

# **(Re)Positioning The Social Responsibility Theory in Defense of Vernacular Mass Media in Kenya: Going Forward**

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## **Abstract**

In order to objectively understand the nature and the role of media in peace and conflict management, it is important to understand the various ways through which the media influences conflict and conflict management. Howard (2015) points out that majority of scholars and researchers have concentrated on the role of media in economic, social and political issues affecting states with little attention being given to conflicts. Further, he posits that media impact on conflict management is an emerging area that has been under studied due to lack of multidisciplinary models and concepts that would view the media's role from the realm of peace and conflict.

## **Introduction**

Proceedings at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania, revealed and concluded that the 1994 genocide was as a result of deliberate choice by modern elite to foster hatred, sow seeds of fear and set the majority against the minority using implicit messages, deliberate misinformation and propaganda through the mainstream media (Van Schaack, 2008). The ruling of the tribunal was to the effect that the Radio Mille Collines contributed directly to the mass murder and convicted three senior managers of the radio station and sentenced them to imprisonment. As a result, media practitioners and conflict resolution specialists intensified the use of media for development and begun initiatives to mitigate conflict and promote reconciliation (Howard, 2015). This has led to the development of an approach known as Conflict-Sensitive Journalism that reflects principles and practices of conventional libertarian media development while at the same time embracing insights from advocates of news media practice who are committed to conflict resolution often called Peace Journalism. This approach is committed to expanding news media practitioners' conflict consciousness without overt peace advocacy with far reaching conflict de-escalation. The need to take into account all local conditions and partners is central to Conflict-Sensitive Journalism which reiterates traditional journalism norms and skills as well as providing media practitioners with insight into conflict as a social process and establishes a new perspective on media's influence on conflict. Journalists are introduced to conflict-instigating concepts such as resource inequity, unresolved grievances and ignorance of shared interests or common ground. The end result is broadened capacity of journalists to analyze conflicts through local perspectives thus enabling them to produce more diverse stories including reports of potential conflict resolution opportunities.

Indigenous media in most African countries have failed to play the crucial role of being a balanced educator and information source that is relevant to the public's welfare over issues that are found to be root causes of conflicts. In Kenya, a highly contested election in 2008 ignited a long standing frustration and distrust among citizens that led to the killing of more than 1,200 persons and property worth millions of dollars destroyed during the three months of violence. The ethno-centrism of alarmist news reports and inflammatory talk show commentaries on vernacular or tribal language radio stations was unprecedented. Many local language journalists knew of no response other than to report their first emotion-laden impressions of the violent acts that were unfolding before them and opened their micro-phones to hateful callers who alluded to killing their ethnically different neighbours.

Sixty percent of Kenya's airwaves is filled with vernacular broadcasting and many have continued their focus on the violent surface symptoms of Kenya's deeper problems of colonial displacement from ancestral/traditional lands and political corruption. Subsequently, a USAID funded initiative sought to train vernacular language journalists and help raise their conflict sensitivity and make their media outlets positive contributors to community reconciliation and peace building. The inductees were introduced to conflict issues in various forums

and roundtables, mentored in their reporting and funded to explore issues elsewhere in the country. More than five hundred journalists were trained who produced 3,300 stories directly related to conflict issues and reconciliation and inspired countless others. Their work explored the deep seated resentment in Kenya and individual and tribal access to land. The initiative expanded to include national media journalists working on all platforms including state media, radio talk show hosts, newsroom managers and the civil society. The initiative monitored the progress and outcomes of the program and analyzed the content of journalists' work for choice of story subject, diversity of voice, and inclusion of conflict resolution as a subject matter and the extent to which ordinary citizens became the focus of the stories.

Some media houses, especially the ethnic based FM radio stations, seemed to have encouraged hate speech that elicited ethnic hatred and animosity that burst into open during the post-election violence, (BBC, 2008). Among the stations that were most mentioned included Inooro FM, Kameme FM, Kass FM, and Lake Victoria FM (Abdi and Deane, 2008; KNCHR, 2008b). While mainstream media houses like KBC, Nation Media and Standard Group were much more cautious, FM radio stations especially those broadcasting in ethnic languages appeared to fuel ethnic hatred and animosity through the use of hate and unsavoury language. For instance, KASS FM radio station broadcasting to Kalenjins in the former Rift Valley Province referred to their Kikuyu neighbours as foreigners while a popular Kikuyu radio station, Kameme FM, often referred to the Luo as uncircumcised fishermen (Mbeke, 2009; KNCHR, 2008b).

## **Discussion**

The focus group testing and community leader interviews showed that audiences captured by media providers who had been trained under the initiative obtained an increased understanding of conflict-igniting issues and a greater receptivity toward conciliation and resolution. The end result was the media coverage of the March 2013 elections. The election was carried out calmly, with the media coverage being very restrained despite the political parties' attempts to appeal to tribalism during their periods of campaigns. There was intense coverage of the election results that had been contested in court but the media coverage remained restrained and there was no significant election related violence reported. The media in Kenya embraced the need to strengthen the journalists' capacity to view their work through a 'conflict-sensitive' lens and regularly put it into practice. The promoters of the initiative were convinced that Conflict-Sensitive Journalism contributed immensely to conflict de-escalation in Kenya by early 2013.

Vernacular media in conflict resolution can be crucial if they embrace Conflict-Sensitive Journalism which emphasizes the importance of local context as the determinant of successful outcomes. Unfortunately, there is very little research available in this realm.

## **Commonly applied models of media effects research**

Research has revealed four commonly applied models of media effects emphasizing the different forces that act as the impetus for media effects. Each model emphasizes a different aspect of media content or audience as the principal force that drives a distinct media effect and therefore no single model can be used to provide a complete explanation for media effects.

### *Direct Effects Model*

The role of media content as the main driver of media effects is central to this model of media effects. This model perceives effects as taking place within a short time span after exposure, moderately even with all audience members and meeting the objective of the media producer. The model is concerned with effects that can be seen and are able to bring about change without reinforcing any existing beliefs or attitudes. These effects can take the form of behavioural change, cognitive abilities, having the power to lead the audience to take noticeable actions. The effects of political ads that have the power to make the audience vote for a particular candidate through the knowledge gained thus affecting the attitudes of the audience fall into this category of direct effect model (Kaid, 2004).

The model does not take into consideration the role played by the audience in the media effects process. The media is taken to be too powerful for the audience to counter its power. The media is viewed as dictating to the audience who are seen as having no mental capacity to make independent judgment on the media messages thrown at them. The model works best with young children or persons lacking in knowledge and wholly dependent on the media for information. In situations where the audience is able to make independent judgment on the media content, the model asserts that they are not able to resist the pull of some of the content. Understanding this model requires that we consider aspects that are central to media content with greater emphasis on those perceived more automatically by people, those that cause arousal and those that are realistically depicted.

There are several variables that determine how direct effects take place.

Whereas this is the position from media effects scholars, the model cannot be ignored bearing in mind the technological advancement that has made it easier for people to access media content. Media content on today's technology has been made to look more real and with a passive audience, and stimulating media content this model cannot be ignored.

#### *Conditional Effects Model*

The conditional effects model carries after the received view or the limited effects model that places much emphasis on the role of the audience in the media effect process. The audience's ability to take in what is being relayed by the media is based on selective exposure, attention, perception and recall ability of the audience. The audience is looked at as having the power to determine the media effect thereby disputing the fact that media effects are bound to take place regardless. The model is based on the assumption that different people react differently when exposed to the same media content. As much as we shall have effects, the effects are dependent on the individual audience member. The effects can be affective, and cognitive dependent on the selective processes that act as inhibitors of the intended media effects. The models reinforces the view that people will choose what media content to be exposed to dependent on what beliefs and attitudes they hold dear. Therefore media content that is consistent with their beliefs and attitude will find resonance with them.

This model takes on the assumption that the flow of mass communication takes a two-step flow. A person receives information that is interesting to him which he later passes it on the next person whom they have an existing social connection. Researchers have established that information flows from opinion leaders which is later passed on family members, friends, and later on co-workers. There is a landmine to media effects with the two step flow of information. First, media effects could be highly affected by people being influenced by media information that they have not had direct contact with, second, the media information that is being passed on could be distorted, and third, the personal influence that is exerted on the second recipient of the information could act as a huge inhibitor of media effects.

#### *Cumulative Media Effects Model*

The cumulative media effects model focuses on the power of media content to override any power of the audience to limit exposure to certain messages relayed by the media. This model has two components that are very essential; one is the amount of media exposure and content analysis. This model occurs as a result of repeated exposure to media content which results in the audience taking up the media viewpoint as their own. The more observable media effects are affective due to emotional reactions and cognitive due to the change in belief and attitudes. The effects of this model are said to be enduring.

Furthermore these news channels have the same sources of their news and therefore there is a high possibility that whatever they choose to focus on can be turned into an agenda for the public to consider.

Another form of the cumulative media effects model is found in the traditional cultivation which results in the audience developing world view based on the media content. This view is reinforced by the results of content analysis that have revealed that violent media content is prevalent and that persons exposed to such content especially during prime-time tend to develop a fear for crime. Cultivation scholars have found out that the effects of this kind of exposure results in enduring effects.

### *Cognitive-Transactional Media Effects Model*

This model borrows so much from cognitive psychology applying the schematic processing of media information. It focuses on how humans process environmental stimuli which affects how they learn and acquire new information. The central feature of this model is the schema that is said to be a mental structure representing knowledge about a concept. Evidence has shown the existence of schemas that are found of every domain that the human brain can grasp and are all interconnected. Schemas play a crucial in media effects in the interpretation and understanding of media content specifically. In influencing media effects, schemas help in directing selective exposure, perception, attention and recall that are very relevant in cognitive effects. They help in the integration of new knowledge and pre-existing knowledge, help in making inferences about new situations, help in reduce uncertainty about what to think or how to act, and help the audience in going beyond the stimuli and make inferences of things not shown.

This models is dependent both on the media content and the role of the audience in the media effects process. Media content has the ability of being primed to achieve a certain media effect whereas an individual audience member can determine what schema to activate. Media content as a variable in this model has to have some salient features that would influence the effects desired. For instance the images that are displayed on the television must take on the visual cues of the audience. Studies have found that the audience pays more attention to people on television with more brightly coloured clothing and hair. On the same note aggressive ideas have the power of capturing the attention of the audience especially when they are more realistic. The content must also make the audience identify with the characters in the media content. This helps in increasing the salience of the actor and stimulating more thoughts related to the observed action.

### **Theoretical framework**

In response to the ascendancy of ethnic conflict, scholars and journalists have developed theoretical explanations devoted to uncovering the source of this violence. One group of theorists identifies the centrality or nature of governance as the key variable predicating whether a society will succumb to ethnic conflict or not.

More specifically, the centrepiece of this theory relates to the breakdown of the state order, which in turn leads to a series of events culminating in ethnic conflict. In short, the feature that links these theorists together is the “structure of the situation” (Kaufman, 2001: 8). Thus, ethnicity, nation and state are linked together from a structural perspective as the core concepts underpinning ethnic conflict. This section discusses theories of media reporting with a specific reference to the social responsibility theory.

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

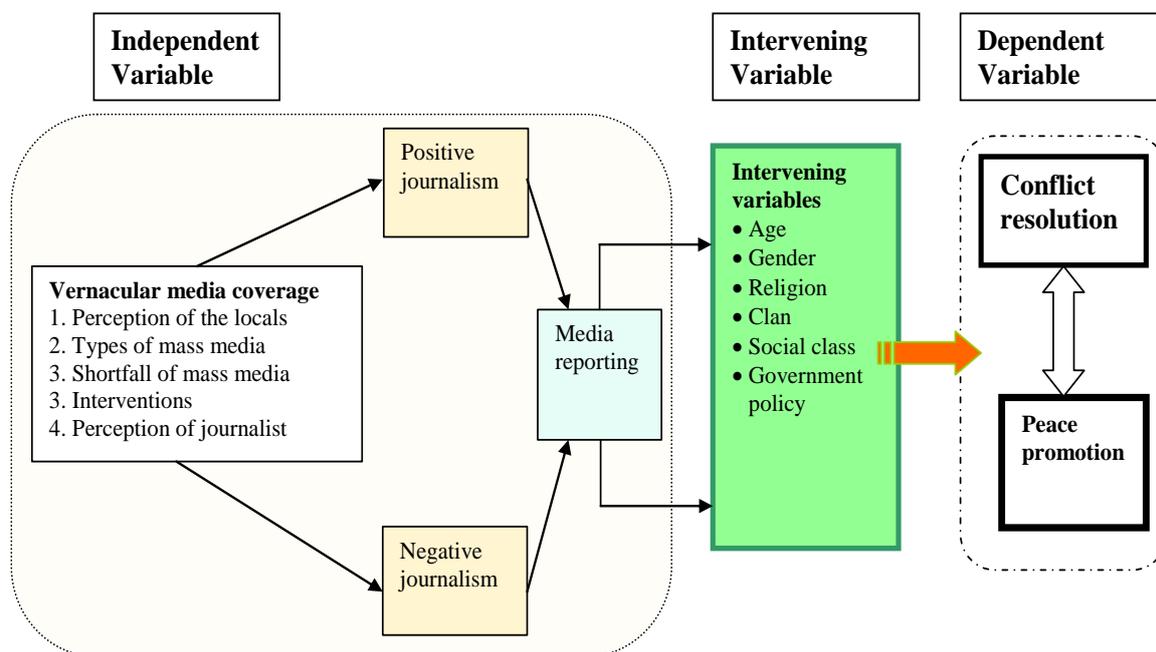
Social responsibility theory takes the position that the media needs to assume, sort of create a reasonable balance in taking both moral and legal responsibilities for all that they publish for the general good of the society (Siebert *et al*, 1972). This theory creates a platform to make media reporting truthful, accurate and objective at all times. Credibility is the foundation of this theory, and to be credible, media practitioners must try as much as possible to be socially responsible, transparent, fair and balanced in reporting, while respecting the dignity, privacy and rights of all (Schudson, 2001). Under this theory, media reporting tends to highlight injustices within the community and enlighten people on their rights and privileges. The predicament with this theory is that as people become more and more enlightened, the more they push for their rights through whatever means available, including use of violence. Thus, the implication of this theory is far reaching in influencing people to unite and rise against injustices (*ibid*).

We can therefore deduce that the Social Responsibility theory binds the practitioners to report objectively, truthfully and transparently as an obligation. The highlighted humanitarian crisis following the 2007/2008 PEV by media made the international community to intervene. As a result, this led to ending the conflict. For example, several world figures, including African eminent personalities, headed by Koffi Annan, a former United Nations (UN) Secretary General, were among the prominent personalities who intervened to negotiate and restore peace in Kenya. Additionally, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) put out advertisements calling on Kenyans to shun violence and keep the peace as well as calling journalists to adhere to their established ethical standards (Mbeke, 2009). Similarly, MCK also called for peaceful co-existence and harmony between the rivalling ethnic groups and mobilized individuals, churches and the private and corporate sectors to provide relief

assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPS) in the former Nairobi, Central, Rift Valley, Western, Coast and Nyanza Provinces. These are some of the media initiatives that could be seen to promote peace under the social responsibility theory.

Social responsibility theory is equally attached to corporate social responsibility (CSR). The idea that apart from the legal or legislative requirements, corporations have a moral obligation towards the societal wellbeing has its roots embodied in social responsibility theory. Major media houses for instance Nation Media and The Standard Group organized for relief mobilization to assist the displaced persons during the PEV. NTV, KTN and Royal media in collaboration with Kenya Red Cross (KRC) appealed to Kenyans to donate food, clothes and shelter to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) during the aftermath of the 2007 election skirmishes in Kenya. This was a positive role played by the media towards promotion of peace, hence a practical application of social responsibility.

**Conceptual framework**



(Source: Researcher’s own 2015)

**Conclusion**

According to the findings, media messaging is assumed to be greatly influenced by either subjective or objective reporting which determines the nature of coverage. Subjective reporting would involve sorting, analyzing and probably manipulation of reports to suit particular interests, while objective reporting involves facts, accurate and responsible reporting based on the professionalism tenets as have been outlined. All these are seen to take place within the media environment which represents the independent variable. However, their influential effect on individuals is based on factors such as gender, age, social status religion and residence. These human factors represent the intervening variable, which determine the strength of relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The ultimate cause of conflict is the dependent variable. It assumes two outcomes i.e. escalation or de-escalation of conflict as may be influenced by the media reportage.

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