

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

This chapter presents a summary of the findings in this research report and conclusions for the same. In addition the chapter offers recommendations for further research in a similar field.

This research report was generally an investigation into the role of the media in democracy and specifically in election coverage. The report was carried out as a case study of the *Standard* and *Nation* newspapers' reporting of the 2002 elections. The report noted that within the context of the print media in Kenya, the two newspapers are the most popular and have the widest reach. It was also established that both newspapers were working within a fairly liberal atmosphere at the time hence there was a lot of leeway given to press freedom in 2002. The report acknowledged that the 2002 elections were distinct from all other Kenyan elections in that they were the first truly democratic elections since the opening up of multi-partyism in 1992. A historical outlook revealed that the press had erstwhile played a role in the opening up of democratic space in the country sometimes to the extent that it played an oppositional role to the government.

In this report, it has been established that the press and media at large have an important role to play in the establishment and maintenance of democracy. Democracy in Africa still remains an ideal rather than the norm and the media has a role to play in advocating for the growth of democracy by among other measures; political pluralism. Kasoma (2000) has noted that the fire for plural politics and democracy was kept burning in the hearts of many citizens because they followed, through the media, what their leaders were saying. This was the case with Kenya prior to the 2002 elections where multi-partyism had been allowed but it was more on paper than on the ground. A great test of any country's democracy lies in the ability of its people to make informed choices through the power of the ballot. The media tried to bridge the gap between the electorate and contenders by offering a forum for information, debate and discussion. For information, it was important that the press provides the electorate with adequate information on the candidates and political parties they will choose from as well as the prevailing conditions of the time. This report further reflects upon

the United Nations Secretary General, Koffi Annan's view that an election cannot be truly fair unless different parties and candidates have equal access to the media. Ideally this means that the media must not only be accessible to the different parties contesting, but also take an interest in knowing what the parties are offering on their own initiative. The press on the other hand must actively seek out the truth on the public's behalf and be free to tell it as they see it<sup>50</sup>. Only then can the electorate make informed decisions after weighing out the different choices proffered to them.

In analysing the *Standard* and *Nation*'s reporting of elections, the research report approached it from a thematic analysis angle which allowed the researcher to look into patterns that frequently occurred in the newspapers. From the onset the newspapers pitted the race as being against two parties NARC and KANU and two main presidential contenders Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta. Out of these the most popular themes explored were personalities, gender, electoral policies or pledges, mergers and acquisitions. The report additionally looked at the way the media covered voter education both from an editorial and advertorial point of view in the paper. It was found that the ECK shouldered the burden of voter education through their campaigns which appeared in the print media as advertisements. For the data, the research analysed the themes from a KANU or NARC point of view and the various ways in which the politicians tackled these themes. The themes were then approached from the manner in which the newspapers represented them in their news reports.

In my findings, I discovered that generally, the *Standard* and *Nation* can be credited for their news reports in that they effectively carried out their roles as purveyors of information. The newspapers were generous in their allocation of space to election reports and round-ups which gave the voters adequate information on which candidate best endeared them for holding office. Reports that were availed after the election such as the K-DOP report and the Media Institute attest to this. There was a balance in their separation of fact from fiction by having the news reports and the opinion and analysis features differently. The analysis roles provided an apt picture of the happenings in the political world with a few writers subjecting

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<sup>50</sup> Annan, K. 'Africa's thirst for democracy' *Evening News*, December 6, 2000: 7 as cited in Temin, J. & Smith, D. Media Matters: Evaluating the Role of Media in Ghana's 2000 Elections. *African Affairs*, 2002

them to contestation. This was important for the newspapers to subject the various pledges of the politicians to critique rather than wholly endorse them at a go. It was notable that the newspapers in their reports not only showed subtle support for candidates but also had exclusions in some way. What reports were not favourable about their candidates, they left out while those that were unfavourable about the opposition, they highlighted and gave prominence. This strategy is one of the ways in which the press ‘endorse’ their political favourites by ensuring that the negative reports do not reach to those voting.

In the analysis, this report found the newspapers wanting in their coverage of policies and pledges as they instead chose to focus on the sensationalism surrounding the 2002 elections. This dilutes the whole exercise of election coverage which is to give the citizens a chance to gauge which parties have the best policies on offer for the voters. While sensationalism secures the commercial aspect of the newspapers, the media overlooks an important priority which is to offer a service to the community by giving them adequate information to choose from. The headlines for each of the newspapers seemed like a battleground for Uhuru and Kibaki in that the two were always pitted against each other. Appendix 1 confirms this about the newspaper reports. In looking at the watchdog role of the media, the report notes that the newspapers reported on election misdemeanours like selling of votes and ballot irregularities which may have constituted rigging of the elections. Both *Nation* and *Standard* were able to highlight these irregularities even in the marginal areas thereby ensuring that elections were ably supervised. The elections were subsequently declared free and fair meaning that most irregularities that are the order of elections were dealt with by the ECK beforehand.

This report additionally explored the dynamics of influence arising out of ownership and organisational influences that had an effect on the reporting of news. Although the two are private newspapers, the report found that the *Standard* and *Nation* faced similar challenges with the latter having ownership ties with the former ruling party KANU and the latter, having a long-term relationship with the Opposition. In this, there was the challenge facing both newspapers to keep their reports fair and balanced in the light of these facts they had. Chapter 2 of this report discussed the definitions of private media, settling on Ronning’s view that private media does not necessarily reflect a disinterested agenda. Macharia Gaitho in a comment ‘democracy is also about openly taking sides’ on November 3, 2002, noted

“It is typical of the mainstream media in Kenya to profess strict political neutrality. Yet we close our eyes to the fact that in more advanced democracies, it is not a sin for respected media houses to openly take sides. They will endorse candidates and parties and hardly raise a flutter. Some may switch sides occasionally depending on the candidate and the issue of the moment. Others are permanently tied to particular political positions. They are seen to be exercising their democratic rights”

Just like the ECK that ‘allowed’ newspapers to be biased, Gaitho argues here that objectivity is seemingly unattainable in news reports, even for the press in Kenya. Other theorists like McNair (1998), Schudson (2003) and media practitioners like the Society of Journalists challenge the notion of objectivity in news reporting. That private media portend to be objective in their reports is a debatable concept and more so within an African context. African media practitioners are just moving from an authoritarian atmosphere where the main type of journalism practised was development journalism. Today, there is a shift towards advocacy journalism with the media championing for the existence of democracy in some countries and for those fortunate enough to have attained this, they fight for good governance. In Kenya, this shift was evident starting in the 1990’s with advent of multi-partyism; a shift which not only brought about plural politics but media diversity and liberalization of the airwaves.

The environment in 2002 was such that the press could write freely about what issues they deemed important and more so, with a marginal fear of censorship. Yet as has been noted in this research report, the media cannot be expected to be wholly objective but there should be a balance and fairness in their reports. Out of the news reports, it was established that both papers had their news reports as somewhat balanced but it was in the commentaries and opinion articles that the press could exercise their open bias for parties and candidates. This report established that newspapers are unable to keep their opinions free from bias, which reverted to a definition of fairness instead. In fair coverage, it was expected for the newspapers to give both parties KANU and NARC a level ground in allocation of space which they did. On average, each news item carried by both newspapers about KANU had a corresponding item about NARC in the reports. Like has been noted, this encouraged a horse-race journalism kind of reporting which is sensationalist to a fault.

The role of the media in democracy and subsequently in election coverage cannot be underscored. As has been noted, the public may not make wise decisions unless they are informed. The media then becomes a tool for educating the public on what is happening out there. As a negotiator, the press has an additional role of questioning the policies and promises of the candidates on behalf of the electorate and later on, binding the office holders to keeping the same.

In its mediatization, the report noted that media has the delicate balance of reporting events and happenings without openly taking sides. The challenge for media then is to keep their articles balanced and fair, to allow both sides of an opinion especially if it is coming from two opposite sides of a political divide and allow for variety in opinions. Further, the editorials must be balanced and not openly endorse candidates of their choice otherwise the newspapers remain a propaganda tool for different sides.

#### **6.0 Suggestions for further research**

The analysis in this report mainly focussed on themes and patterns that the newspapers used in covering the elections. From the findings, the research realized there is a possibility for further study in media with a focus on the private press and its relations with politics. The political economy theory will aid an understanding of this topic. It has been established that the media in Kenya is tied to economic and other interests. Unfortunately, not much research has been carried out for the field of politics and media in Kenya especially within the sphere of the private media. Most of the studies undertaken in the area of press and politics have been on the public-owned media and the need for private media to be allowed to flourish. Notably, Ochieng (1992) has attempted to document the intricacies of political development in Kenya from an angle of their relationship with the press in his book 'I Accuse the Press'. However, there is a need to engage with a more current outlook of the media and look at the way in which the intrigues of politics and economics are playing especially post 1992 when democracy was introduced. Further, one can also look at press-government relations post 2002 to see whether there are any differences in the present political dispensation and the past regimes.

It would be interesting to work out the political machinations that surround the media as well as the economic ties in the case of *Standard* and whether these have a direct effect on the newspapers production. Further, a comparative analysis on the workings of the government owned media and the privately owned media would be another idea for research in so far as their editorial independence goes. It will be imperative to get a background to the Kenyan media and through the use of interviews and content analysis, answer these questions on the same. The new research could take shape and be worked out within the context of the print media.

In conclusion, this research report takes into cognisance Ochieng's (1992: 20) argument that "freedom of the press can never be absolute. It is always hemmed in by all kinds of circumstances. The most important of these are social, economic and technological insufficiency". As evidenced, these issues play themselves out on an even greater scale in election coverage.