

CHAPTER 5



The Role of the Media

Even before the opening of the official campaign, opposition parties began to complain that they were being denied reasonable access to the media in general and to the publicly-owned radio and television in particular. They repeatedly gave expression to resentment at what they felt was biased reporting on radio and television. They also alleged that their electoral activities and pronouncements were being blacked out by the official media.

We were surprised at the number of complaints which reached us on this matter. Indeed, this became one of the most contentious issues during the campaign. We consider that arrangements to ensure that all parties have equal access to the media are always an important indicator of the strength of the commitment to the democratic process. The media in a democracy has a crucial role to play in informing voters of the programmes and policies of all political parties. Shortly after our arrival, therefore, we issued a statement pointing out that there was a noticeable imbalance in the reporting of the election on radio and television and that we would hope to see greater exposure given to the activities of the opposition parties in the publicly owned media (see *Annex XII*).

Although the complaints against the print media were less strong, it did not take us long to realise that there was a widely shared perception that the print media, too, was not impartial, and was by no means as free as it appeared on the surface. It was clear that every newspaper and magazine was identified by the public as supporters of, or affiliated to, a party or an ethnic group, which meant that the media generally was understood as being partisan.

The media in Kenya is well-established and relatively well-endowed and should have been in a commanding position to play an important role in the structuring of the country's democratic institutions. It was our hope that both the print and electronic media would make strenuous efforts to be more even-handed in their coverage of the election campaign, so as to inform voters and politicians about their new responsibilities in a democratic society.

Adequate information about the policies put forward by the political parties was not being provided to voters. No serious efforts were made to analyse or criticise any of the economic or social programmes being canvassed in the campaign. With one or two notable exceptions, therefore, party leaders were

not assessed in a serious manner, for their socio-economic and nation-building programmes.

The Print Media

This failure to take a vigorous position on political issues characterises the media in many developing countries. Newspapers and radio in these societies were originally controlled by the colonial authorities and handed over to the incoming governments at the time of Independence. As one-party rule became the norm in Africa, strict government controls tended to be maintained over the media; thus in many countries, newspapers and particularly radio and television functioned as outlets for government propaganda.

Kenya had managed in earlier years, and even later on, to escape the full impact of this. While the publicly owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation monopolised the electronic media, the print media included two privately-owned newspapers and several independent weekly news-magazines. The two leading English-language daily newspapers, the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, are owned by foreign interests and have succeeded in maintaining a modicum of independence. The third newspaper, the *Kenya Times*, is closely linked to the ruling party, and is therefore a firm and unabashed supporter of the party, reflecting the views of the Government. There is also a parallel, vigorous and widely read Swahili press, published by these newspapers.

In their election coverage, the *Nation* and *Standard* made commendable attempts to be even-handed and to present a coherent overall picture of the campaign. It is true that as the date of the election approached, the media became increasingly open. However, in the print media a certain degree of self-censorship continued to prevail while radio and television remained overtly partisan to the end. This was a great disappointment to us.

Every day, the newspapers were full of articles detailing the 'dirty tricks' being practised during the campaign. It seemed to us that emphasis was placed on the more sensational side of the elections. There was a plethora of daily reports of candidates being kidnapped, voters being bribed, voters' cards being purchased, candidates being forced or persuaded to defect from one party to another, and political killings taking place in certain areas of the country.

Little effort was made to investigate and report fully on the reasons for the outbreak of violence. There were few interviews with or photographs of the thousands of internal refugees, widely believed to have been reduced to living in distressing circumstances in makeshift camps. This should normally have been a big story in any national media. We regret that the Kenyan media has failed to take adequate note of this ongoing story of a grim tragedy. It was not a reassuring picture of a country standing on the threshold of democracy and it showed that the newspapers were unable or unwilling to tackle some of the serious political issues which faced the country.

Fortunately, the media in Kenya is greatly strengthened by a number of excellent weekly and monthly news-magazines, which are edited and written by dedicated and independent local journalists. The leaders in this field are the *Weekly Review*, *Finance* and *Society*, all providing well-researched and lively articles on the candidates and parties.

The failure of the newspapers to speak out forcefully on these issues has led us to conclude that journalists in Kenya are still unable to express their views as freely as would be expected in a society with a truly free press. The reasons for this are understandable. It is no secret that in the past, many journalists were harshly treated by the Government for stepping out of line and daring to question the certainties of the one-party state and the entrenched ruling party. Independent-minded journalists have been detained, prosecuted for sedition and have been deprived of their jobs. The Government has continued to seize copies of, or to ban, publications with articles considered critical of the State.

Some editors have paid a price for their candour. In recent months, people like Pius Nyamara of *Society*, Blamuel Njururi of the *Monthly Observer* and Njehu Gatabaki of *Finance* have been arrested on various charges. Mr Gatabaki is still facing a charge of sedition.

These points have regretfully to be made here, as there is a perception in Kenya that the media is free. When we met President Moi he told us that it was "the freest in the world". We hope that, with the advent of democracy, this statement will become a reality.

There is also a wide range of foreign newspapers, books and magazines widely available in Kenya. Over 100 journalists representing foreign news organisations are based in Nairobi. During the election campaign they were able to provide an additional source of information regarding what was happening throughout the country.

Radio and Television

The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) transmits radio and television broadcasts in several languages including English and Swahili while the recently established Kenya Television Network (KTN) has introduced a second television channel for their viewers. For decades, KBC has devoted its news coverage to chronicling the comings and goings of the President, his Ministers and various government functionaries. It will need, as time goes by, to begin the process of broadening its coverage of events throughout the country. KTN is said to be privately-owned, but it remains dependent upon, and therefore supportive of, the Government. Its election coverage, like that of the KBC, was tilted in favour of the ruling party.

We were told that it was only after the most vigorous complaints by opposition parties that the KBC began, in the final weeks of the campaign, to give regular coverage to political statements and meetings of the opposition parties. This coverage invariably began with reports of the President and

Ministers carrying out official duties, followed by footage of the KANU campaign. KBC also gave extensive coverage to defections from other parties to KANU, ignoring defections from KANU to the opposition parties. KTN sometimes carried stories of these defections from KANU.

An independent group,⁴ has made an analysis of the airtime provided to the various parties starting in late October and ending on 23 and 24 December. It has analysed KBC RADIO 7 p. m. news, KBC TV 10 p.m. and KTN 9 p.m. news. The results indicate that KANU was given a disproportionate amount of the time devoted to election coverage. On KBC TV, KANU had up to half of the allotted time, with the three leading contenders being given between 5 per cent and 1.5 per cent of the time. As regards the Radio network, KANU received nearly six times as much airtime as the opposition combined. On KTN the airtime given to KANU was slightly more than the three others combined.

Conclusion

It is regrettable that efforts were not made early enough by the Electoral Commission to encourage the media to adopt guidelines for impartial coverage. This would have gone a long way to allay some of the criticisms of the media which surfaced during the campaign. Many Commonwealth countries have successfully worked out schemes which allow political parties free-time access to the media through party political broadcasts and other arrangements.

Several of the political parties complained to us that they could not afford to pay the cost of advertising in newspapers and on radio and television. We were told that the advertisement tariff was prohibitive.⁵ This no doubt explains why KANU advertisements were the most frequent, leading to the charge that this unfairness stemmed from the KANU party having access to unlimited funds.

Whenever we raised these matters with the Electoral Commission and the Information Ministry, the standard official response was that there was no great pressure from the opposition parties for a media code of conduct, that this matter had never been pressed by them and that, indeed, the opposition had been better served in the indigenous language press than in the national English-language dailies.

We need to keep in perspective the role of the media, by examining the figures about its outreach. With the exception of radio, the outreach of all other sectors of the media, across the countryside, is somewhat limited. As far as we could discover, the circulation figures for the independent newspapers are approximately 188,000 for the *Nation*, 75,000 for *The Standard* and much smaller

⁴ The Professional Committee for Democratic Change (PCDC), a local non-governmental organisation.

⁵ Information provided by the Ministry of Information showed that the cost of a noon-time advertisement on TV was KSh 4,000 per minute, prime time radio in Swahili was KSh 5,000 and in English KSh 5,000. The cost of a half-page advertisement in the newspapers was KSh 60,000.

for the *Times*. The leading Swahili weekly newspaper commands a circulation of about 70,000. TV is limited to urban areas and recent estimates given to us by the Ministry of Information put the number of TV sets at 300,000 – covering about 1.5 million people – and the number of radios at five million.

It is estimated that one in nearly 200 Kenyans owns a TV and one in five a radio. As in most developing countries, there is much sharing of newspapers and radios, and the news is rapidly disseminated through an efficient word-of-mouth process. The level of access to newspapers, radio and television continues to remain low for such a modern country.

There is much scope for improvement in this regard. The stirrings of democratic freedoms are bound to have a beneficial impact on this aspect of national life.