

# The Role of Mass Media in the Devolved Governance System of Development in Kenya. A Case of Kisii County

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## Abstract

Media reports indicates that majority of Kenyans don't fully understand the Devolve System of Governance. Mass media plays and integral role in informing and educating the citizens the expected beneficiaries of devolve government services. The study focused on the role of mass media in the devolved governance system in Kenya during the period after promulgation of the constitution of Kenya, 2010. The study seeks to assess the knowledge gap in the government, leading to misconceptions about devolution, among the Kenyan public. The specific objective of the study is to examine the knowledge gap among the Kenyan publics on the devolved governance system and the contribution of mass media in informing and educating its audiences. The study is guided by the agenda setting theory. The study was taken in Kisii county which is one of the 47 devolve units in the country with locals forming the target population. The study adopts the descriptive survey design. A sample of 160 respondents aged 18 years and above was sampled through cluster and purposive sampling. The data was collected through structured interviews, and questionnaires. In conclusion this project, by closely examining the role of mass media in Devolved Governance, shed light on the critical contribution of the media towards the success of this constitutional dispensation by highlighting challenges and how they can be addressed going forward. The findings established that the media has remained steadfast in its three major roles of Watchdog, Agenda setting, and Gate keeping.

**Keywords:** *Mass Media, Devolve System, Devolution, Promulgation, Government*

## Introduction

The Constitution of Kenya 2010 envisaged devolution as a way of democratic governance that could maximize fundamental freedoms, human choice, self determination and development. Indeed as observed by the World Bank in its Governance and Anticorruption Strategy of 2007 (World Bank, 2007), good governance is associated with robust growth, lower income inequality, child mortality and illiteracy; improved country competitiveness and investment climate; and greater resilience of the financial sector

Ensuring that devolution works as envisaged in the constitution requires that information and education on the roles and functions of the devolved system of governance be easily accessed.

Empirical evidence suggests that communication activities if skillfully implemented reform objectives could then be translated into actual results on the ground (Reinikka & Svenson, 2005). According to Baran (2004), the media as a tool of communication helps to define and shape reality. Communication mechanisms propagated through the media have a potential to improve governance through citizen engagement initiatives right at county levels. Citizen deliberation on local issues goes a long way to enhancing their public-spirit in devolved governance. Despite the potential the media has in espousing the role of communication in devolved governments, not enough has been done in policy and practice to explain why the media makes a difference in devolved system of governance.

This study argues that the media has the potential to maximize opportunities critical for County Government to reflect and rationally deliberate on inclusive participation of citizens in local governance issues. The principal goal of the study is to establish how effective the media in Kenya is playing its watchdog,

Agenda setting and Gate keeping roles in the context of the Devolved System of Governance.

### **The Concept of Devolution in Kenya.**

Devolution is defined as the constitutional transfer of power, resources and services or functions from a central authority to two or more levels of Government. The move towards devolution arose in the 1990s when new public management reformers and good governance enthusiasts claimed that the era of centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic, and rule bound administration was over (Lynn, 2001). According to these reformers, through devolution, authority over public goods and revenue is evenly distributed thereby making it difficult for those in power to collude and engage in corrupt practices. (Conlan, T. J. 1998). Besides, devolution of authority along communal and territorial lines as is the case in Kenya can be postulated as being able to foster effective cooperation within County Governments.

Devolved Governance in Kenya has two levels; the National and The County Governments. In essence, and in line with the views of Potter (2001), devolution in Kenya was construed as a process through which political, administrative and fiscal management powers would be transferred from the central government to County Governments operating at regional levels. Consequently, as a form of decentralization, three key aspects were targeted for decentralization from the central to County Government.

Administrative decentralization sought to vest functional responsibility within counties to County Governments. The second aspect for decentralization was finance. County Governments needed to be responsible for their own development hence the need to have financial power. Handling functional and financial issues then meant that there was need for some level of political decentralization under which County Governments would be held accountable. Political decentralization in Kenya led to a paradigm shift at the county level. Initially local authorities operated with councilors. This had now to change to members of county Assemblies (MCAs). This reconstituted the state in a democratic way. It provided an avenue for diverse interests to be heard and negotiated and resource allocation decisions to be made at local levels based on public governance.

Challenges have however emerged in connection with the democratic reconstitution of the state. The media has time and again highlighted situations where the County Governments have faulted fiscal allocation from the central government (e.g the standard Tuesday, July, 29, 2014 p.6); other issues have revolved along disagreements between MCAs and county governors (e.g the Standard Tuesday, July 29, 2014 p.9). Furthermore, despite the efforts by the media to inform and educate the public on devolution, there are misconceptions among Kenyans with regards to devolved governance.

The media has been mandated with discourse on devolution, most of which show a lack of understanding among the general populace. Feedback in newspaper opinion pages and talk shows on radio reveal among others that confusion reigns regarding for instance the role of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) within the larger County Government in relation to duplication of projects.

### **The media's role as the watchdog**

The media plays a significant role by providing a check on powerful sector of the society which includes leaders within the private and public domains. In this regard the media plays the role of the watchdog. Under this role, journalists are tasked the responsibility of guarding public interest and protecting it from incompetence, corruption and misinformation. As observed by Brunetti and Weber, (2003), the free press does indeed often promote transparency, although journalists often face serious constraints and obstacles in dispensing this role.

Reports highlighted in the media with regards to the corruption bedeviling County Governments lends credence to the urge of the media to highlight cases of corruption and poor governance at the county levels. In the Sunday Nation dated July 27, 2014, the media reports on a warning from the Ethics body to MCAs to act within the law or lose seats. In this article it is noted that 'assemblies

across the country have shown a lack of leadership and are run as market places ...". The paper goes on to enumerate cases across the country where MCAs conduct has been put to question. The article notes that 'in June 2014, both the Nairobi and the Machakos county assemblies descended into chaos with MCAs openly exchanging punches", In July 2014, there was trouble at the Kakamega assembly leading to suspension of the Assembly deputy speaker and an MCA". These media excerpts clearly inform the public on the level of poor governance at the MCAs.

Despite the efforts however, issues of corruption and misrule still dominate the media (e.g "counties still losing millions to ghost workers", Tuesdays, July 29, 2014/the Standard). This then brings into focus the effectiveness of the Medias role as a watchdog.

**Research question one:** *Does the media play its role as a watchdog effectively in devolved government?*

### **The Agenda Setting Role**

The Agenda setting role of the media is a concept that first permeated the study of mass communication in the early 1970s (Maxwell and Shaw, 1972). Under this concept, the media is expected to function with the purpose of raising awareness to social problems, while at the same time informing leaders about public concerns and their needs. In terms of devolved governments, the media particularly comes under the spotlight in the manner it highlights vital issues that may require urgent action by County Government or the National Government.

The problem in the Kenyan context has however been the balance between the news media agenda (gauged by the amount of news media coverage devoted to specific issues) compared with the public agenda (measured by public perceptions of the important issues in regular opinion polls), and the political agenda (typically monitored by the number of the statements, speeches, or press releases coming from powers that be). While media agenda and political agenda are aptly covered, the public agenda appears to be given very little airtime or paper space. The advent of talk shows on radio has in a way tended to alleviate issues of public agenda - but tend to be ethnically motivated going by the names of the radio stations airing them. This tends to open another 'Pandora's box,'

**Research question two:** *In which ways do the media achieve its role as the Agenda setter in the context of devolved government?*

### **The media as the Gate Keeper**

Under the gate keeper role, it is espoused that citizens could be more empowered and informed about their County Governments if the media can be able to sermon and bring together a plurality of diverse interests, voices and view points to debate issues of public concern at sub-county and county levels.

This is consistent with the views by Voltmer (2011), that in many newer democracies, the news media are indeed effective in strengthening political interests and knowledge. She finds the media to have positive effects on democracy, citizen's democratic orientation and concludes that the media impacts positively on new democracies, in particular with regard to the empowerment of citizens. These views are echoed by Tettey (2008) in noting

that the news media in Africa, are injecting marginalized voices into the public sphere. Those who had hitherto had no voice are speaking up.

Yet in the Kenyan context a lack of balance in media coverage and locality persists. The mainstream media houses in Kenya are based in Nairobi out of the reach of the common Kenyan from the county levels. Despite the efforts by most media houses to organize and bring together a plurality of diverse interests to debate issues of public concern, most of the panelists in the discourse are usually the same across the houses and are mostly elitist and based in Nairobi. This then begs the question as to whether the media is able to achieve its role as gate keeper.

**Research question three:** *Does the existing framework of media coverage promote the media's role of gate keeping in the context of devolved governance.*

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample comprised of respondents drawn from the diverse communities residing in Kisii County. As a criteria of inclusion, it was required that participants be actively involved in issues pertaining to local governance. This was ascertained via an interview with individual participants during the initial request for participation. Out of an expected number of 180 residents, a final sample of 160 was purposively sampled.

### **Demographic characteristics**

Demographic characteristics of the respondents were analyzed across age, gender, and level of education. This was necessary in order to develop the general picture of representation in discourse pertaining to county governance and devolution as a whole.

### **Design and Procedures**

The study adopted the ethnographic research design that is qualitative and synthetic in nature. The purpose was to look at media involvement in devolved governance from a holistic approach. First the study sought to identify residents to participate in the study. This yielded naturally occurring strata levels representing the nine constituencies in the study area. Stratified sampling was therefore used to determine the sample size to be drawn from each constituency proportionate to the target population in that constituency. Simple random sampling was then used to select the study units.

Extensive narrative data was collected pertaining to the three roles expected to be played by the media as well as perceptions on implementation of devolved governance in the study area. Background, development, existing conditions and trends in devolution within the county were observed and analyzed thematically. This involved analyzing the collected data for patterns in relation to media presence and devolution implementation.

## **Results**

The profile of the respondents indicated that a majority (34.1%) of them was in the age bracket 26-30 years and slightly over 50% were males. The level of education distribution revealed that most of the respondents (49.8%) had attended education up to college level and 13.1% had gone up to and graduated from university. These findings were construed to indicate that devolved governance was a concern of both men and women in equal measure and that the citizens have requisite education to be able to engage in discourse regarding county governance.

On the role of the media in devolved governance, three key themes were identified. First, the study revealed that the media *secures political will through public lobbying and persuasion*. This is achieved through educating and persuading the audience directly. Secondly, the study identified *building of public will through participatory and deliberative approaches* as another key theme across respondents. It was found that the media proactively enables political and civic participation by informing about issues which in turn leads to opinion change, and hence deliberate participation. The third theme identified was that of *securing political will and building public support through framing and agenda setting*. Most respondents indicated that the media often communicated issues in a manner that made them comprehend and see issues from a variety of perspectives. The media's persistence on topical issues was attributed to incisive reporting that tended to tap into the public's pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and opinions thereby shaping them into acceptable format.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study revealed that the media secures political will through public lobbying and persuasion. This finding is consistent with the ideals of Agenda setting. By securing political will through persuasion and lobbying, the media ensures that the issues it considers important resonate with what the public considers important. This supports the findings by Weaver, McCombs and Shaw (2004) who demonstrated that topics and issues that the media present as important are also those that the public subsequently deems important. These findings also support the findings by Kwansah - Aidoo (2001) who in a study on media coverage of environmental issues found a correlation between environmental issues that the public found important and environmental issues given importance by the media.

The findings that the media builds public will through participatory and deliberate approaches is consistent with expectations of the media as a watchdog for which the media's involvement of the public in a participatory way ensures that powerful sector of the society is under scrutiny and is checked. This is consistent with the views observed by Brunetti and Weber (2003), and which indicate that the media and particularly free press often promote transparency. The findings that the media secures political will and builds public support concurs with the findings by Voltmer (2011) which reports that in many newer democracies, the media plays the role of strengthening political interests and knowledge. The finding further supports the findings by Tettey (2008), that media in Africa are injecting marginalized voices into the public sphere.

The study therefore concludes that despite the myriad challenges bedeviling the process of implementation of devolved governance in Kenya, the media has remained steadfast in its three major roles of Watchdog, Agenda setting, and Gate keeping. The media has been proactive in unearthing evils particularly within County Governments and in exposition corrupt elements both in the national and County Governments. Furthermore, the media has fully attempted to bring the public on board by organizing various forums for public discourse on devolved governance. The study however, recommends that the media considers devolving most of its functions and particularly TV airing to counties for faster dissemination of information.

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