

Role of Privately-Owned Media in Enhancing Accountability and Transparency in Democratic States

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Abstract

Media alongside other State arms like the Legislature, Judiciary and the Executive is a vital contributor to any nation's development agenda. Kenya has witnessed rapid increase in the number of private media institutions, among the reasons for this being: the liberalization of the airwaves facilitated by new more democratic leadership regimes. This study sought to establish the contribution of private media in ensuring accountability and transparency among elected leaders. The study was inspired by the fact that, despite of remarkable progress made by the media in spreading and adapting to diversity over the past decade, there are still troubling concerns. There is no political operation space for the free media in the 'democratic' countries and further arguments assert that privately-owned media cannot be exempted from damages directed to the jurisdiction of the fourth estate. Grooming a responsible citizenry through objective and critical information is a key responsibility of free media, it is therefore imperative for the media to incorporate the public to exterior elements of societies' development like a transparent and accountable democratic system. The study was conducted using the qualitative approach and used content analysis method where data was analysed deductively to infer the roles of the media and journalists in enhancing transparency and accountability. The study established that media should adhere to the basic principles that define its position and roles, in national development to understand the existing political structures processes and influence them for the better of the public representation instead. This is because the mass media do not have only have a role to play towards achieving good governance but are themselves components of a good governance structure.

Keywords: *Privately-Owned Media, Accountability, Transparency and Democratic States.*

Introduction

This paper explores how privately-owned media can effectively contribute towards the enhancement of political virtues of transparency and accountability in democratic nations. If there lacks media in the present-day democracy, accountability and transparency will remain to be a mirage in many States. The media have the responsibility of ensuring particular objectives and basic mandates of the fourth estate in alignment to the watch dog role are attained. They are tasked with the role of ensuring the two virtues of democracy; transparency and accountability are embraced by public institutions, servants and political leaders. Media sometimes do exactly this but now and then frustrate the process of pursuing accountability in equal measure.

The media are expected to be valid and formidable forces of enhancing democratic progress and therefore need to conduct a self-analysis about their execution of basic jurisdictions and their patterns of operation. Privately-owned media patterns of operation need to be changed if they are not to self-destruct thus failing to effectively execute the responsibilities bestowed on them.

Not only do the media report politics, they are a crucial part of the environment in which politics is pursued. They contribute to policy discussion and resolution, not only in so far as they set public agendas, or provide platforms for politicians to make their views known to the public, but they also assist in judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation (McNair, 1999: pp 67).

In theory, it is easy to conclude that in the lowest extreme mass media can help make a political system become more open to the public through informing the audiences of the leaderships' dealings, making the public to participate in political decision-making processes and above all holding government officials accountable on issues of service delivery through critical and unbiased reporting.

Practically though, a lot of issues contrary to the assertion that media are effective in checking accountability and instilling the same in political leaders continue to arise. In this age where mass media have become dominant due to their expanded reach and attaining more public trust and on the other hand political leaders derailing them from efficiently executing their laid-down mandates, trends of compromising of the efficiency and objectivity of the fourth estate have emerged. Some political officials have gone ahead to fake transparency and accountability virtues through speechmaking techniques and in the process manipulating media not to critically report on these.

Pretentious transparency in turn fails to serve the basic political values that need to be adhered to in order to attain the real image of a transparent and accountable democracy. The constructed sets of virtues instead impede and conceal accountability flaws. Important information jumbled with a pile of manufactured political realities. Sadly, mass media does not always thwart simulated transparencies by politicians or even correct the rhetoric of openness and accountability.

Statement of the Problem

Privately-owned media have been perceived to be in a position to efficiently check the government's service delivery status, keep public servants on toes and ensure transparency and openness are observed as compared to government-controlled/owned media because they are more independent in terms of funding their activities and development.

This has however not been the case with issues like market competition and scramble for audiences and advertisers have come about and even influenced the objectivity of privately-owned media houses which put so much energy on establishing themselves as the most popular in the industry.

Objectives

Today, political transparency is virtually impossible without some form of mass media coverage. *Edwin Baker has written that, "Democracy is impossible without a free press. At least courts and commentators tell us so.*

Given the assertion that media and journalism are critical for the wellbeing of society on the basis of the fact that information is an enormously important resource that people and society need to operate, this paper therefore provides a systematic analysis base on the following objectives:

- To establish how the media ensure efficient and objective execution of their watchdog role on political officials.
- To establish issues barring privately-owned media establishments from independently reporting on unaccountability cases of State leadership.
- To identify what needs to be done too enable the mass media execute their core responsibility of pursuing accountability among State Officials and institutions.

Methodology

This study was conducted using the qualitative approach and used the content analysis method where the aim was to build a model and describe phenomenon of the role of media in checking accountability and enhancing good governance.

The data was analysed deductively basing on already existing information on the same topic. Deductive content analysis is used when the structure of analysis is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge.

Discussions and Findings

How Media Reports on Governance Issues?

Discussions offered within the media realm and its position in Kenya as part of a series of round tables organised by School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Nairobi, the Media Focus on Africa Foundation, the Media Institute, and the Kenya Editors' Guild to enhance public participation and understanding of the role of the media in political, democratic processes and development in Kenya concluded that media have a huge task of conveying meaningful information vital for democratic consolidation, responsible and accountable political leadership that respects the rule of law, human rights, and promotes good governance at all levels (Nyabuga, 2012.)

Above and beyond, journalists are often depicted as 'watchdogs' or 'advocates' of the public and are therefore expected to operate 'on behalf of the public', provide it with information essential for democratically making decisions, defend society from corruption, and deal with issues that the public have a massive grasp and grip on. Precisely the media in Kenya and other countries across the globe have an important role to play despite the challenges they currently face (Ibid.)

Conclusions from the round tables that were conceived platforms for promoting conversation among and with various organisations and people like academics, journalists, civil society, policy makers, media stakeholders, politicians, and 'ordinary' Kenyans on the role of the media in Kenya also concurred that, there are serious concerns about the position and capacity of the media to midwife change. Although pundits, panelists and participants in a number of the forums acknowledged the important role the media play, they also reckoned the fourth estate had effectively abandoned their public service tenet due to commercial, political and entrepreneurial pressures.

One participant who is the former Kikuyu Constituency Member of Parliament and renowned lawyer Paul Muite argued reality is that ethnic mobilization is not for the benefit of a particular community as not everyone from the community benefits but just a few people surrounding the power centre like the President for example. It is very unfortunate that communities are often fooled by these ethnic tricksters that '*mtu wetu anamalizwa*' [our person is being finished]. You find an ethnic kingpin who has totally brainwashed his tribesmen and women and he totally controls them like a puppet for his own political gain. He even goes around bragging to fellow politicians about the magnitude of followers he commands from his ethnic community. This is the jinx that needs to be broken down if we are going to have development in this country. We have got to break this bad tradition. This is the message I think the media needs to focus on. As media organisations, you are the experts in packaging information; the ball is in your court; this message has got to be passed across to the Kenyan people so that during the next election people will vote on the basis of issues and merits in terms of what elected leaders can do and not on the basis of ethnic mobilisation (Nyabuga, 2012: pp 25-26.)

The Kenyan media has also been accused of being ignorant in averting reports that could abet division amongst population. Charles Nyachae the Chairman of the Commission for Implementation of the Constitution (CIC) in one of the

meetings on 27th September 2011 said that the media had continued with negative utterances by politicians even when they are a replica of hate speech. He critiqued the trend by the media and urged the practitioners to research issues before publication.

“.....sometimes media tends to misreport constitutional issues, whilst they shape public opinion and despite wielding great power , they at times fail to understand the atrociousness of their reports and actions,” . He noted.

Conversely, notwithstanding the criticism razed against the media and journalists in Kenya, there is an all-encompassing view that they still have a place in the development of effective participatory political and democratic processes due to the important role they play as providers of information, and public space critical to public opinion formation and aggregation.

Has Media Bettered or Worsened Democracy?

The Conduct of democratic or autocratic politics in a State or across the World depends massively on mass media, only a few issues are tackled and solved without a little bit of consideration of the role of mass media be it negative or positive, McQuail (2005.) This is an implication that the media and journalism in general have a role to play towards achieving liberal and participatory democracy; the role can be positive or negative to the progress.

Democracy has numerous definitions and applications respectively with these ambiguities arising from the reality that different people define it and apply it differently, in most cases to suit themselves and their interests. However, in an ideal world, democracy is perceived to be the rule of the people achieved through maximum participation of all the people in making decisions or choosing their representatives although this ideal is almost practically unattainable or fiercely contested, Holden, (1974); Lively, (1975); Diamond, *et al*, (1988); Bratton and van de Walle, (1997).

Besides, democracy is gaining popularity across the world as the only system of governance that can deliver people from innumerable political difficulties and conflicts because of its rudiment principles of empowering and bestowing the right on the people to decide their destiny.

Despite the promises of democracy and its enticing potentials, numerous Kenyans and citizens of other African countries still suffer from poor leadership effects, autocratic leadership and power conflicts. There still is massive suspicion from the public on this governance style which is perceived as the elevation and or maintenance of oligarchies in power through *popular* consent specifically, the ballot box or elections (Runciman, 1971).

True participatory democracy calls, allows and enables people to actively take part in decision-making processes. This begins from the elections' candidates choices, to monitoring their performances and participating fully in the business of the government. Participation not only helps the citizens understand the phenomenon of government as a form of action rather than merely a kind of event, but also leads them to criticise from the perspective of agents and not as spectators only, Lucas (1976.)

Such situations position the media at a point from which it should execute its critical mandate of observing, commenting and even mobilising, a course of actions against some issues which are an impediment to national development like corruption, unaccountability, crime, constitution mutilation and misrule. Though, the media have severally invited criticism over their failure to be responsible of the issues mentioned here due to their obsession with

profitability that has led them to abusing the power bestowed on them as the society's watchdog.

Mediatisation of Democracy and Politics

Media is considered a key factor in shaping the way society operates by articulating ideas, influencing perceptions and attitudes. An assessment of the role of media in democratic States/societies affirms that media and journalism act as vehicles/channels reflecting public opinion by highlighting public concerns and inform people about State policies and important events and viewpoints. Sometimes media and journalism are catalysts for change and thus play a facilitative role by 'reflecting the political order in which people are situated' and 'promote dialogue among their audiences through communication, Christians et al., (2009).

Most important the spreading out or development of democracy is dependent on an educated and conversant public, which acts on what it knows and make what they know play an important role in society. This is because in any democracy, information and communication are considered vital organs without which this system of governance would not survive.

Democracy is generally and factually considered a communications-intensive mode of governance that allows for incessant discussion, analyses, debates, and learning. People can therefore arrive at individual views on important issues and prepare adequately to participate in politics after accessing information from various perspectives and diverse opinions on arising issues and such information is conveyed through media. This is because the mass media are considered powerful tools of communication and provide a powerful link of information access between the political elite and the electorate/voters/citizens, Wheeler, (1997) and Grossman, (1996.)

The electioneering period is especially crucial for the relationship between politicians, the media and the target audiences. The biasness of the media, the ownership and control of the media industry and the political uses of the media," according to Street (2001,) matter at different or same times because they have some influence on the working of political processes. Interests of the media also shape the outcomes of that process.

The media are well positioned to determine the political fate of politicians because of the power they enjoy. Mass media influence political courses, the governments and the voters at the same time and they are therefore listed alongside other political or leadership institutions like national assemblies, county assemblies, the executive both national and at the county levels, administrations and parties.

The conduct of democratic (or undemocratic) politics, nationally and internationally, depends more and more on mass media, and there are few significant social issues which are addressed without some consideration of the role of the mass media, whether for good or ill. ... the most fundamental question of society - those concerning the distribution and exercise of power, the management of problems and the processes of integration and change - all turn on communication especially messages carried by the public means of communication, whether in the form of information, opinion, stories or entertainment, McQuail, (1994: pp1- 2)

The media do not only report but they are a crucial part of the environment in which politics is pursued. They contribute to policy discussion and resolution, not only in so far as they set public agendas, or provide platforms for politicians to make their views known to the public, but they also in judging and critiquing the variety of political viewpoints in circulation (McNair, 1999).

In democracies also McNair, (2011) argues that mass media have become critical to the merging and expansion of democracy because they do not only

perform the basic function of disseminating but also interpretative functions of analysis, assessment and comment.

However, despite prior arguments in this paper and the fact that the relationship between political parties and politicians on one hand, and the media and journalists on the other operate on a shared strategy of complementarity of interests the two parties' relationship oscillate between "trust and suspicion" (Mancini, 1993).

The Media we Require for Enhancement of Transparency and Accountability

Mancini and Swanson, (1996) posited that media are no longer a simply a means by other subsystems like political parties, officials and government institutions use to spread their individual messages. They are instead autonomous power centres in reciprocal competition with other power centres. This assertion is simply a pointer that that mass media possess power which they ought to use in public service advancement and in turn national development.

This is to say that journalists/media practitioners and the media have a role as a watchdog, keeping the public informed particularly about the operations of the state and public officials whether appointed or elected. The media should therefore safeguard the public from political extremes, lies and manipulations that are not in real sense and unaccountable leadership in form of corruption and discrimination which has in past times bred hatred among the citizens.

However, as Kohut (2001) observes, sometimes journalists and the media act as "an ill-mannered watchdog that barks too often - one that is driven by its own interests rather than by a desire to protect the public interest" and this paper sought to establish what exactly is the media that the people need to convey their concerns and keep the leadership on its toes making it to deliver even better.

In the Kenyan scene Oriare et al (2010) stated that Kenyans desire a free, independent, assertive, vibrant and responsible media that would effectively advance democracy, human rights, good governance and socioeconomic transformation. This is because such media would provide platforms campaigning against the culture of impunity that is a key challenge to Kenya's political and socio-economic transformation and growth.

It was also established that Kenyans want professionally run media that promote, respect and adhere to the fundamental principles and global standards of journalism practice. The audiences were also found to be yearning a communication platform that can promote professional behaviour in newsrooms and respect the code of conduct thus objective and accurate reporting which is vital in helping the public make wise decisions and judgments of their leadership (Ibid.)

According to Oriare et al 2010 Kenyans also yearn for media that promote the development of local content and talent suggesting the need to undertake further research on applications and the financial viability of emerging local content industry in Kenya.

Pertinent to the ignition of this study, Oriare et al (2010) also inferred that Kenyans very much want private media which they believe can balance between commercial interests and development imperatives of the country by objectively and critically checking on the leadership.

The citizens believe that privately-owned media are accountable and corruption-free; and media that promote media literacy among their audiences as far as making informed decisions to spearhead development is concerned.

Hutchins (1940) in his study *A Free and Responsible Press* identified five possible functions that could be used as the criteria for assessing the performance of the media in executing its key mandates. Mass media could

one or more of the following: provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning, a commitment evidenced in part by objective reporting. Secondly media could be a forum for comment exchange and criticism, meaning that mass media should be common carriers of public discussion, at least in the limited sense of carrying views contrary to their own project.

The media can also be a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society where it presents and clarifies the goals and values of the society. It also provides full access to the day's intelligence to ensure that the public's right to be informed is not infringed.

Comprehensively Hutchins further identified three broad roles of media which include: Political role whereby it provides information hence enlightening the public so that it can be in a position to independently self-government. The other role is serving as the watchdog on the government. An additional function of the mass media is providing various segments of the society a sense that they are represented in the public sphere.

It is logical therefore to infer that the media has a mandate of checking on the government performance through informing the public objectively and exposing the ills that can compromise the development of a state perpetrated by a section of leaders. However, previous criticism in this study have shown that the privately-owned media perceived by the audience as more objective have in many occasions failed to hit the expected mark in executing the surveillance role.

Accountability and Transparency Role

The watchdog task majorly looks at accountability, efficiency, access to information-transparency which is similar to countering abuse of office. Mass media are the watchdogs of the powerful or they basically check on the performance and ethics of powerful people in the society.

Therefore, it is rational to infer that in executing the surveillance/watchdog role, media can check the government and other institutions' adherence to corporate governance standards to ensure transparency and accountability the decisions and engagements of those in power by highlighting scandals, maladministration, corruption, policy failures. This grants the media not even the duty but a responsibility to check on State abuse of power and help correct such ills through highlighting them, informing and conducting analyses that will empower the public towards sanitizing the governance system.

The media should therefore ensure that it attains the capacity to reach different segments of the society and inform the government on the needs that require to be addressed at the various levels, and the perceptions of individuals on the governance qualities to ensure that there is equal representation of the electorates' views. This is in line with the agenda setting formative role of binding the leaders and the marginalized public. Here the media raises awareness on social problems informing elected officials about public concerns and needs.

Conclusion

Free and independent media do not just have a role to play in ensuring good governance but they should be part of the structure of good governance. This is to say media activities matter fundamentally and superficially in good attaining of good governance. Therefore, any policies and regulations that impede free access and exchange of information and hence communication whether through censorship, intimidation of journalists, privately-owned media oligopolies have serious consequences on basics of good governance in any State.

The phenomena described in this paper to some extent imperfections of a normally functioning democratic system of governance and a free and independent media. The instances where media fail to deliver their mandate of objectively checking on the performance of public officials are unethical and demeaning to the significance of the fourth estate which is the watchdog for other State arms. In any case such trends are symptoms of a failing democratic system and existence of a toothless watchdog that can rarely bark leave alone to bite.

The public must therefore demand for more diverse coverage and news organisations must provide it as a core responsibility. However, the problem does not largely lie on the failure of the will of the structure of news creation and dissemination. Just as stock markets have rules to prevent landslides of panic selling, news organisations should consider creating structural methods of diversifying their coverage even in times of intense political and cultural scandals and to protect them from failing to step up to their key role of surveillance.

It is also logical to infer that news organisations cover media events, politicians and scandals in the manner that they do because they are acting in balance in relation to the enticements to increase and maintain their audience and advertisers' share. On the contrary, one might also say that rational/balanced behaviour or approach on coverage occurs against a background of enticements produced by structures. This leads to the conclusion that the media's major goal should be to understand how the existing political structures operate and use the fourth estate's basic principles to change them for the better of the public and the leadership.

Another challenge of media efficiency in ensuring accountability of political officials arises when these media are owned by politicians who would want to influence and achieve a particular course thus making their establishments biased. But over time and in the right circumstances, the media can also help to build the practices and culture of democracy and good governance within society as a whole if they adhere to the basic principles that define their roles and endows them with power to ensure States develop at required rates.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The conclusions from analyses of the previous studies on a similar study topic indicate that the role of the media to reinforce attitudes in the society cannot be under-estimated. Therefore, restrictions of freedom of the press and of expression should be clearly and narrowly defined to ensure that they do not infringe on legitimate speech or go beyond the scope of harmful speech. Suggested measures to prohibit the abuse of media freedom and promotion of peaceful co-existence include: a review of Kenya's media legislation, enactment of a progressive media policy, strengthening the Media Council of Kenya, training in conflict sensitive journalism and improving working conditions for journalists.

Just to expound on the last bit that calls for the improving of the working standards of the journalists the authors established that poor remuneration and lack of safe working conditions for journalists negatively affect the functionality of a free and plural media. Precisely, significant progress towards cementing the efficiency of the mass media cannot be achieved unless the working conditions of journalists are improved. We therefore recognize the importance of the media as a system of good governance and recommend that innovative funding schemes to strengthen the sector be initiated to support the Journalism profession to perform its civic duty.

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