

Print media capture in Kenya: Journalistic framing bias of William Ruto on front-page news

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Abstract

What happens to a democracy when the media places its public interest province at the margin and elects to enfeeble and undermine genuine political voices that object to the status quo? This research attempted to respond to this sticky question, exploring the top-page news depiction of William Ruto both as a Deputy President and of him as a 2022 presidential contestant in Kenya. The study, whose data was gathered through a methodical content analysis of a representative sample of eight English-language national newspapers in Kenya, covered three years from March 2018 to March 2021. While it sought to contribute to and advance the shared discourse on media's role in checking the excesses of power, the investigation revealed that the print outlets willfully packaged and portrayed William Ruto in a skewed manner on their front pages to delegitimize his political profile and conviction. This occurred through attacks and partisan framing, highlighting serious questions regarding the task the media should play in a growing democracy like Kenya.

Keywords: Watchdog • William Ruto • Top-page news • Fourth Estate • Media Capture • Newspapers • Kenya • Print Media

Introduction

Journalism reveals the truth, uncovers rots and attempts to hold the power accountable (Fengler, 2003). This explains why the media is oftentimes referred to as the fourth estate for it is the society's watchdog [1]. With its potency to deliver and shape public understanding and perception on political, social and economic issues, the media is seen as an espouser for democracy and a champion for a more robust public service.

For it to prominently foster and guard the interests of the public [2], it must devotedly hold to the canons of journalism (Rodgers, 2007) by getting its facts right (Murphy, Ward & Donovan, 2006), being independent (Allen & Blinder, 2018), impartial [3-5].

Even so, the path to credible journalism is often potholed, resulting to the sourcing, production and dissemination of inaccurate information. Scholars argue that this is universal complications which continue eroding the public's decision-making on fundamental matters. The notoriety in the infringement of the journalistic ethics has gained currency particularly in African countries due to impenetrable media ownership, budgetary limitations, etiolated human capital and the stiff market competition as a consequence of intensified consumption of digital content.

With an emphasis on main English-language national publications: Daily Nation, Saturday Nation, Sunday Nation, The Standard, Standard on Saturday, Standard on Sunday, The Star and People Daily, this research strived to investigate the coverage of Deputy President William Ruto as a 2022 presidential contender and of him as Kenya's second high-ranking politician.

Anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory that seeks to make predictions and explain how the media makes an effort to sway its audience by establishing a hierarchy of news prevalence (Rogers & Dearing, 1988; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Erbring, Goldenberg & Miller, 1980), this study will be offering an analysis

on the assertions and frames on William Ruto in the top-page news of Kenya's print media.

The outcome of this study will apprise media actors on the need for credible journalism even at times of dilemma, enrich the thought process of other scholars as part of their reference material while the gaps therein will afford a major area for other researchers to pursue in their future work.

Review of Literature

An independent media is an indispensable cog in a functioning democracy. By making decisions and acting on the authority of its own logic, the media offers the public a chance to make well informed and responsible choices. It is such an emotive subject globally so much that a free media and its roles in an economy has become a concept that has been extensively tackled by a broad-spectrum of media practitioners, scholars and researchers.

In the lack of external sway and pressure, media performs its checking functions — that engenders divergent and plural voices — through its spread of credible information, hence ensuring that the power is held to account. For the average news consumers, therefore, media is the eye of the underprivileged; a devoted public servant and a siphon of democratic ideals [6].

Therefore, in the arguments of Gurevitch & Blumler (1990) and Blumler & Coleman (2015), the press has a responsibility to offer a stage for debate on diverse and often conflicting ideas, provide voice to public opinion and act as a watchdog that exposes power abuses and corruption. In time, this stimulates active participation of citizens in the running of government [7-9].

In the wake of the paucity in financial resources, intricate media ownership formations and the ever-dynamic business models, media independence is degenerating. As maintained by [10], the case has been aggravated by the digital transformations, which have given way to the sprouting of new media channels and practitioners that eat into the traditional media's fortunes.

Out of the pressure to create value for its shareholders, media outlets are growingly bartering public interest for the production of news that will easily generate revenue for the owners. Hence, they have turned on the "disservice to democracy" button, opting to commodity news [11] by replacing professional, original and serious news generation with sensationalised information by letting the market decide what is newsworthy (McManus (1992). Indeed, this is what has led to the amplified production of oversimplified and non-enterprising news, most of which relating to crime, violence, relationships and sex.

The political and commercial interference, coupled with regulations emanating

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from within such as having self-regulations and in-house public editors — and without news enterprises have redefined journalism, at times taking it off its professional trail to the route where editorial platforms are misused and abused by the power, inducing the fabrication of news [12-15].

While many studies have been done on media independence, its erosion and the impact it has had in the society, no research has been carried out that brings out the concept of newspapers capture directly by the government and by vested interests networked with Kenyan politics and the growing top-page news framing of Kenya’s Deputy President William Ruto. It will be grounded on the following questions:

Q1: What sources are used most in the top-page news of Kenya’s newspapers in the coverage of William Ruto?

Q2: How is William Ruto framed in the top-page news of Kenya’s newspapers in the coverage of William Ruto?

Methods

To investigate the media coverage and framing of William Ruto in Kenya’s top-page news, the Daily Nation, Saturday Nation, Sunday Nation, The Standard, The Saturday Standard, The Sunday Standard, The Star and People Daily were picked. These print outlets constituted a credible cross-section of papers from Kenya, are national in perspective, routinely produce political news which are published in English language.

This implies that the papers, whose circulation is fairly high (as indicated in Table 1), are widely read for English is one of the country’s official languages (Campbell & Walsh, 2009). Hence, their influence in society is broad, enduring and remarkable. This line of thought is augmented by [16,17] who held that newspapers carry multifarious viewpoints and grounds, besides presenting extensive interpretations of the political world. Due to their unfettered scrutiny and discussion of the mighty, their exceptional ability to keep the citizenry abreast of events and raise awareness of various issues in the society, print outlets have the benefit of more committed readership Table 1 [18].

Initially, the period for the study was between 2013 and 2021 to cater for the eight years that William Ruto has been the Deputy President of Kenya. However, this was adjusted and constricted further to from March 2018 and March 2021. This was seen as the era under which William Ruto was strikingly featured in the press, particularly after he declared his candidature for President post-2022. This period was also figured out to be feasible because newspapers archives were mostly complete. Experiments to put a figure on the feasibility of the study were conducted using four newspapers for a week, between March 8 and March 14, drawn from the Daily Nation, The Standard, People Daily and The Star [19].

To respond to the two key research questions, a sample size of 14 top-page stories from each publication for the three years was decided upon to be representative of all the news pieces published in all the outlets during the period under consideration. This means that the total number of stories that this project paid attention to, having established that it will accurately reflect the attributes of the population [20]. Was 336

Key words such as “Dr Ruto”, “Deputy President”, “Ruto”, “DP Ruto”, “William

Table 1: Newspapers and their daily circulation numbers [based on a blend of sources.

NEWSPAPER	CIRCULATION
Daily Nation	80,000
Saturday Nation	95,000
Sunday Nation	1,00,000
The Standard	55,000
The Saturday Standard	60,000
The Sunday Standard	75,000
The Star	40,000
People Daily	45,000

Ruto”, were used to gather content for the study. Preliminary results indicated that “Hustler” and “Tanga Tanga” had also gained the notoriety of being used by newspapers to refer to William Ruto. Hence, the researcher added the term in the exploration. The study’s relevant news pieces were assigned a number with a random number generator used to fetch the 14 top-page news from the pack.

Taking into account these key words, coding of the data was done to label and organise them, thereby identify various themes and relationships between them. The sorting of concepts into groups was aimed at bringing out the aspects of the sourcing and treatment of top-page news on Kenya’s Deputy President William Ruto in the newspapers. Later on, a coding sheet was designed, developed, polished and finally used for the study’s 336 collected articles.

The news coverage was scrutinised further to establish the number of stories that carried the above keywords — hence build the theme of the study. This is illustrated in Table 2, which gave a general feel of the frequency with which Kenya’s Deputy President William Ruto occupied the front-page of the papers Table 2.

The term Dr Ruto Hustler was not found in any of the publications in 2018. This may be due to the fact that William Ruto acquired the Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Nairobi in December 2018. The frequency with which William Ruto occupied the top of the newspapers, using the different words indicated above, was used to respond to Q1. All the pooled top-page articles with the above words were filtered to ensure their relevance and strictly fitting to the study’s concentration. Hence, for the pieces to be seen relevant to the research, it had to mention the above words at least thrice.

It is at this filtering stage that the coders separated the articles into relevant ones, those that principally focussed on William Ruto, and non-relevant that mentioned William Ruto as a by the way. Hence, only top-page pieces that the coders agreed on as relevant were kept. Examples of top-page articles that were kept for the study were:

People Daily, January 14, 2021: Parties gang up against DP in mini polls. This article carried a kicker which read: “Jubilee Party has closed ranks with ANC, Wiper and Ford Kenya to ensure that they retain their seats against an onslaught of Ruto after his allies dared them to a contest in their backyards.”

Sunday Nation, November 29, 2020: Raila: Why I do not trust Ruto. In the kicker, the piece noted that: “The Deputy President is sensing BBI defeat, hence his muted support of the process.” It further stated: “Ruto will be a silent promoter of the NO campaign, just as he did in 2010”.

Top-page News Sourcing

Sources form the crux of news. From their claims, they make the stories be, and according to Trumbo (1996), sources can range from experts, media pundits, citizens, unattributed, leaked information, official or unofficial documents to scientists. Based on an assessment and discernment of the past studies, this study adapted the list, and ended up coding for pollsters and statistics, politicians, ‘experts’ and government as sources. The government sources were further decoded depending on whether they were institutions, documents or officials.

Top-page News Framing

A frame defines the packaging of a news item in such a way as to encourage a specific line of interpretation, and to cast down others. In their study that identified Governments as one of the prime actors in news framing, Rodelo

Table 2: Number of top-page article hits across the study’s eight newspapers, 2018-2021.

-	Dr Ruto	Deputy President	Ruto	DP Ruto	-	William Ruto	Hustler
March ‘19	44	34	33	38	-	41	42
March ‘20	38	37	31	-	38	31	74
March ‘21	44	49	52	43	-	45	92

È Muñiz (2019) noted that frame building consists of materials that political actors send to newsrooms to facilitate their work while shaping the news.

Thus, frame building consists of the mental representations, interpretations, and simplifications of reality. The frame kinds adopted by the study included problems frame that featured the impacts of the phenomenon, judgments frame that presented statements calling for action and solutions frame that offered a discussion on how a problem should be solved. In circumstances where it was hard to determine to which frame a story belongs to, a dominant frame of the story was picked. Hence, the story headlines and content had to be re-assessed further during coding to determine their intention.

Results

Figure 2 shows that the number of times news on William Ruto made it to the headlines increased tremendously in 2020 and 2021 with the use of Hustler tag assuming the pole position. This can partly be explained by the fact that William Ruto has been pushing for a new economic model, referred to as bottom-up, middle-out approach that advocates for the empowerment of the millions of the ordinary people, euphemistically referred to as hustlers.

For the period of the research, the problems, judgments and the solutions frames dominated the top-page editorial coverage of William Ruto in the eight newspapers of investigations. A descriptive total of 37% and 29% of news articles from the sample fell into the categories of the problems and judgments frames, respectively, as shown in Figure 3. In the arguments of Trumbo (1996), when government officials are used as sources, the news lean more on judgments. It is no wonder that in the study, government and political officials got more prime space in newspapers.

An example comes from an article in The Star of February 26, 2020: Uhuru men plan to kick DP Ruto out of Mt Kenya. In another piece of March 1, 2020, the People Daily splashed a piece saying: Detectives: Kenei was murdered which was closely connected to The Star's Powerful individuals murdered Kenei-DCI of March 6-8, 2020 and People Daily's Ruto office on the spot over Kenei murder cover-up of March 4, 2020.

Others are the Daily Nation's Murder: DCI zeroes in on Ruto's office of March 6, 2020, the Standard's Isolated (indicating Ruto was fighting for survival) that was published on March 9, 2020 and Sunday Nation's April 12, 2020: Edged Out which called on William Ruto to "give up the fight" as "the party he helped launch is ruthlessly being snatched from him".

Of the sampled articles, the solutions frame category, whose focus was mainly on the provision of specific information about how the solution at hand should be implemented, scored 34%. This frame had stories that were specifically discussing anti-William Ruto's presidential bid, and purporting to offer solutions in the form of publishing glowing articles that were skewed towards his political opponents such as Musalia Mudavadi, Gideon Moi, Raila Odinga, among others. Some of the articles in this section included:

The Standard of February 25, 2020: The political bulldozer. This story detailed how Raila (Odinga) had gotten free hand to woo (President) Uhuru Kenyatta's backyard, a vote-rich Mt Kenya. It was augmented by a kicker which said: "BBI meetings give former PM strategic opportunity to rebrand himself and build alliances."

The Daily Nation of March 9, 2020: Uproar over plan to impeach Ruto. This story leaned towards the impeachment of William Ruto as Kenya's Deputy President by igniting the fire further asking: "Does Senate minority leader James Orendo have sufficient grounds to seek the removal of the Deputy President from office, and can he marshal two thirds of all elected MPs to support his bid? Table 3.

A reliable news source provides a thorough, well-grounded theory and arguments based on strong evidence. They are, therefore, essential building components of a story. Hence, their choice in a story carries a good deal of significance. In its bid to respond to Q1, the study placed a focus on the type of news sources employed in the eight papers under consideration. It was established that the news sources used in the articles under review were

Table 3: Frames and respective descriptive total rates of news articles from the sample.

FRAME	PERCENTAGE (%)
Problems	37
Judgments	29
Solutions	34

Table 4: Frequency of use of different kinds of newspaper sources.

SOURCE	FREQUENCY OF USE
GOVERNMENT	54%
POLITICIANS	22%
POLLSTERS AND STATISTICS	8%
EXPERTS	16%

dominantly from government and politicians (this is shown in Table 4).

However, most of them were not put on record but rather assumed the anonymous tag even when the confidentiality granted was not warranted. Some of the labels used in the pieces were "allies", "sources close to...", "a highly-placed source...", "a source that sought anonymity", among others. In most cases, the anonymous sources' claims were, as a by the way, backed and validated by single sources, which were cramped to an average of five familiar politicians and government officials.

Most of the top-page news cited anonymous sources in government (n=181), about 30 per cent of them referenced only one source a politician (n=101) and a paltry 16 per cent of the reviewed news pieces quoted experts, pollsters and statistics (n=54) Table 4.

Discussion

Different newspapers gather, package and present their news distinctively due to the diverse environments that they operate in. Be as it is, it is noteworthy that print media has a strong and faithful readership in Kenya as evidenced by the assorted editions and the surging circulation figures. It is no wonder that today, newspapers are seen to be effective and veritable funnels of information be they on political, economic or social issues as they attempt to not only inform the citizenry but also hold the power to account.

But their approval by the public — and which critics have broadly endorsed — is staked as questions linger on whether Kenyan newspapers are discharging their watchdog functions or serving a selected few in authority as attack dogs. From these investigations, it is apparent that newspapers content is deteriorating with patterns pointing to newsrooms that have been infiltrated and their editorial commitments captured.

As a consequence, the publications cannot criticise genuinely, fairly and in a balanced manner as is expected of the profession. Instead, they are growingly being appropriated to further political desires as is revealed in the research where the publications were seen to be heavy on resentful stories on William Ruto, and hollow on pieces that were regarded to be portraying him in a positive light.

This is largely pegged to the structure of the ownership of the print media and its subjection by the government and other big corporates. Kenya's media industry is highly concentrated, an indicator that it is run by few individuals who suppress critical and challenging insights on issues besides discouraging diversity of expression. At worse, explains Iosifidis (2010), a concentrated media puts at risk the freedom of press and diminishes the plurality of political viewpoints, thus inspiring authoritarian leadership as is being witnessed in many African countries.

In Kenya, the newspaper industry is highly consolidated and dominated by a limited number of private owners such as His Highness The Aga Khan who runs the Nation Media Group, S.K. Manchuria who owns the Royal Media Services, the Kenyatta Family (whose son is the President of Kenya) that

controls the Miramax Network Limited and the late President Daniel Arap Moi of the Standard Group Limited.

It may not be easy to generalise the journalistic bias that William Ruto enjoys to delegitimise his presidential bid by framing him as a corrupt, violent and under qualified figure to lead Kenya. But the newspaper ownership matrix fingers to this inclination towards political undercutting and witch-hunt. The Nation Media Group, which owns the Daily Nation, Saturday Nation and Sunday Nation, is unsurprisingly a pro-establishment platform driven by the wealth creation for its shareholders. Hence, in its bid to be in business, the outlet has commoditized its news in a form that attracts advertisements from the government, parastatals and corporates.

On the other hand, the Standard Group that controls the Standard, the Standard on The Saturday Standard and The Sunday Standard is managed by Gideon Moi, a senator who has also announced his intentions to be William Ruto's competitor in the 2022 presidential race. It brings to the fore the long-held debate among media critics and scholars: can the media be free from its owners' strings and still manage to engage in reporting that is accountable to journalistic norms? Can journalism plunge itself in logical, factual and constructive criticism without eroding its masters' value and aspirations?

Given a free hand in a vibrant environment, scholars assert that quality journalism that independently monitors power, acts as the servant of citizens and establishes the truth has the power to not only generate revenues but also engender owners' other interests like politics. In the views of Anderson, Ogola & Williams (2014), quality reporting can easily attract funding and stimulate viable business models such as paywalls, hence untether the media from advertisers' control. Such a path has already been assumed by global brands like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Economist, Telegraph, among others.

This study, which faced a number of challenges including issues with sample and selection, limited access to data and time constraints, recommends that newspapers in Kenya must come up with sustainable strategies that will free them from government and owners' capture, or at least ways to limit its effects. This will inspire quality reporting, and recapture the outlets' deteriorating fourth estate roles.

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