

Reporting Kenya's elections from extreme to extreme

The unprecedented eruption of post-election violence following Kenya's 2007/2008 election, in which incumbent Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity was named the winner amid wide-spread allegations of malpractice and vote rigging, threw up serious challenges for Kenyan journalists, the likes of which had not been experienced before in this relatively stable democracy.

By Sarah-Jane Bradfield and Vivien Marsh

Five years later, the country held its fourth democratic election since the introduction of multi-party politics in 1991. Although somewhat more peaceful than 2007/2008, the latest elections had challenges of their own and pressed journalists and media professionals to further question their role in reporting on elections and violence, and to what extent they are justified in being agents of peace.

The disputed and hotly contested 2007 elections were marred by eruptions of violence which saw 1 300 people lose their lives and a further 600 000 displaced, followed by an International Criminal Court indictment of political leaders – and a journalist – for fuelling the violence. Young journalists with little training were reporting on the violence, the nature of which is as yet not fully understood, although it is thought to have taken on an ethnic dimension.

A series of Nairobi Round Table events in co-operation with the Editors' Guild of Kenya and the Kenyan Union of Journalists was organised by Article 19, the International Federation of Journalists, International Media Support and the International News Safety Institute with the support of the World Association of Newspapers and the International Press Institute. The round tables aimed to provide a space for reflection for academics, members of civil society organisations and Kenyan journalists. Many of these were the same journalists who found themselves covering a conflict within their own borders for the first time in their lives with little idea of how to report on conflict and violence. Various recommendations were made based on the challenges identified, including trauma counselling for affected journalists, increased logistical support and safety training, advocacy efforts to sensitise the public on the role of the media, strengthening self-regulatory mechanisms within media organisations, establishment of a corruption monitoring mechanism, training on ethics and balance, and the implementation of widespread conflict-sensitive journalism training programmes.

Reflecting on their experience of being part of broader efforts to empower local media in Kenya in the wake of the violence, Callie Long and Daniel Bruce of Internews, an international non-profit media development organisation aimed at empowering local media worldwide, shared findings from their research into the effects of widespread efforts to train journalists in conflict-sensitive reporting and what effect, if any, this had on journalists' coverage of the country's 2013 general election.

Formed in 1982, Internews has worked in more than 75 countries and has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and North America. Internews ran a rapid response programme in Kenya

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following the post-election violence aimed at training the media in conflict-sensitive journalism approaches. These include Mission Possible (2008), Reporting for Peace (2008-2009), Land and Conflict Sensitive Journalism (2010-2013), Free and Fair Media (2011-2013), and Talk Check (2013), during which 750 journalists were trained and more than 5 500 stories on the peace, reconciliation and reform process were published.

During June 2013 for the research of *When words were weapons: how Kenya's media turned the tide on hate speech and conflict from the 2007 election to the 2013 election*¹, Long interviewed more than 30 Kenyan journalists, news editors and media experts to gauge opinion on the media's role in the 2007/2008 crisis and whether perspectives had shifted in the last five years. Her main observation was that the Kenyan media were not merely observing democratic change but were an integral part of it, for better or worse. Given the widespread allegations in 2008 that the media had fuelled existing tensions it was worth exploring what changes, if any, had occurred in the last five years and in the build-up to the country's 2013 election. But was Kofi Annan's praise for the Kenyan media in their coverage of the 2013 election premature? There was little evidence of the hate speech or inflammatory reporting that characterised the 2007/2008 election coverage but had the media really exercised good judgement and promoted peace, and what had gone wrong in 2007/2008?

According to Long, the pendulum has swung from the propagation of hate speech in 2007/2008 to what some critics consider to be another extreme, "peace activism", with the media adopting the role of peacemaker rather than mediator. Whether or not this approach complies with the mandate for the news media during political elections remains contested, as allegations of increasing self-censorship in 2013 accompanied strategic editorial decisions not to report violence in the fear that it would fuel conflict. Such a case includes the unanimous decision by editors not to report the killing of 12 people, including several police officers, in Mombasa County on 3 March 2013. Mombasa Republican Council secessionists were suspected, yet the incident did not make the headlines because of its potential to inflame tensions.

Considering the extent to which self-censorship featured in the 2013 coverage as a result of the 2007/2008 violence, Georgina Page and Angela Muriithi's *The Kenyan election 2013: the role of the factual discussion programme Sema Kenya (Kenya Speaks)* explored the extent to which the national TV and radio programme *Sema Kenya*, part of the BBC's Media Action governance work in Kenya, supported accountability, peace and inclusion during the 2013 election. Drawing on feedback from a panel of 17 media and governance experts, a broad cross-section of *Sema Kenya*'s TV and radio audience and 3 000 adult Kenyans, the research reinforces Long's finding that following the allegations of their compliance in 2007/2008 the Kenyan media swung to the other extreme of self-censorship to avoid instigating violence. In this environment *Sema Kenya* arguably provided a space for public engagement and detailed information, more so than any other media source. According to Page and Muriithi's findings, the programme encouraged government accountability as citizens were provided with a platform for dialogue and debate and encouraged to question their leaders.

Nicholas Benequista, PhD candidate with the London School of Economics and Political Science, shared research findings from his collaboration with networkednews.org which interviewed a group of senior journalists and editors about their views on the 2013 election coverage and the nature of any changes in their approaches since 2007/2008. According to Benequista, these media professionals were predominantly concerned with issues related to raising their standard of reporting rather than outright censorship and were highly critical of their coverage, in line with the gatekeeper and watchdog roles.

Although relatively more peaceful, the reporting of the 2013 election marked the emergence of a new journalistic era in Kenya, different and perhaps more complex than that of 2007/2008.

Endnotes

1. https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_Kenya_Hate_Speech_Report%202013.pdf