

**MEDIA IMPACT ON THE GREAT LAKES
CONFLICT 1993-1998**

BY

CHRISTINE OUMA NABWIRE

**A PROJECT PAPER IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER OF
ARTS DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
AT THE INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
SEPTEMBER 2006**

**UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
EAST AFRICANA COLLECTION**

University of NAIROBI Library



0444319 8

**JOMO KENYATTA MEMORIAL
LIBRARY**

ABSTRACT

In the past media used to play a crucial role in relaying information to the public. The mandate to give unbiased information made it possible for governments to provide security for people living in various regions of the country.

The news media is the most significant type of communication that can be entrusted with all the functions of communication in a democratic society. No democracy can run without free press. Press freedom protects the citizens by providing them with an informed choice so that they in turn make an informed decision.

The press has the ability to determine what to report, when to report it, how to tailor the information, and where it will be published. It remains a powerful tool of influencing people's minds and their decisions; an informed choice could as well be a misinformed choice. The prevailing political culture, the level of economic strength and independence enjoyed by the press, the ownership structure and the level of professional training and education of journalists are among the key factors affecting press freedom today not only in our country but in the world at large.

Communication is an integral part of security, without its proper management people get anxious and start to spread rumors leading to a wave of violence. Very often people make use of the media to attack opponents, spread disinformation or misinformation, or to rally external and internal support. Therefore the need for good information on political process is underlined by the fact that interest groups who manipulate crisis may also manipulate the information surrounding the crisis.

This was seen in the 2005 proposed Constitution referendum campaigns in Kenya and election campaigns in the greater where opposing factions have been aired in our media hurling accusations and even physical objects at their opponents as a result the public has also started taking sides and causing disturbances during referendum campaigns. Factions have capitalized on media reports through radio, television and print houses and use them to propagate propaganda among the populace.

The media shapes opinions and decisions related to the nature and scope of conflicts and insecurity, as well as how to constructively handle actual and potential conflicts. Where social, political and economic conflicts have degenerated into widespread violence, the role of information in mitigating the effects of violence or in presenting alternatives remains crucial. Kenyan media is set within a democratic system that allows the establishment of privately owned

media houses. It is therefore mandatory to make good use of the trust the people of Kenya have put in media to inform and not to inflame society.

The role and importance of media in modern society can not be under estimated. The media put us in touch with the world beyond our immediate experience, while significantly changing our perception and beliefs, particularly in relation to events and topics with which we have little direct contact. For example Kenyans are relying on the media to inform them on the Constitution. However it has been noted that less of educating is going on as compared to reports on the propaganda filled political campaigns.

Institutions should assume responsibilities for the consequences of their actions. Within the context of the media, this implies that media practitioners should act at all times with the best interest of the society in mind. The main impetus of the social responsibility function of the media is the growing awareness that in some important respects, the free market has failed to fulfill the promise of press freedom and to deliver the expected benefits to the society.

With the rise of FM radio stations and increased television channels, there is need for control and accountability that only the media can deliver, in order to reconcile independence with obligation to society. Media control and ownership should therefore be viewed as a kind of public stewardship and not a private

franchise. Under private ownership, media is not only responsible to the consumer and shareholder, but also to the society at large. Three principles are evident here: that of individual freedom and choice, as well as those of media freedom and media obligation to the society.

Broadcasting is of great influence and the most powerful tool of attitude change in the world. This was seen in the Rwanda genocide, where a horrendous act against humanity was committed. It is therefore the obligation of media owners to ensure that a level playing ground as well as a reconciliatory role is achieved to bring a common understanding.

Media influence is increasingly significant because it constitutes a major human resource with the potential to help prevent and moderate social processes. Objectivity and impartiality of journalists is the key to professionalism. They should report facts and truth from a neutral and objective viewpoint and not to promote a particular social or political worldview.

Media reports, affect people's perceptions and plays with people's emotions depending on the angle the journalists have chosen to report. This angle could mean that people get upset at what is happening and as a result cause a reaction, if the report convinces them that they are in danger. Media could also be used to calm people down through fair reporting and reporting the mediation

processes leading to peace as well as reassuring the public on the security situation therefore leading to a calm environment.

Media has a capacity to reach large and influential portions of a given population in the shortest possible time, and to provide factual information, analysis and opinion. It helps in shaping popular perceptions of the nature of a society in terms of basic human rights. Media transforms the ideas of freedom of opinion and expression into a concrete reality, by being able to openly communicate information and ideas and by acting as a watchdog on public institutions and leaders.

As a watchdog, the media should give credit where it is due and criticism where appropriate. Acting as a watchdog, the media should give an early warning when there is potential danger. By heeding the early warnings and sounding the alarm, the media could act as a powerful tool in conflict management and prevention thus provide the required impact in conflict de-escalation and security.

All conflicts start as a misunderstanding or tension between and among groups. If not quickly recognized for what they are or their potential, they can and do eventually explode to engulf a larger section of the community or nation.

Therefore press freedom should be exercised with the caution it deserves as a noble and crucial partner in democracy.

It is the role of media to help build a democratic country by reporting relevant factual and necessary information while exposing the dangers, and campaigning for the restoration or redress of the situation, before it gets out of control. This way, media becomes a powerful instrument for defusing conflict.

Where there are racial or tribal undertones, the media's instinct for danger should stay alert to the fact that handling the situation as a usual story could trigger off conflict or an uprising. The accomplishments of the country would fade with the rise of human anger. A word is all that is required for a nation to declare war against another nation or for an ethnic group to massacre the other ethnic group: such is the power of a single word.

Media therefore remains the instrument of speedy conveyance to the masses. However, in many instances correct and objective reporting by the media has effectively been used as a gatekeeper and an early warning system of looming conflicts, in such instances media has deescalated conflict.

Today there are only two sets of media standards. These are the conscience of those who own and run the media and the expressed demands of the consumers. However it remains a fact that there are no rights that go without responsibility. In order to enjoy press freedom, media has to be dedicated to reporting objectively, impartially and with the interest of the audience at heart.