

**AUDIENCES' INTERPRETATION OF EDITORIAL
CARTOONS AND CARTOONIST'S INTENTIONS IN THE
RUN-UP TO THE 2013 GENERAL ELECTION IN KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to establish how editorial cartoons were interpreted ahead of the 2013 General Elections with regard to cartoonist intentions. The study was guided by the Social Action Theory of mass media effects with an objective of establishing the intentions of the cartoonist in constructing editorial cartoons. The data consisted of editorial cartoon strips. Six cartoon strips were sampled from the Daily Nation newspaper and the Standard newspaper in Kenya. In-depth Interviews were used to gain insight on the intentions of the cartoonists who constructed the cartoons while questionnaires were used to gather data from the sampled residents of Nakuru municipality. The study found out that an overwhelming number of people view cartoons and to a large extent they are able to interpret the cartoons in line with the cartoonist's intentions. However, there are instances, where the audience interpretation is not in line with cartoonist's intentions and this could present a conflict in the society. It was also established that the messages being passed by the cartoonists are subjective, largely representing the cartoonist's opinion or that of the media house.

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INTRODUCTION

“The primary purpose of political cartoons is to make social and political commentary that simplifies the subtle and often complex underlying issues of a news story,” (Fairrington, 2009:205). This assessment serves to underline the great significance attached to editorial/political cartoons in contemporary society. Feldman (2005) defines an editorial cartoon as a representational or symbolic drawing that makes a satirical, witty, or humorous point about a political subject, be it a topical issue, event, or person. The writer further says that the graphic images in editorial cartoons convey concepts that might otherwise only be thought of in terms of verbal abstractions.

In Kenya, editorial cartoons are mainstay in newspapers, so much so that their place on the op-ed pages is a guaranteed formality. All newspapers in the country adopt a similar page layout with the editorial cartoons prominently displayed in the op-ed pages near the beginning of the paper. The fact that they are situated at the heart of the paper’s opinion and editorial page, laying out the paper’s take on socio-political issues marks editorial cartoons as the virtual mouthpiece of the paper providing editorial direction (Jimoh, 2010). The impact of mass media in Kenya, more so newspapers, as Ogunda (1992) notes, is far-reaching in society. This is because they are used as sources of information. A majority of Kenyans perceive the mass media as one of the most credible institutions in society because of media’s relentless fight to expose graft and other social evils. The mass media are ahead of Government institutions such as the police, Parliament, and the judiciary. Newspapers are important to Kenyan society because they are pervasive much more than any other forms of mass media. They are widely read and are a source of political information. During election periods, Kenyan newspapers are bound to have headlines with political leanings more than any other period. This underscores their importance to the public, both the electorate and the aspirants, as a platform to articulate and access various opinions and agenda of different political parties and personalities.

Despite editorial cartoons occupying such hallowed space in Kenyan newspapers, not much attention is paid to what impact if at all they have on the opinions of the readers especially with regard to political occurrences in society (Thorndike, 2003). In the op-ed pages, editorial cartoons are arguably the most visible section of the editorials, more so because of their visual appeal in relation to the flat text of the editorial. They serve a purpose more important than providing visual balance to the page which is usually bereft of photographs and other graphics.

They are the face, as it were, of the editorial – they underscore what the newspaper thinks is the most important social issue of the day hence playing an agenda-setting role (Coleman & Dennis, 2009). A study of their impact on political opinions is important, more so when back-grounded against such important historical occurrences as the 2007 post-election violence.

Editorial cartoons as a means of communication are very subjective. Indeed, Hess and Northrop (2011:11) say that good cartoons and cartoonists should be “unabashedly subjective.” Bohl (1997) says that political cartoons are inherently negative, critical, and cynical. He says that the editorial cartoonist’s role is to engender thought and inspire action amongst his audience. Honest criticism of the people in power should be his mantra. The political cartoonist must first and foremost have a political opinion to put across, and then have the courage to state the opinion (Bohl, 1997). The point here is that editorial cartoonists must have a political opinion and are required to put it across.

Shiveley and VanFossen (2001) identify the key questions whose answers help in interpreting editorial cartoons thus;

- i. What is the news event being promoted in the editorial cartoon and why now (motive)?
- ii. What is the literal meaning of the cartoon (overt meaning as opposed to implied meaning)?
- iii. What caricatures are used in the cartoon to represent who or what?
- iv. What is the editorial comment being made by the cartoonist (intended meaning)?

The motive of the editorial cartoon and its timing helps to identify potential biases that the publisher may be interested in bringing about amongst the audience. This assessment is necessary to decipher the relevance of the cartoon to the issues of the day. It may also help in identifying agenda-setting behaviour of the publisher. McCombs (2004) says that mass media audiences only get a second-hand reality from journalists and media outlets who structure reports about events and situations. The media influences what part of an event forms realistic news and how the news is conveyed to consumers (Cogan & Kelso, 2009). He describes agenda-setting as the careful orchestration of events and affairs such that the public is forced to focus their attention to those particular events as depicted by the media, and further, in the particular manner they are depicted. Media consumers are thereby “duped” into believing that the issues as depicted in newspaper and TV news are of particular relevance to them. It is in much the same

way that editorial cartoons work in ensuring that the issues in focus stay in the domain of public discourse.

Agenda setting in editorial cartoons makes the audience to focus their attention on the particular person or issue depicted in the cartoons and cultivates an environment where public discourse on the issue or person is encouraged, as has been earlier established. Further, the cartoons ensure that the political discourse is carried out in a manner dictated by the cartoon by driving the emotive content of discussion and prescribing the nature, tempo, and urgency of argument to suit a certain political objective. This much can be seen from the above arguments. The general effect, therefore, of the generation and guidance of political discourse in the public domain using politically targeted messages is to band together public opinion on given issues. This creates a situation where public opinion is swayed either to support or reject a given political candidate or issue through the emotions engendered by the editorial cartoons.

METHODOLOGY

The study interviewed 16 University staffs of Mount Kenya University, Nakuru Campus, 9 Hawkers in Nakuru Town and 9 members of the civil society (NGOS) operating within Nakuru town. All the questionnaires from the 32 respondents and 3 interview schedules were received back. After sorting and screening, all were found to be valid representing a 100% response rate. This was possible since the questionnaires were administered in person by the researcher who, after administering the questionnaire, waited for the respondent to complete and collected them immediately. This ensured that the sample size as was originally designed remained the same thereby ensuring representativeness of the target population and validity of the result of the study.

DATA PRESENTATION

Trends in reading Daily Newspapers

Since the invention of the daily newspapers in Kenya in 1959 *The Daily Nation* has grown to Kenya's most visible daily newspaper followed by *The Standard*. Between them, the two dailies command a majority following in the country. This study sought to find out whether

the respondents indeed read the daily newspapers to authenticate their eligibility to participate in the investigation of the problem under study.

Table 4.1: Trends in reading newspapers

| Have you been reading Daily newspapers for the last two years? | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Yes | 32 | 100.0 |

From the findings of the study, all the study respondents 32 (100%) were found to have been reading consistently reading the daily newspapers and particularly, the Daily Nation and the Standard newspapers, the sampled media houses for the study.

Parts of the newspaper read

The respondents were asked to indicate which parts of the daily newspapers they read mostly and their responses were as shown in the table 4.3 below.

Table 4.2: Parts of the newspaper read

| Which parts of the newspaper do you mostly read? | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Political Editorials | 26 | 81.3 |
| Business editorials | 17 | 53.1 |
| Cartoon editorials | 31 | 96.9 |
| Sports editorials | 16 | 50.0 |
| other | 4 | 12.5 |

From the study findings, of the 32 interviewed respondents, an overwhelming majority 31 (97%) read cartoon editorials this a good representation because the study sought their interpretation of the cartoon editorials however, beside that they also read other parts of the newspaper with 26 (81%) read political editorials, 17 (53%) read business editorials and half of the respondents 16 (50%) saying they read sports editorials. In addition, 4(13%) of the respondents did indicate they read other parts of the newspapers mostly education columns, commentaries by analysts and regular columnists, current highlights on topical issues such as marriage in Saturday magazine and the Cutting Edge.

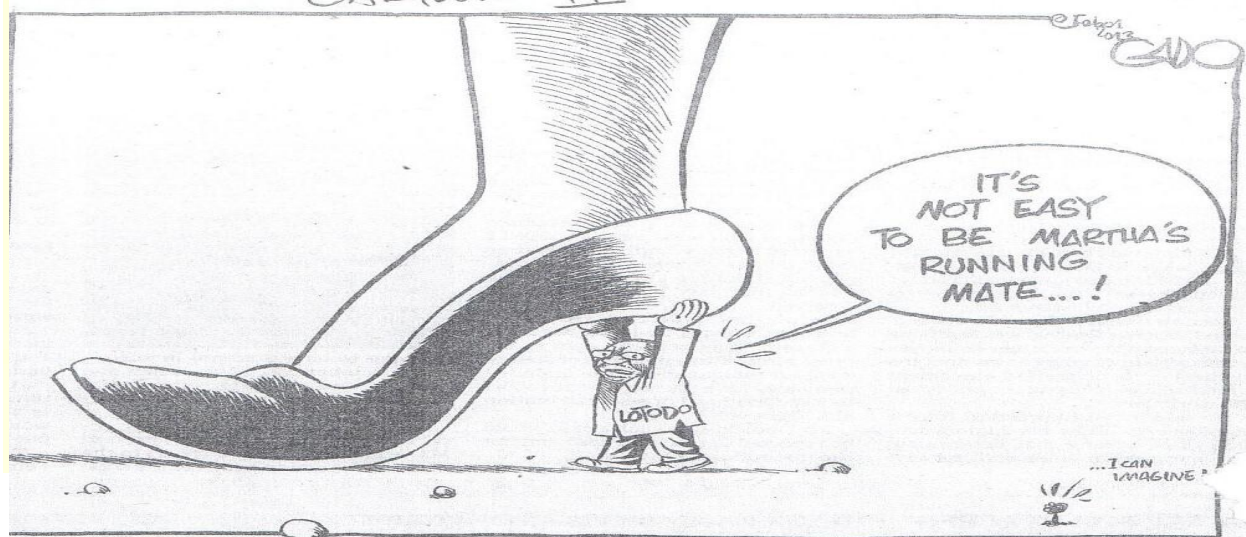
Intention of the Cartoonists

According to Mwampembwa, political cartoons, over the centuries have been used to provoke thoughts. They are supposed to say something and or pass a message, though the messages are hidden in humour. They are supposed to lampoon political leaders and other famous people. From the cartoonist's interview, he clarified to the researcher that he did not intend to attract readers to the newspaper by drawing cartoons that they like, rather his core business was to pass the message he wishes to pass. "I am not in the business of pleasing people. If my cartoons succeed in making the audience to laugh the better and if they annoy them, so be it, after all cartoons are supposed to antagonize some people," he said. He said that editorial cartoons have a license to point out what people fear to say and they are also meant to provoke thoughts and not, as many perceive, making the audience laugh. On whether his work is edited before publishing, the cartoonist confirmed having editors who go through it and when they feel something is too sensitive, they comment to have it toned down. He was however quick to add that they don't decide for him what to draw on.

Cartoon I: With regard to the cartoon strip I, the cartoonist did indicate he used simple self-explanatory symbolism which refers to Hon. Raila with his cronies. For him, his intentions were simply to mean that during that ODM party nomination; there was nepotism, cronyism and favouritism in favour of those close to the former PM. He also intended to say the nomination process was marred by violence and lack of transparency. He identified the cronies as, Otieno Kajwang, Anyang Nyon'go, Ruth Odinga, Jakoyo Midiwo and Oburu Odinga, all of whom were vying for various elective positions in the last elections. He went ahead to identify other objects and images used as: stones, teargas canisters and flies indicating violence and a 'dirty' nomination process.



Cartoon II: In this cartoon, the cartoonist identified the characters used as Martha Karua's giant leg being supported by her then running mate for the presidency, Mr. Augustine Lotodo. The interpretation he gave was that it was not easy for Mr. Lotodo to help Hon Karua win the election. It was an uphill task for him to mobilize any votes for her since she was not a top contender for the presidency and because Lotodo was a non-starter in national politics.



Cartoon III: According to the cartoonist, I E B C officials are covering their noses as they receive nomination certificates from various candidates. He said he wanted to pass the message that, even though the party nomination was evidently a sham, marred by corruption, violence, bribery and other social ills, the I E B C officials had no choice but to accept those candidates

who he described as “actually stinking to the high heavens”. The flies and arrows show that there was violence and unclean practices that bedeviled the party primaries.



Regarding Cartoon IV, Eric Ngamau, whose pseudonym is Gammz, the Standard Cartoonist who did the cartoon strip, told the researcher that at the time he drew the cartoon, party nominations had just ended and those who had lost in the contest for nomination slots rushed to smaller parties to get direct nominations after paying for or buying the nomination certificates. This showed how Kenyan political obsession with power and self-centeredness was heightened as opposed to serving Kenyan people.

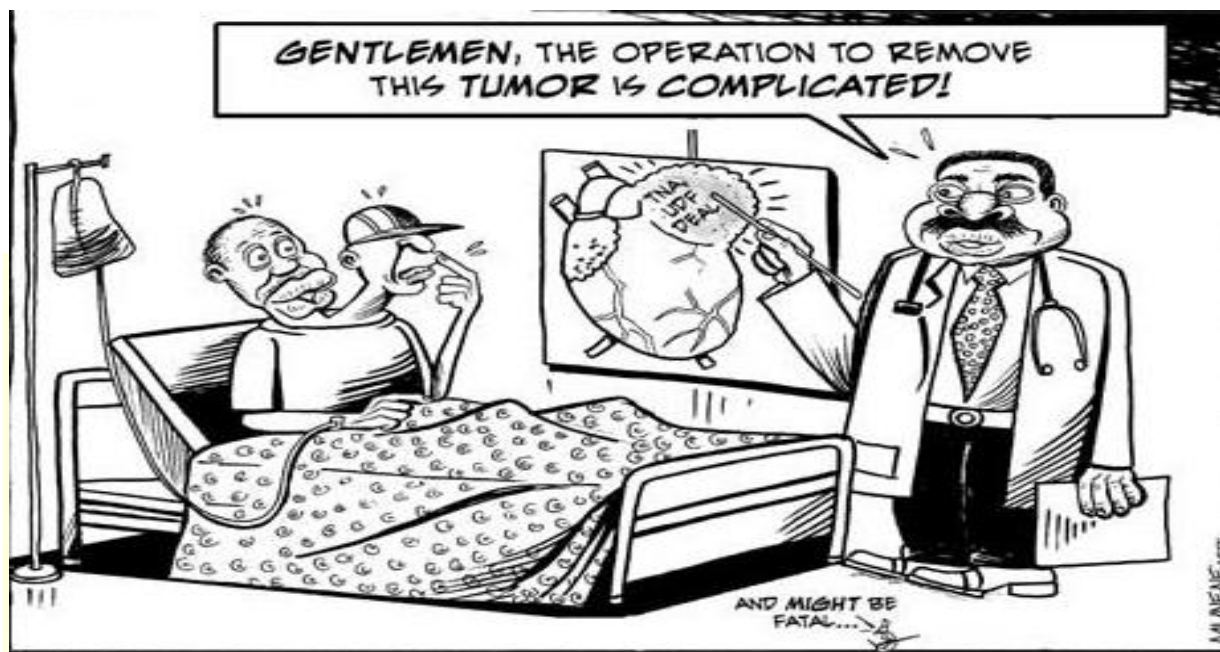


On intentions of cartoon V, Michael Munene, also the standard newspaper cartoonist said Bensouda the ICC prosecutor at that particular time had just released fresh evidence against the two ICC suspects among the four with pending cases at The Hague. He told the researcher that he wanted to say it was not going to be easy for Ruto and President Uhuru the then contestants for the presidency to attain their political dreams especially given the fact that they were seeking the highest office in the country. Thus the tough choices they were facing at the moment would compromise their ambition.



Cartoon VI depicts honorable Musalia Mudavadi the then Presidential candidate who had just entered a political deal with Uhuru and Ruto. The cartoonist told the researcher he wanted to portray Uhuru and Ruto as selfish people who only wanted to use Mudavadi and UDF party to their advantage until the time for coalitions formation was over. This would mean that Mr. Mudavadi would not have the chance to join hands with any other political party or coalition and the only option would be for him and his party to go it alone in the general elections. This strategic step by Uhuru and Ruto would ensure votes especially in western Kenya were divided and therefore give Jubilee coalition carry the day in the 2013 general elections. In how he came up with cartoon editorial characters, he said he develops them so that they are explicit enough

with the message he wants to pass across such that even without additional writings, the audiences and readers can get the message at once.



The interpretations of editorial cartoons by readers

Despite a slight variation in responses as to the characters and images used in the cartoon strips, most of the respondents were able to positively identify the characters and images in concurrence with the cartoonist. In Cartoon I: most of the responses, both that of the cartoonist and the residents' responses indicated that characters used were Hon. Raila Odinga with his political cronies. They named more characters in the cartoon (concurring with the cartoonist) as Anyang Nyong'o, Ruth Odinga, Jakoyo Midiwo and Oburu Odinga. The responses from the audiences concurred with the intentions of the cartoonist in that, both sides said Odinga favoured his cronies and kinsmen for various seats in the nominations and that there was nepotism and no party democracy and transparency especially during the nomination exercise.

On Cartoon II all the responses were the same as those of the cartoonist when it came to identifying the characters used in the cartoon. They all rightly identified Hon. Martha Karua and her running mate Hon Lotodo. However, most responses from the audience on this particular cartoon indicated that Hon. Martha Karua was a dictator, domineering and intolerant especially to men. The respondents here failed to rightly interpret the cartoons according to the cartoonist's

intentions. The cartoonist told the researcher he simply wanted to say that it was not easy for Mr. Lotodo to help Hon Karua to win the presidency because he was not famous enough to attract votes.

All responses on Cartoon III were as per the intentions of the cartoonist as they said IEBC officials accepted nominations certificates that were a result of a bungled nomination exercise. Some respondents pointed an accusing finger at IEBC for accepting the certificates while in full knowledge that they were attained undemocratically. On the part of the cartoonist he said that the I E B C officials were covering their noses as they received the nomination certificates saying he wanted to show that the exercise was a sham but the officials had no choice but to accept those certificates. The elections were marred by corruption, violence, bribery and other social ills, and he put it that the nominees were “actually stinking to the high heavens”.

For cartoon strip IV the data collected from respondents from Nakuru municipality correlated with the Cartoonist's intentions. They both said that politicians were not loyal to their political parties and that they practiced selfish politics, where they put their interests before the interests of the public.

For cartoon V, both the interpretations of the cartoonist and that of the audiences said that new evidence adduced by the prosecutor would dampen the political ambitions of the presidential candidate Mr. Uhuru and Ruto who were facing charges against humanity. This particular cartoon generated a lot of debate at the time, considering that internationally a possible presidency of the ICC suspects was being received with mixed signals particularly the United States of America. This is exemplified by the former US secretary in charge of African affairs John Carson's warning to Kenyans that their political choices had consequences.

With regard to Cartoon VI, the respondents' responses also agreed with the cartoonist's intentions with most of the responses pointing out that Musalia Mudavadi and his political allies Uhuru and Ruto were in a pre-election deal that would see power sharing after they win election. As indicated by the cartoonist, his intention was to depict Mudavadi as a politician who had been duped. According the cartoonist, Mudavadi was meant to believe he would be allowed to be president. The respondents in their views said that Uhuru and Ruto were dishonest, mischievous and selfish and they plotted to exploit Mudavadi and UDF party for their own political selfish ends. This study therefore found out that to a very large extent, interpretations given by the respondents on the cartoons appearing in the dailies are in line with the intentions of the

cartoonists who construct them. However, there may come up instances when slight variations in interpretations of these cartoons may occur. This may stir up emotions depending on how audiences perceive the messages in the cartoons and may cause conflict as that witnessed in 2007/2008.

Summary of the Findings

The study confirmed the Social Action theory, which holds that the media and the audience influence each other in a social setting. The audience shapes the content of the media through social action as media shapes actions of the audience through their content. The study also found out that cartoons have the potential to engender acrimony and even violence as the cartoonist admitted to the researcher that he had several pending court cases against him as a result of the cartoons he did. It shows those individuals were agitated and in the absence of legal option they would use violence or other criminal methods to pay back for their perceived unfairness from the cartoonist

Cartoons are largely subjective and propagate the view of the cartoonist. In many cases the top management of the newspaper organization only rubber stamps them. The cartoonist said even though there are editors who look at his work, they don't tell him what to draw on.

The study also found out that cartoons are not always interpreted rightly and the intended message is sometimes missed by readers. This was evidenced when the sampled respondents failed to correctly interpret cartoon II that caricatured Narc Kenya's presidential candidate in the last elections Hon. Martha Karua and her running mate Mr. Augustine Lotodo. This is particularly important as it shows there is a risk of audiences misinterpreting cartoons and in a way that may cause disharmony in the society and even contribute to the kind of violence witnessed in 2007/2008. Lastly, the study found out that an overwhelming number of people take editorial cartoons as sources of information. 100 per cent of the respondents said they view editorial cartoons.

CONCLUSIONS

The researcher concluded that cartoons are indispensable in newspapers and readers always seek them out to get messages from them. There are also subjective as they advance either the intentions of the cartoonist drawing them or the media house publishing them. Readers are more likely to miss an editorial written by the management of the media house than they are to miss the cartoon. This is because of its graphic or visual quality that pulls readers to it. They

are used as a medium of passing hidden yet important information that the general public would need to know. Cartoons are largely interpreted according to the intentions of their drawer since cartoonists endeavor to use clear imagery to hammer their messages home. Messages in cartoons are therefore received once by readers. However the disclaimer is that there are instances when cartoons can be misinterpreted by the audience. This happens when readers fail to attach the right meanings to cartoons. This misinterpretation is recipe to conflict in the society depending on how the audience interprets them, especially if the cartoons are perceived to be attacking a loved politician by a section of the population or community or a tribal king pin.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made;

- v. Given the massive utilization of cartoons as information dissemination tools as proved by this study, and the fact that the cartoons are largely subjective, there should be policies and regulations that govern use of these cartoons to avert polarization of the society. Being allowed a free will to say what they feel like through cartoons may occasion antagonizing messages to find their way into the newspaper. More so given the possibility of misinterpretation of cartoons by readers as exemplified by the wrong interpretation of the cartoon involving Martha Karua and her running mate Mr. Augustine Lotodo, there is a real risk of disharmony arising hence the need of regulation of the use of cartoons.

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