment as media compete to capture the largest audience that would ensure sustained profitability. Real debates of political issues are in this case relegated to the periphery as the sensational take center-stage.

It is against the background of the ideal role of the media in the public sphere and the transformation so outlined above that this paper seeks to interrogate the Kenyan print media in the run-up to the 2007 general elections with the view to investigating the role it may have played in contributing to the post-election violence that flared up after the elections. This is particularly pertinent because the Kenyan media in the run-up to the elections and its
aftermath maintained a deportment that they had acted by the journalistic principles that they subscribe to. This paper specifically focuses on the analysis of the country’s two oldest and highest circulating newspapers – Nation and Standard from October to December 2007 for opinion poll reports and from November to December 2007 for reporting of campaign news.

Kenya’s 2007 election campaigns: a brief political-historical background

Much of what was happening in the 2007 election campaigns and the seeds of the violence that rocked Kenya were to some extent sown in the reneging of the memorandum of understanding MoU that brought forth the pre-election party, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). The MoU was signed in 2002 between National Alliance party of Kenya (NAK) comprising 11 major political parties on the one hand and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) made of disgruntled leaders who had decamped from Kenya African National Union (KANU) in protest to Moi’s unilateral decision to pass them over as senior party leaders and choose a political novice – Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta. The MoU, whose content were only known to the political players involved in its negotiation and unknown to the public, had reached the understanding that, among others, the two partners would share out on equal basis cabinet and other senior government positions. The MoU is also reported to have stipulated for the creation of a Prime Minister post, which would be occupied by Raila Odinga of LDP, two Deputy Prime Minister positions that were shared equally between the partners. The Presidency was to be occupied by Mwai Kibaki of NAK while the Vice-Presidency was reserved for Wamalwa Kijana also of NAK. The Summit, the topmost body bringing together nine top leaders in the coalition, was to act as an oversight board directing policy and resolving conflict whenever it arose (see Oyugi (2006) and Murunga and Nasong’o (2006) for a full discussion of the coalition background and dynamics).

On winning the 2002 elections, Kibaki reneged on the MoU and sought to exercise presidential powers as the constitution so provided. Fissures emerged shortly afterwards and were starkly played out in parliament and also at the constitution review forum whose sometimes acrimonious discussions came up with a draft constitution popularly known as the Bomas draft – named after the venue of the review talks. The adoption of the final draft was marred by a walkout by the pro-Kibaki NARC faction of government in protest to alleged manipulation of the talks by Raila-led LDP faction of NARC. It is only later that the government formally accepted the draft. As this was playing out, KANU the former ruling party since independence in 1963 till 2002 – then the official opposition party, was going
through a crisis trying to reinvent itself. In this moment of crisis, two factions were emerging with one cozying up to the NAK faction of the NARC government and the other, which was more powerful, coalescing around LDP-led NARC faction.

The 2005 discussion of the constitution review draft – composed of that emerging from Bomas talks that had been redrafted under the auspices of the Attorney-General, Amos Wako, with the backing of pro-Kibaki’s NARC/KANU faction – hardened the positions of the two NARC factions and their partners from KANU. The putting to a referendum of the Wako draft cemented the ties in the two political camps as the pro-Kibaki group supported a ‘Yes’ vote, whose election symbol was a banana, while the LDP-KANU faction supported a ‘No’ vote, with the orange as its symbol. By this time, the political alignments had already started taking ethnic hues that later gelled in the referendum vote.

The ‘No’ vote carried the day with 58% while the ‘Yes’ vote garnered 43%. Riding on the success of the ‘No’ campaign, political Parties and individuals fronting for the ‘No’ vote decided to register the Orange Democratic Movement Party of Kenya (ODM) as a political party. However a Nairobi lawyer, Mugambi Imayara, beat the team to their game by registering ODM, forcing the team to register Orange Democratic Movement-Kenya (ODM-K). Later in 2007 when the (ODM-K) suffered a split, Kalonzo Musyoka and political associates took the charge of (ODM-K), while the group associated with Raila Odinga negotiated for the transfer of ODM from Imanyara to their custody. These two parties alongside the Party of National Unity (PNU) – a political coalition of parties put together less than four months before elections as a platform for President Mwai Kibaki’s re-election bid – were the three main political players in the 2007 general elections around which the Kenyan populace coalesced.

As the country approached the 2007 general elections, many individuals and institution that would have otherwise acted as voices of reason and provided a moral compass in the disturbing moments before and immediately after the elections had been sucked into partisan politics of the time. The media was not spared either.

**The state of the media in Kenya in the run-up to the 2007 elections**

As perceptively discussed in the April 2008 BBC World Service Trust Policy Briefing on the role of the media and communication in the 2007 elections and its aftermath, the media in Kenya enjoyed an unprecedented boom in the 15 years starting around 1993. In 1992, the government for the first time broke its firm monopoly of the airwaves, by allowing the privately owned Kenya Television network (KTN) to broadcast. In the mid and late 1990s the
government further gave concessions to private broadcasters, licensing more broadcasters and providing the media with substantial freedom, a trend that was accelerated after the coming to power of the NARC government in 2002 resulting in what the BBC World Service Trust Policy Briefing (p. 15-16) calls ‘unsophisticated liberalization of the media’.

The print media on the other hand had had an illustrious history for taking bold and outspoken stance in the agitation for democracy and providing a forum for public discourse in much of the post-independence history. The country’s two oldest and highest circulating newspapers under review here – Nation and Standard – played a leading role in shaping this legacy. News magazines such as the now defunct Weekly Review, Nairobi Law Monthly, Finance and Society also made significant contributions to the fight for democracy and human rights.

For nearly two decades prior to 2002 elections, the grand project of the media, and especially the print media – as indeed was the case for the civil society and religious bodies – seemed clear-cut: the establishment of a more democratic, just and public spirited society, which was partly to be achieved by breaking the KANU hegemony. The coming to power of the NARC government presented an identity crisis for most institutions and individuals, with the KANU hegemony – the common enemy that had helped the media and civil society forge a cross-ethnically unifying front – out of the way. The betrayal of the NARC dream of a united, democratic, public spirited and responsive government when President Kibaki reneged on the NARC MoU set off a bitter infighting in the party that left the Kenyan society restless. The restlessness easily found vent in political factions with ethnic hues, further deepening the identity crisis in the media and civil society.

In the prevailing circumstances, as the BBC World Service Trust Policy Briefing points out, the media was not spared factional politics obtaining in the country, with individual media personalities and media houses supporting different politicians and parties. These media outlets and personalities aligned their journalistic practices with their preferred political outlook, while at the same time maintaining an aura of practicing within and upholding journalistic principles such as objectivity, neutrality, acting in the public good, public’s right to know, society’s watchdog, freedom of the press and the like.

Another challenge facing the Kenyan media in the run-up to the 2007 elections relates to the commercialization of the media in a competitively liberalized economy, which meant that the media outlets had to grapple with the tensions between operating as commercial entities driven by the profit motive and entities entrusted with a vital public spirited responsibility. Commercialization of the media has a great bearing on what is taken to be
newsworthy and how news is packaged and relayed. Commercialization of the media means that the media gets into a cut-throat competition in gathering and presentation of news so as to have the greatest appeal to the audience, whose ensured readership or viewership in turn means increased revenue from sales and advertisements. It is against this backdrop of competitive commercialized media operating in a highly polarized political atmosphere that we now turn to the analysis of election campaign news design and the implications it may have had in Kenya’s 2007 elections and the aftermath.

**Election campaign news designed as a hard news genre**

A genre is a category of media product that has particular features, codes, and conventions associated with the particular genre. The features of a genre have come to be well understood and recognized through being repeated over a period of time. The features of a genre act as rules by both producers and audiences to encode and decode texts. Because of their repetitive nature, the features of a genre get reinforced thus becoming ‘natural’, believable and hence amenable to ideological messages (Burton 2002).

Election campaign news is given extensive focus by the media because, as Dennis (2003: 81) notes, “not for impartial or neutral reasons, but because they believe that political power achieved through elections is a vitally important news story”, a news story that can be played out to the benefit of the commercial media bottom line. It is for this reason that commercial media desires that the electioneering process dramatically plays out for long because the process attracts audiences and larger audiences have a bearing on the media bottom line. Election news reportage is a genre that is increasingly modeled in the form of hard news. The hard news model is appealing to the media because it suits commercial media interests.

Hard news according to Jamieson and Campbell (2001) is personalized, it is dramatic, conflict-filled, and involves extreme physical action and emotional intensity. It is also out of ordinary, controversial as well as linked to issues prevalent at the time. This modeling of news is not unproblematic as the authors’ arguments so captured below attest.

Hard news is personalized and individualized because such news is appealing, attention-getting and interesting to a varied mass audience. The notion of personalized news can be better understood if one considers the fundamental appeals for the rise and popularity of the celebrity phenomenon and how it almost entirely relies on recounting the private lives of the stars and celebrities. However, the personalizing of news has its drawbacks. Firstly, by the media personalizing news, the tendency would be to seek out news actors who are the
more spectacular, flamboyant, and articulate for the sense of drama and attention that they attract and not for the substance of their contribution to issues or their centrality to issues at play. Secondly, the exploration of issues and ideas surrounding news items may be relegated to the periphery as focus shifts to individuals’ theatrics. Subsequently, important questions that need to be asked of an issue may be glossed over in the search for the personalized angle. Thirdly, when complex issues don’t attract news coverage politicians are likely to ignore them and focus on simpler, more dramatic issues that ensure the politicians receive continued coverage.

The norm that hard news is dramatic and conflict-filled influences the structuring of news reports. Conflict becomes an important device for driving forward hard news stories because unraveling of conflict is a sure attention-grabber for the mass audience as well as interesting for providing a break from the routine, everyday occurrences. In the quest for the news media to recreate conflict and drama in events, accommodative and consensual approaches and issues may be disregarded or lost out. It is also the case that many issues present several viewpoints; however, it is common in the news media for two extreme perspectives to be presented as the only existing ones since in such presentations conflict would seem more clear-cut. In this regard, election campaigns are regularly structured in forms of battles or sporting events with metaphors of these domains extensively employed to describe the electioneering process.

A third conception of hard news is that it involves action, an event or an identifiable occurrence. Events or occurrences are tangible and distinct such that they can be captured in a limited time or space. As Jamieson and Campbell (ibid) contend, the notion that hard news should lend itself to being conceived of events and occurrences is appealing to the news media because the events and occurrences can be captured as single instantiations as in photographs and tape recordings, or in the case of print media, because they are amenable to be captured in pyramidal structure. The distinct events or occurrences are also likely to be dramatic and involving individuals. This norm is detrimental to the coverage of ideas, patterns, structures and processes underlying events so graphically captured. The quest to capture events as distinct occurrences may also truncate the events from their context.

A fourth model of hard news is that it regularly seems to be about things that are out of ordinary or novel. This conception may be problematic in that the out of ordinary events may just be that - odd events, which when looked at in terms of the substantive consequences that they have to citizens vis a vis other happenings of the time, they are simply inconsequential, save for their entertainment value. The awareness of this norm to news
coverage may also motivate groups intending to attract media attention creating pseudo-events in order to get publicity.

The fifth principle of hard news is that it reports events linked to issues prevalent in the news at the time. The idea here is to provide continuity and pattern to complexities of modern life. This desire for continuity and pattern in news reportage explains the greater coverage of individuals who are certifiably newsworthy or those who have in the past been bankable news sources. This approach may determine who gets covered or not, how often and in what ways in, for instance, election campaigns.

The hard news model coverage of election news so favoured by the commercial media on the other hand lends itself to manipulation by those who understand its workings, as the next section shows as it focuses on politicians’ exploitation of the hard news routine in the 2007 Kenya election campaigns.

**Politicians’ manipulation of the hard news routine and the Kenya’s 2007 election campaign**

The modeling of political campaign coverage in form of hard news is one side of the coin in which the media can sensationalize news. The other side of the coin, as Jamieson and Campbell (2001) argue, is that people and groups who understand the norms of news coverage and routines can also manipulate news reportage in their favour. Public relations practitioners and politicians are two of such groups. The whole notion of influencing news media is tied to the concept of power of the media in setting the agenda for the public. As Dennis (2003: 80 citing Cohen) points out, news media do not tell us what to think as much as they tell us what to think about.

This understanding was no less keenly understood and played out in Kenya’s 2007 presidential political campaigns like at no other time in Kenya’s history. There was heavy engagement of political campaign consultants, political analysts and spin doctors by all the major presidential candidates. Most spin doctors were content to work in the background but their crafty work was discernable in the numerous advertisements in the media as well as in the subtle subterfuge news feeds carried in the media. Perhaps the most notorious and most publicly known of the spin doctors was Dick Morris, who was brought into the ODM presidential campaign and paraded by the ODM presidential candidate, Raila Odinga, in a press conference in November 13, 2007, as the architect of former US president Bill Clinton’s successful re-election in 1996. He was reported to be ready to work for ODM for no fee at all. Morris was to leave the country two days later after it was established he did not have a work
permit. Within his short stint in Kenya, he generated negative publicity for the ODM campaign when ODM’s opponents and sections of the media latched onto his controversial history in the US involving a prostitution scandal, tax evasion and run-ins with the Clintons.

One arena which can, and has been, used in influencing and even manipulating news media according to Jamieson and Campbell (2001), is manipulating deadlines such as releasing controversial information that is harmful to opponents or in favour of the source close to the media deadline by newsworthy personalities, thus leaving little room for verification of the information. The controversial information is likely to be reported as has been provided. In a competitive commercial media environment, chances of the unverified controversial material getting reported are usually higher. This is because if a media outlet fails to report the story other media outlets will scoop it. If readers get to find out about the story in other outlets, they may start to question the capacity of the media outlet that did not carry the story to cover news. The unverified controversial material can easily be let to pass unchallenged and thus legitimized as ‘factual’ if the media relaying the controversial stories either lack capacity for investigative journalism or is compromised or biased in favour of the source of the controversial story. As the BBC World Service Trust (April 2008) observed, this was the case of the mainstream Kenyan media in the run-up to the 2007 elections.

A lot of conspiracy theories, unverified claims of plans to rig elections, serious allegations bordering on incitement, outright misleading statements by politicians gave a field day to the political propagandists. The media seemed content to report them in descriptive terms, only quoting the sources and at times the counter arguments, and only rarely pointing out the contradictions or putting to task the politicians leveling the allegations to unequivocally substantiate the claims. One such connected series of unconfirmed allegations was carried as the lead story on the cover page of the Standard on three occasions in early November. On November 2, 2007 the paper carried the headline: *Raila alleges plot to rig General elections*, in which story it was reported that Raila, the ODM presidential candidate, ‘had credible information that the state had planted six people at the Election Commission of Kenya (ECK) headquarters to doctor voters registers in a bid to rig the elections’. The electoral commission denied the existence of such people and asked Raila to provide proof of the allegations. On November 4, 2007, the same paper again in the lead story on the top page carried a follow-up story headlined: *Rigging scare: all but three of the 22 ECK members appointed by Kibaki. 19 have never supervised polls. Kivuitu term lapses. Leaders cry foul.* On November 5, 2007 the same paper had the lead story on its front page as: *Spotlight on ECK*. The subhead read: *Returning officers shuffled: ODM alleges manipulation as
Commission moves 45 officers in Nyanza, Rift Valley and Central provinces. The Commission in the story is reported to have said that the moving of its officer was a routine activity that was necessitated by some of the recruited returning officers, for one or other reason, having declined taking up their offers.

To have put the above allegations as lead stories on the front page was to give the allegations a lot of weight and thus legitimacy. Further, reporting the unverified allegation without a thorough background investigation to establish their authenticity, as well as shifting the burden of proof on the accused – ECK, as the headline Spotlight on ECK implied raises pertinent questions. In such a situation, especially when such unverified controversial material undermined credibility of institutions and put the country on unnecessarily polarized footing, shouldn’t the media have adopted a more analytic deportment towards such material? Could the media not have applied a little more pressure to politicians to account for the allegations and controversial statements or alternatively the media have their correspondents investigate the claims? Indeed a fundamental question that confronts the media is: how should they handle serious unverified allegations about critical institutions emanating from politicians, especially if the materials have grave implications to the nation?

These questions seem critical when viewed from the backdrop of what obtained during the post-election violence that rocked the country. There was literally no individual or institution that could stand up as a moral voice to calm down the tension and violence that was spiraling out of control. Part of the reason was of course that virtually the entire Kenyan citizenry and her institutions, including the media and religious organizations had been sucked into the political feuds that had informed much of political discourse in the period between 2003 and 2007. The other reason is that, led by the political class, Kenyans had been quick in labeling anybody holding a divergent view from theirs as a ‘traitor’ or as working in the service of the differing camp, however well thought out the views were. In the prevailing circumstances perhaps many people who had the urge to speak about the worrying situation in the country held their thoughts to themselves for fear of being labeled as belonging to one or the other political camp. Much of this labeling passed on through the media. The media, therefore, being a critical and powerful institution in mediating public discourse should be more keenly aware of what danger unsubstantiated allegations, claims and conspiracies carried uncritically in the media may portend to society in the long run.

A related avenue to manipulating deadlines is manipulating live news coverage. Live coverage could also be effectively used to insert questionable or highly controversial material in live news stories in real time to reach an exceptionally large and captive audience. A
glaring case in the 2007 election period was that of a Mr. Julius Bisen who in a live media broadcast on December 30, 2007 was paraded in an ODM press conference as the ‘returning officer’ of Molo constituency, claiming that he had announced the constituency’s PNU presidential candidate vote tally of 55,755, which was at variance with the 75,261 announced in favour of the PNU presidential candidate at the Electoral Commission Headquarter at Kenyatta International Conference Center. Mr. Bisen was later whisked away by ODM stalwarts immediately after, before reporters could ask him questions. As reported in the Nation August 28, 2008, the genuine returning officer of Molo Constituency, Mr. Laban Arupe Korelach appeared before the Kriegler Independent Review Commission set up to investigate the 2007 elections, and recounted how he had been queuing to make a physical presentation of Molo’s results at the electoral commission headquarters, to the national tallying officials when he heard Mr. Bisen presented as Molo’s returning officer. This planned misrepresentation of the situation carried out in the background of the tensions building up with claims of rigged elections definitely added fuel to the tension and violence that had started around this period.

A second arena in which journalistic norms and routines can be manipulated by politicians, as discussed by Jamieson and Campbell (2001: 132-6), is through the effective and strategic use of language and symbols. ‘Of particular force is the dramatic, visual symbol .... It is also possible to attract coverage by tailoring statements and events to the predispositions of the reporter or media outlet’ (136). Symbols are particularly important in the visual medium such as photography and television. These may include symbolic locations, apparel, artifacts and the like. Language on its part can be used to manipulate coverage when such language is artfully constructed and skillfully delivered in concise and dramatic statements that lend themselves to be used by the media unedited. It is always desired by politicians that these statements appear as media headlines.

The Kenyan 2007 campaigns did recognize and extensively employed this strategy to both attract crowds to their rallies, as well as media coverage. The strategies came in handy in offering the pomp, colour and spectacle that hyped the campaigns for the benefit of the live television coverage, which the competing TV stations devoured in their quest to win over viewership. Entertainment by musicians, political antics spiced with propaganda, sharp dressing in political party regalia, traversing the country in helicopters, elaborately decorated political venues, highly choreographed political events, among many other countless tricks and displays of might and glitz constituted the menu doled out in the campaigns as politicians launched their visions, party manifestos, held rallies and road shows.
The print media like the TV stations did not disappoint in offering extensive coverage of the spectacles that attended these events as captured in fancy headlines and coloured photos glorifying the shows, with regular juxtaposition of stories and photos whenever a chance presented itself in a recreation of battle. The following headlines taken randomly attest to this: 

*Kibaki: Here I come* (Standard October 1, 2007: 1), *A red blue and white affair; Pomp and colour as president rolls out poll vision* (Nation October 1, 2007: 3 & 4 resp.), *Show of might: Raila launches all-out battle for power, describing Kibaki as a failure; Kibaki digs in to stay at State House* (Nation October 7, 2007: 1), *ODM paints the city orange* (p.2), *Nairobi, Nakuru in campaign frenzy* (p.3), *Day of thunder: “The best days of this country are not in the past. The days of this country are yet to come. They are in the future. And the future is Orange” – The pentagon team* (Standard November 7, 2007: 7). *Kibaki dangles education carrot to seduce voters* (Nation November 3, 2007: 6), *Bitter-sweet orange: A taste of the fruit – how ODM’s harvest of technocrats, professionals former top civil servants and experts is causing disquiet ahead of primaries* (Standard November 9, 2007: 1), *Raila team storms North Rift* (Standard October 1, 2007: 1).

With such knowledge that the hard news media norms prefer such dramatic presentation of news stories and the emphasis of the visual symbol, political campaigns are gleefully presented with the possibility for influencing news to their advantage through pre-packaged pseudo-events that take into account what news gatherers consider as news worthy. As Jamieson and Campbell (2001) argue, the ideal pseudo-event conforms to the norms of what is considered as hard news. It is filled with drama and conflict, its personalized, novel, a discrete event and part of an on-going theme in the news. Pseudo-events work best when timed to effect on the basis of deadlines news media have to beat for news presentation, which leaves little room for verification of assumption that underlie the point of view packaged by those managing the pseudo-events. A commentator observing the sensational turn that the 2007 political campaigns and their reporting in the media had taken lamented:

A great paradox evident in Kenya’s emerging democratic polity is the lack of grasp of fundamental economic issues that underpin everything else…. The majority of voters are always deeply steeped in campaign euphoria, showbiz spectacles and meaningless sloganeering and other rhetoric that have no bread and butter value. (Ngugi, Nation October 19, 2007)

An additional setback to the over-emphasis of the dramatic and visual symbol in politics and its reporting is that quite a number of questions that need to be asked in such
displays go unasked in the media. For instance, how much does it cost to put together such spectacles? Where does the money come from? A modest audit of money spent on the campaigns by the political parties was estimated by the non governmental organization – Coalition for Political Campaign Accountability’s report released on April 23, 2008 to run in excess of 5.6 billion Kenya shillings (about US$ 86 million). An earlier report carried by the Daily Nation newspaper on November 5, 2007, under the banner: Campaign billions was content at just reporting the parties as having ‘set up war chests to finance the hunt for votes in readiness for poll battles’, without so much as delving into the critical questions of the sources of finances and desirability of such ostentatious displays. Further questions that may be asked are – do the people scrambling for political offices stand the credibility test? Can African states afford to play such showbiz politics in the face of the myriad problems that require serious political attention?

A third avenue in which politicians can, and indeed do, exploit news media routines and norms is in the understanding of the journalistic concept of the political process. The media does reproduce the conception that political campaigns are contests, candidates are adversaries, and the campaigns are reported in mainly battle metaphors. Politics in this conception is seen as a bruising battle, emphasizing winners and losers, divergence rather consensus, even when divergences may be minimal. An example of such conception was captured in the Nation newspaper on October 5, 2007 with a sub head that read: President shares campaign platform with ODM pentagon William Ruto. The sharing of a campaign platform between Kibaki and Ruto is reported as an oddity, given that the two politicians were in different political parties competing in the elections. This conception ignores the fact that electoral campaigns are not meant to be a do or die affair between enemies. It also personalizes what is at stake in the political processes to seem to be a matter between individuals and parties while downplaying the fact that the political process is only a means to achieving the good and the interests of the nation and not the vanquishing of political opponents. It legitimizes as the norm the notion that politicians in competition should not see eye to eye.

Further examples of the media reporting campaigns as battle were include a headline of a lead story that went: Show of might: Raila launches all-out battle for power, describing Kibaki as a failure. Below the lead story another headline is juxtaposed in recreation of battle: Kibaki digs in to stay at State House (Nation October 7, 2007: 1). Other headlines enacted elections as battle as follows: ODM moves to defend its turf as Kibaki casts his net for Rift Valley vote (Nation December 2, 2007), Raila team storms North Rift (Standard October 1,
In another instance the Nation newspaper in December 12, 2007:4, reported Raila saying – apparently borrowing from Winston Churchill’s declaration in the World War II, ‘we shall attack the enemy from every direction. We shall launch a simultaneous attack from the land, the air and the sea until we secure victory’. This is a case of politicians using battle sound bites to describe the election process, seemingly aware of the media conception of the process in such mental frames, and thus aligning his descriptions accordingly with the knowledge that the likelihood of the sound bite being reported verbatim are almost assured.

In yet another example indicating the zero sum game that the political contest was played out in Kenya’s 2007 elections, the Standard December 7, 2007 carried the headline: Why a win is a must: high stakes game – For Kibaki, a loss would make him the first incumbent to do so; if he doesn’t win, Raila will have missed his best bet yet; if he fails, Kalonzo could be back in 2012. The story spiced with combat terms relates why the 2007 campaigns were played out using vicious propaganda, advertising blitz and obsession with opinion ratings. The tone of the story does not envisage or urge that there is life out of power for the two major presidential candidates, Raila and Kibaki.

The offshoot of presenting the political process as a combat is that perceived minor candidates in the process are mainly ignored and their policies, despite the merits, are also ignored. Kalonzo’s case is germane here especially on his proposal to introduce a 24 hour economy in the capital, Nairobi, in order to create more employment. So was also the case his political act to publicly make known his personal wealth (a proposal that is aggressively resisted by the political elite though widely acknowledged as important in stemming corruption in the public sector). These were laudable actions which were generally given minimal coverage and ignored by the other major presidential campaigns.

Another effect of presenting the political process as a contest is that attacking rather than advocacy becomes the defining basis of political campaigns. Policy issues in this conception are given short thrift as the dramatic and conflict is emphasized. Questions that emerge from this conception of politics include: does this conception of politics resonate with the African socio-political psyche? Does playing politics in an all-out adversarial manner not hemorrhage further the already fragile ties that make up many African countries? Do the media reporting of elections in overly antagonistic, conflict and combat metaphors polarize fragile African societies?
Media reporting of opinion polls in Kenya’s 2007 election campaigns

Opinion polls in the run-up to the 2007 were conducted extensively in the three months to elections and the media hype almost literary latched on anything opinion poll. Starting late September 2007, the Steadman Group began a fortnightly poll that ran up to about 11 days to elections. In the three months to elections the Steadman poll was almost always reported on the front pages of the two dailies under review, either as the lead story or less often as the second story.

The history of widely published political opinion polling in Kenya is rather brief and became controversial if not emotive in the run-up to the 2007 elections. The first widely acknowledged political opinion polls emerged in the 2002 general elections, which rightly predicted the victory of Mwai Kibaki, the then National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) presidential candidate by a margin of 65%. The actual figure turned out to be not far of at 62.21%. Steadman Group established its presence in opinion polling in the intervening period, more notably during the 2005 referendum on constitution review. Since that time the pollster affirmed its presence by a quarterly poll gauging the popularity of political players, their parties and opinion on issues that citizens felt needed to be addressed urgently. Critics have argued that the polls in concentrating on measuring the popularity of potential presidential candidates long before the elections unduly put the country in a perpetual election mood and unnecessarily fueled competition among political players and by extension the communities they represented.

Apart from the Steadman Group opinion polls, Nation media Group also commissioned a weekly opinion poll dubbed Barometer conducted by three groups – Strategic Public Relations Research, Infotrack Harris and Consumer Insight. The results were published every Sunday and at a later point on Saturday in the period between September 30, 2007 and December 16, 2007. Within this period also, there were two reported polls conducted by Gallup Poll. The first one reported on November 22, 2007 indicated a very tight race between the two top contenders, with Kibaki scoring 42% and Raila 45% Kalonzo 11%. The second poll by Gallup reported in December 19, 2007 had a prediction of a Kibaki win with 44% of the vote, Raila with 43% and Kalonzo at 12%.

Philip Ochieng, a Sunday Nation columnist (October 21, 2007: 11) summed up the media interest in opinion polls in the following terms:

Whatever the political leaning of each editor, there is no way that he (sic) can ignore Mr. Steadman. For news is his stock-in-trade. And, just a few weeks to the General
Election, nothing can be more “newsworthy” than Steadman’s polling figures. A commercial newspaper ignores these figures only at its own peril. Underlying this comment is the guiding notion that opinion polls are seen as an important attention getter that can offer a good storyline that would help bolster revenues which are what drives commercial media.

Indeed the 2007 opinion polls did capture the imagination of Kenyans like at no other time. The opinion polls were subject to heated debates amongst the political class and their supporters, with those highly rated praising the polls as a ‘reflection of what is on the ground’ while those rated lowly fervently contesting the poll results or dismissing them as inconsequential. Given the interest and heat they generated, it is instructive to ask: how did the media treat these opinion polls? Did the media report the polls in a manner that advanced enlightened debate of issues of the day? Could the opinion poll results have been used by interest groups and reported in a manner that would have contributed to the violence that rocked the country after the 2007 elections? And as one commentator, (Mbugua K. Standard October 17, 2007: 7), posed, ‘Are Kenyans savvy consumers of opinion polls?’ In response to his question, he observed (an observation I concur with) that ‘there is a tendency in this country (Kenya) to view opinion polls results as an ‘interim election’ or a ‘mandate from the people’.

It is noteworthy that opinion polls when conducted by reputable organizations in a scientific manner do provide a ‘snapshot in time’ of a particular question (Dennis and Merrill 2003:84). However, opinion polling is not unproblematic and indeed the conduct of the Kenyan 2007 opinion polling and reporting did raise pertinent issues. Firstly, the opinion polls and their reporting tended to personalize the campaigns into a dramatic popularity contest of persons and by extension the ethnic community or coalition of ethnic communities the presidential contestants represented. Positions and issues the candidates represented were only given token considerations in the polling, with the reports consumed by who is ahead of who, as aptly captured in nearly all the opinion poll headlines, which overwhelmingly gave prominence to the ratings of the presidential candidates and very rarely or only as secondary issues on policy, as these headlines picked at random demonstrate: Raila tips scale but Kibaki stays close, Raila widens gap, Kibaki gains two points but Raila still leads in latest opinion poll, Raila’s third win, New poll shows mixed fortune for candidates, Kibaki narrows gap on Raila in new poll, The last sprint.

Secondly, the opinion polls commissioned by the Nation Media Group Barometer posed some serious questions that even though seemingly acknowledged by the Nation
newspaper, they were not satisfactorily addressed as to be enlightening to the public. These questions are more telling given that the same questionnaires were supposedly asked to respondents by the three pollsters. To begin with, there were quite significant disparities between the highest and lowest rating of the same candidate by the three pollsters, for instance on 14th October 2007 the discrepancy in the rating for Raila was 8%, as was also the case for Kibaki. On the 21st October 2007 it was 9.8% for Raila and 7.2% for Kibaki. On 11th November 2007 it was 12.2% for Raila and 9.2% for Kibaki. There were also major discrepancies in the margins reported between the two leading candidates that would have needed to be accounted for, for instance in 14th October 2007 Strategic Public Relations Research poll reported a margin of 17% between Raila and Kibaki, Infotrack Harris reported a margin of 15.9%, while Consumer Insight reported a margin of only 3%. On the 21st October 2007 Strategic Public Relations Research poll reported a margin of 16% between Raila and Kibaki, Infotrack Harris reported a margin of 21.2%, while Consumer Insight reported a margin of 5%.

There was also a telling difference in opinion reported of the *Barometer* poll when correlated to that of Steadman Group’s on the controversy surrounding whether the country should adopt the *majimbo* system of government as had been advocated by ODM campaign, and ODM-K having a variant version of it dubbed ‘economic *majimbo*’. As reported on 28th October 2007, Strategic Public Relations Research reported 62% of the people polled were in favour of *majimbo*; Infotrack Harris showed 57% in support of *majimbo* system, Consumer Insight had 51% in favour of the system, while Steadman Group indicated only 44% supporting the adoption of *majimbo*. Given the extreme opposing passions that the *Majimbo* debate generates in Kenyan politics, the varied polls here with a discrepancy between the highest and least reported support standing at 18% only helped to muddy the political waters that politicians had initiated. It did not help matters further when the same opinion polls indicated that different people had different understanding of the meaning of *majimbo*. For example, it was reported that ‘a significant number were ignorant of the concept’, while ‘to some it meant returning land to its “original” owners.’ For others it meant ‘uprooting people from their land’, for yet others *majimbo* would ‘come with re-allocation of land’ (Sunday Nation October 28, 2007: 13). If then the term *majimbo* meant different things for different people, could it have been possible to provide a common rating of the same? Wouldn’t it have been wise, for instance, to rate the various versions of *majimbo* each on its own?

It would seem the Nation Media Group was aware of the potential or actually took note of the discrepancies and the issues that may be raised of the ‘Barometer” polls it had
commissioned. It therefore attached a disclaimer below the poll results: *Caution: Readers are advised that all opinion polls have a sampling error. This error is not the only source of bias.* Seemingly after the discrepancies got stark, and possibly also granted that quite a number of question could be raised of the commissioned poll, the group upgraded the disclaimer from a caution to a warning starting on the 4th November 2007 onwards:

*Warning: Readers are advised that all opinion polls have a sampling error. This error is not the only source of bias in opinion polls; Readers are further cautioned that the Sunday Nation has not confirmed the accuracy of the findings published here. The accuracy of the data is the sole responsibility of the contracted polling companies. Should you have any concerns, please send them to Sundaynation@nation.co.ke (or Saturdaynation@nation.co.ke when published on Saturday).*

The warning carried by Nation media Group in the subsequent publication of the commissioned polls could be put to probity on various accounts. For starters, what other errors and sources of bias were to be taken into account in reading the polls? How were the readers supposed to interpret the polls? Is the warning implying that it leaves the responsibility of confirming the accuracy of the polls to the reader? Does the reader have the capacity to verify the findings? Isn’t the Nation Media Group not abdicating its responsibility of investigating the accuracy of the polls, which it took upon itself to commission in the first place? If the accuracy of the polls seems uncertain, of what value are they to the public? How can the polling companies be held responsible by the public? A related issue one may raise revolves around the vexed matter of using disclaimers on potentially problematic or hazardous material. It has been pointed out that it is usually written in small print below the main massage and, therefore, normally goes unnoticed by readers, which might after all be the desired intention.

Besides the above problems, quite a number of the *Barometer* opinion polls did not provide sufficient information of the methods and procedure of survey, or sample questions to enable readers to judge the authenticity of the results. It therefore became quite problematic when the results of the polls were used as support for assertions on campaign predictions. The same is true of, for instance, such a poll as reported in the Standard December 14, 2007 in the front page lead story thus, *Voters have decided, says opinion survey.* The story quoted pollster Infotrack Harris, ‘Once again Kenyans insist they have made up their mind on who they will vote for.’ The report also indicated that the new findings also show ‘that most Kenyans are not ready for hereditary kind of leadership’. The report further asserted, ‘Kenyans have also said a thumping “No!”’ to a succession arrangement that would install a
dynasty, with 93 per cent saying they are totally opposed to the concept’. The only background information that gave a clue as to how the poll was conducted indicated: ‘at least 2,400 people were interviewed in the poll conducted between December 9 and 11, with a rural-urban split ratio of 56:44’. The colourful language used here and the subject of the poll, which was propaganda material that was circulating then, only makes the poll questionable.

A fourth problematic issue in opinion polling in Kenya’s 2007 election campaigns concerned commentaries carried in the news section in which some material couched as facts, but pertinent misleading, sounded more as a pitch for a candidate or worse an unassailable fact. In the Saturday Standard (October 13, 2007:3) a columnist wrote, as a carry over story of Steadman opinion poll reported in the front page of the paper, which had Raila leading at 53% rating, Kibaki at 37% and Kalonzo at 8%:

There are two clearly known scientific facts about political opinion polls, the world over. First, once ratings of an individual start plummeting, it is unlikely that such a politician can weave his way back to a favourable position. The simple logic of this is that as the voting date gets closer, political players and voters want to associate with the winning side.

The columnist then offers the background of how Kalonzo had led in the opinion polls for ten months after the referendum in 2005, surrendering the lead to Kibaki from July 25, 2006 and now Kibaki had lost that position to Raila the previous month, ‘three months away to the polls’. The columnist further went to cite the case of UK’s Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and how he lost the lead in opinion polls to Tories’ David Cameron and how this plunged Gordon into uncertainty over calling for elections for fear of the imminent loss. Though this columnist suggests that Raila’s triumph in the polls is not given yet till the real poll, the overtones of this article seem to leave the impression that scientific facts, historical facts about the length the contenders have held to the pole position and lessons from Gordon Brown’s situation in the UK are sufficient to almost guarantee Raila’s triumph. Bearing in mind the tendency for Kenyans, as indicated earlier, to view opinion polls results as an ‘interim election’ or a ‘mandate from the people’ such kind of commentary can prove potent if such predictions do not come to pass.

A similar kind of reporting of opinion polls that could have potentially set the stage for hardening of feelings if the elections did not go the way of a candidate, given how opinion polls are interpreted in Kenya, was carried in the headline of the Standard December 21, 2007. It read, Dec 27 poll results: what Kenyans want. Below it, were photos of the three leading presidential candidates addressing rallies. On each photo was a tag indicating poll
results by infotrack Harris and Strategic Public Relations Research for Kibaki as 37% and 39% respectively, 45% and 43% respectively for Raila, and 16% and 15% for Kalonzo Musyoka. The certainty of the headline here coupled with the various on going claims of plans of rigging by Kibaki’s group and casting aspersions on Steadman, the other major opinion pollster at the time, which had reported a close election, by the same newspaper (Standard November 11, 2007:4 had carried a story titled: *Kibaki men’s link with Steadman now disclosed*), could have certainly raised political temperatures that would have easily spilled over into violence if the presidential election was adjudged any other way.

Still in the Saturday Standard (October 13, 2007:2) it was reported of the Steadman opinion poll, ‘on the negative score, 68 per cent of voters in Central province would *never* vote for Raila, while only 43 per cent of voters in Nyanza would *not* vote for Kibaki (italics mine). Notice the use of the negative ‘never’ and ‘not’. It is not clear what question might have been asked and the range of possible responses that were given so as to elicit the contrasting responses offered here. The responses as reported here may pass as harmless, but in the context of the fact that central province being home to the Kikuyu community, to which Kibaki belongs and Nyanza being predominantly Luo, Raila’s community and the understanding of the intense rivalry and at times animosity that has occasionally attended to the post-independence relationship of the elites of the two communities, animosities that that on occasion have sucked in large potions of the communities, one would think otherwise. At best, the reporting here is a serious oversight by the media outlet and at the worst, this could be the kind of reporting that can easily incite ethnic passions. It is instructive that the two communities indeed got involved in violence targeting each other in the ensuing post-election violence.

**Conclusion**

This paper has made an analysis of the campaign news reports in the run-up to the 2007 Kenyan elections as carried in the country’s two oldest and leading newspapers – *Nation* and *Standard*, trying to critique the performance of the newspapers against the ideal of the role of the media in the democratic public sphere. Focusing particularly on the newspapers’ failings to live to the ideal, the appraisal has been made within the context of the political environment that the media was operating at the time. The paper has taken the perspective that the media increasingly models campaign news in the fashion of hard news, in which such news is personalized, it is dramatic, conflict-filled, and involves extreme physical action and emotional intensity. It is also out of ordinary, controversial as well as linked to issues
prevalent at the time. The motivating factor in structuring campaign news as hard news is that such structuring is appealing to the readers and that this appeal is desired in order to sustain competition and media profits, which are the driving forces of media operating in a liberalized economy as commercial entities.

The paper observes that such conception of news is problematic in a number of ways that undermine the ideal role of the media as an arena and actor in the public sphere. On the other hand, politicians’ understanding of the media hard news norms and routines manipulate such norms in their favour. The paper in this regard analysis instances in which politicians in the 2007 Kenyan election campaigns, through engagement of media consultants and spin doctors, manipulated hard news norms to get desired publicity. The paper has also examined the two newspapers’ reporting and commissioning of opinion polls and some critical shortcomings of the processes. The paper, though acknowledging that the media would not in themselves have been the cause of the 2007 post-election violence, they may have contributed in polarizing society, or in other cases, did not do enough to steer the campaign debates in a more enlightening manner.

On the basis of these observations, this paper recommends the re-examination of the hard news model in reporting campaign news, given the negative consequences such an approach may have in fragile societies such as Kenya. For instance, the reporting of unverified allegations, conspiracies and controversial material from political sources need be treated more analytically than in overly descriptive terms. The sources of such controversial material need be made to substantiate the allegations made. In addition, there is need to sustain more investigative journalism as well as raise journalistic bars because it would seem that politicians and political campaigns in Kenya have now acquired a very high level of sophistry that the media need to match or better understand if they are to effectively realize their role as envisaged in the public sphere. A similar orientation need to be adopted with regard to opinion polling, where a stringent code in the conduct and reporting need be established if the polls are going to be useful in helping shape political issues and debates in future.

Finally, one other section of the Kenyan society that can help shape media practice and orientation towards achieving a more enlightened role in the public sphere is media scholarship. There is a dearth of informed critical voices with regard to the media practices in Kenya today. The government has been hampered in playing its media oversight role because of the genuine fears that most of its interventions in the past have been far from benign. Self regulation by media bodies has been wanting in many cases. The public, though critical of
media practices in the recent past, as noted in letters to the editor in various newspapers and in sentiments expressed in commissions investigating the 2007 elections and violence, may be lacking in the analytic tools and sustained focus needed to critique media. Critical media scholarship is, therefore, best placed to fill in the lacuna that presently exists in the critique of media in Kenya. This is particularly important because of the centrality of an enlightened and reflective media in shaping and setting the direction that the country takes as she moves through a turbulent period that will both heavily impact on her future and have implications on the quest to achieving a stable, egalitarian modern democratic nationhood.

References


Newspapers Cited

Daily Nation, Nairobi.

Saturday Nation, Nairobi.

Saturday Standard, Nairobi.

Standard, Nairobi.

Sunday Nation, Nairobi.

Sunday Standard, Nairobi.

News Magazines Cited

Finance, Nairobi.

Nairobi Law Monthly, Nairobi.

Society, Nairobi.

Weekly Review, Nairobi.