

Kenyan elections and the media: complex illusions (guest blog)

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LSE researcher Nick Benequista is researching networked journalism in East Africa. Here's his take from Nairobi on the complexities of media coverage of the tightly-contested Kenyan elections.

The national elections last week revealed an uneasy relationship between Kenyans and the mass media. Kenyans have been given an unsatisfactory choice between the half-truths of the foreign press and the illusions of their own national media.

On the surface, Kenyans appear to have rejected the half-truth common in foreign reports which says that the country's tribal politics have sewn hatred and prejudice amongst its citizens; instead they have embraced the illusion, more common amongst national media, that the tragic violence that followed the 2007 elections has taught people that they share more in common with each other than they do with their leaders.



But the illusion comes at a high cost. Even those who publicly praised the Kenyan media's overtures to unity will privately confess that they harbour concerns, particularly about [the national media's self-censorship](#). In the fear of telling dangerous half-truths, an extreme relativism – that all truths are equal – has been permitted.

Fortunate Kenya?

Still, the solution isn't merely in the fit: a version of Western investigative journalism, but without all the Western prejudices. Kenya is actually quite fortunate, in a way, because in this awkward encounter of foreign media, national media and new media, it seems clear that something quite unique is needed, and, indeed, possible. Kenyan journalism can set a new, better standard.

Election coverage in Kenya last week gave us a glimpse of that possibility.

Mass media is where we go when we are at our most anxious, where we go to be together and to find comfort in our togetherness. And while the foreign press is no place to gather for Kenyans (not to say that it hasn't been for others, as in the Arab Spring), national media have been.

The 24-hour television coverage often featured a panel of guests providing running commentary throughout the week as the parties rallied, people queued and finally as the problematic tallying process dragged on. These commentators did little to help us to determine the truthfulness of statements, including claims of vote rigging by Raila Odingo's coalition party, but they did provide background, history and context.

They echoed our own anxieties, questions and thoughts and allowed us to imagine the many others across the country who were, like us, hoping for peace – whatever the outcome. Their conversation was an extension of ours at home or in the bar. This effect was especially powerful for those who were simultaneously in conversation on Twitter, which is increasingly fused with English-language television in Kenya.

Accolades for the national media came in a flood on Twitter, just as the mockery and [the derision of the foreign press had come earlier in the week](#).

Illusion of Unity

Kenyans are right to choose unity over division. But this is an illusion because it fails to recognize the vastly different ways that people have understood this national event, and not just whether the elections were credible, though that too is important. The media scholar Roger Silverstone (who was influenced strongly by Hannah Arendt's philosophy – itself influenced by the Holocaust) had this to say about such illusions.

“And illusions, of course, though they have their costs, can be massively sustaining. The illusion of connection is grounded in the refusal of otherness. It is based on the private masquerading as the public, the separate masquerading as the shared, the different masquerading as the same, the distant masquerading as the close-at-hand, the unequal masquerading as the equal. In all these dimensions the masquerade is profound in its ethical consequences.”

All this to say that the aim to counterbalance the grim reports from the foreign media is misguided. Kenya's national media narrative should not be reactionary; it is not a counterbalance. It should serve national needs, regardless of what the foreign press is saying.

Narrative Challenge

Among those national needs is certainly the preservation of peace, but Kenyan media cannot forever remain a polite space where differences are swept under the rug to be replaced by a consensually agreed (rather than imposed) agenda of nationalistic propaganda. The good stories, the positive angles, should be included, no doubt, and people need to be reassured in times of crisis. The real challenge to forming a national narrative, however, is how to include conflict, injustice, suffering, and inequality – how to promote mutual understanding on the themes that divide us.

Peace journalism, civic journalism, development journalism: there have been many names given to designate a form of journalism with higher aspirations, though few good examples. The Kenyan media has demonstrated the will and responsibility needed to demonstrate that this long-standing hope is no illusion.

This article by Nick Benequista. Nicholas Benequista is former journalist and now a PhD researcher at the Department of Media and Communications. He is currently conducting an action research project in Kenya to explore the very possibilities he discusses here. You can follow the project on www.networkednews.org and follow Nicholas on Twitter @benequista.

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