The Relationship Between News Content Tabloidization and Political Polarization in *The Standard* Newspaper, Kenya

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to examine the relationship between news content tabloidization and political polarization in the standard newspaper in Kenya. The need for this study was prompted by the fact that the definition of tabloidization and its causes have been limited and non-inclusive enough. While not disputing the fact that tabloid content sells more than elitist journalism, this paper seeks to explain how political polarization can induce tabloidization of the national news. Tabloidization of news content has been restricted to mean only the placement of personal news, scandal, human suffering, celebrities and sport, all of which is categorized as soft news, in a space reserved for national political and economic news which is categorized as hard news. This study broadens the concept of tabloidised content to include ambivalent opinion, personalization of official conflict and the use of the public discussion forum approach to polemize concrete facts. The study links political polarization in Kenya to the increased prevalence of this phenomenon. The theoretical perspective used as the background of the study is the agenda setting theory and Harbemas' public sphere concept .The methodology involved the qualitative analysis of selected news items of The Standard newspaper representing a time period ranging from 1995 when there was a relative political cohesion in the Kenya, to 2015, when the country is politically polarized. The study succeeded in linking political polarization to an increase in tabloidization of news content in The Standard newspaper.
Keywords: Agenda Setting, Public Sphere, Polarization.

INTRODUCTION

Tabloidization has been defined as " the dumbing down of news by moving the focus from the public to the personal and the concentration on scandal, sensation and human suffering at the expense of politics and economics. This definition is rather simplistic, because it implies that tabloid reading is apolitical. This could also be inaccurate given that tabloidised news material can engage in political debate, featuring national issues and personalities to the same extent as do the elitist spreadsheets. The tabloidized elements can be brought in when the writers report the news items from a personal angle, personalizing any political arguments involved, inducing skepticism and cynicism by implying that what is reported is not the truth but is open to debate. A second issue that problematises the conventional understanding of tabloidization is the simplistic explanation of the propensity to tabloidize as arising solely from the urge to make greater sales.

Fiske [1] argues that the difference between the tabloid and elitist approaches is that while the elitist press aims at producing a believing reader, by presenting news as undisputable truth, the tabloid presents the news as a semi allegation, introducing a controversy. According to Blumler and Gurevitch [2] this approach makes the reader more cynical than informed. Elitist journalism thrives in a climate of political calm. It also does best in a climate of spontaneous nationalism or a political stability induced by a strong dictatorship. In a situation where press freedom is exercised against the background of polarizing partisanism, reporting of news tends to move from the informative to the controversial. Partisanism affects the way the public handles the truth. Recently the Obama administration attempted to introduce legislation aimed at controlling gun ownership in the US. This was in reaction to the rise in mass shootings by deranged lone gunmen. The victims are usually nursery school children and their teachers cornered in their classroom or a church congregation . Helpless victims absorbed in learning or worship are sprayed with bullets. If logic was the sole factor guiding public opinion, the bloody shootings would become a uniting factor, galvanizing public opinion against uncontrolled gun ownership. But this was far from the truth. Members of the opposition Republican Party opposed the potentially life saving legislation, accusing Obama and his ruling Democratic Party of infringing on the traditional American habit of carrying and using guns.

Possibly if a Republican was the one who had suggested that guns be regulated, the party members would have supported him.

Kenya's politics have transformed from calm and cohesive during the days of one party dictatorship, when a form of nationalism was enforced by the state, to the ever growing ethnic based polarization during the multi party era. From the days of the first president, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya remained a one party state for over twenty years. Though the country became a dejure multiparty state after a constitutional amendment, a de facto one party situation persisted until the second president, Daniel Moi who headed KANU, the party that had ruled the nation since independence, was defeated by the opposition NARC alliance. This alliance began to breaks up two years after taking power. A referendum was held aimed at approving a proposed new constitution. A faction of NARC legislators voting under the orange symbol voted against the proposed constitution. The president happened to be in the faction supporting the draft constitution, voting under the banana symbol. The anti draft constitution orange faction won. The draft was rejected. This referendum marked the beginning of political polarization and intolerance in Kenya. The Orange faction was bundled out of the ruling NARC alliance. They formed the Orange Democratic Party (ODM) which lost the next general elections to the banana group that had regrouped into a new party, PNU (Party of National Unity). The results were contested by ODM. This resulted in skirmishes that left thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced.

This political polarization has created a partisan, cynical newspaper readership, individuals ready to support any move or utterance by a public figure, provided that the actor or speaker belongs to their political grouping [3, 4]. The press responds by becoming ambivalent. The resultant tabloidization is in the form of a cynical presentation of the truth, the personalizing of public conflict and the reduction of concrete issues to departure points of conjecture.

The Standard newspaper is an established spreadsheet, the second largest in Kenya and practicing elitist journalism. An examination of its news items has revealed a shift from elitist journalism around 1995, during the days of one party dictatorship to tabloidized content that started around 2005, when multi partyism caused an increase in political polarization. These departures from traditional journalistic practices which can not be explained solely on the basis of a struggle for market share, increased in frequency up to today.

The Public Sphere, Democracy and Tabloidization

Studies have shown that the tabloidization process has resulted in the serious media moving towards the news values of tabloids [5]. However, despite denunciation of tabloids, the extent and exact nature of these changes has been disputed by certain writers [6]. Some have questioned whether these changes have possible damaging consequences for society [7], leading to suggestions that tabloidization damages the public sphere by "transforming journalistic culture from a source of mass enlightenment and civic empowerment to a cause of mass pacification and intellectual degeneration" [8].

At a primary level the function of news is to provide us with an ongoing narrative about the world. From a modernist perspective, the media plays an important role in the democratic process, providing information for citizens necessary to formulate judgment and make informed decisions. In fact, most people in modern democracies receive their news through the mass media, with the media acting as both an input and output of the political system [9]. The media accomplish their input function by publishing facts and opinions of social relevance, indicating how the public feels about problems, people and decisions, while their output role is fulfilled by providing the public with information about decisions, political and social processes and the political system [10]. This creates a mediated public sphere, a place where the public can access societal dialogues [11].

Tabloidization mitigates against the public sphere, by working in opposition to the creation of general truths, general principles, which could guide the formulation and implementation of the necessary regulation of social life [12]. Gripsrud [13] critique of journalism and its role in the public and cultural sphere highlights how journalism is losing its autonomy to economic and market principles. Instead, the public sphere becomes an "arena for spectacle, presented mainly as entertainment", distracting "the public from matters of principle by offering voyeuristic pseudo-insights into individual matters" [14]. Tabloidization places the emphasis on the sensational, the personal and the personality, rather than providing vital information necessary for the public sphere. Without an informed citizenry, "democracy is improvised and at risk" [15].

McLachlan and Golding [16], pioneering study, which carried out a quantitative analysis of tabloidization in the British press by using four operational characteristics, provided an example of how to study this complex area. The characteristics are range, form, mode of address and market structures.

1. **Range:** During tabloidization, it is argued that newspapers move away from 'hard' news towards

'softer' items [17]. By assessing the volume and prominence of various areas of reporting, in terms of subjects, it should be possible to see if there has been a tabloidization of range

2. Form: It has also been suggested that tabloidization has resulted in simplified formats. By examining the layout, pictures, vocabulary, syntax and presentation, it will be possible to assess if this is taking place.

3. Mode of address or style: The tabloidization process results in the press moving away from a self-consciously serious style and mode of address to a style and assumed relationship that is more casual in both tone and language [18]. By assessing the tone of the article and the representation of characters in terms of public or private life, it will be possible to examine if the style has tabloidised over time.

4. Market structure: Tensions, such as competition, in the market place affect the distribution and production decision of media organisations and may result in tabloidization [19]. While this empirical research primarily focused with the first three factors, it is also necessary to take market structure into consideration during the discussion of the results.

McLachlan and Golding [20] presented a content analysis of the major British tabloids over the last decade of the 20th century. Using the conceptual lens of tabloidization and the framework they devised, they analysed content of three British tabloids and two British mainstream newspapers. The findings of McLachlan and Golding showed that the coverage of tabloids can be characterized by a dominance of soft news, by a significant presence of headlines and visuals and a personalized angle of coverage. Over time, the coverage had become more 'tabloidized' in its form and style, but had remained constant in its range of contents. Theoretically, the results indicate that the evolution of tabloid coverage had been heterogeneous, which supported the idea that the press can be in a process of homogenization only in the areas of form and style of coverage, but not in terms of range of content. Moreover, these changes suggested that tabloidization (as a feature directly related to tabloids) should not be considered a static concept.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two theoretical perspectives. The first is the Agenda Setting Theory which states that the media has the ability and the tendency to set agenda for the reading public , influencing them on what to think about and what to treat as important, as well as tilting their opinions about certain issues. This theory explains the thinking behind the sensationalization and scandal mongering which is the stock of trade of tabloid journalism where part of the purpose is to

sway public opinion in a certain direction, vis a vis objective presentation of facts.

This study deals with the effect of political polarization on tabloidization in a traditional spreadsheet. This makes the concept of public spheres as postulated by Habermas relevant as it contributes to the understanding of this study. It is rare to find a discussion of tabloidization that does not accuse it of negatively influencing political communication by simplifying and sensationalizing important issues and at worst provoking a crisis in public communication. Habermas defines a public sphere as a realm of social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed as a necessary requirement for a healthy democracy. According to Harbemas [21], in situations where the public sphere is neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, it will have to rely on the rational debate between private individuals on public matters. Access must be granted to all citizens to take part in this debate. In the situation of the polarized politics of Kenya there is not one but many public spheres. Moreover in the climate of a democratized press, the newspapers are left oscillating between various public spheres. This necessitates the press ambivalence in the handling of public issues. The expansion of political space which came with the multiparty democracy and the attendant polarization, coincided with a granting of press freedom by the government. This created a fluid situation, in which makeshift political alliances sprang up and disintegrated by the day, creating and destroying public spheres in the course of their capricious progress. The reasoning here is that tabloidised news material produces dysfunctional public spheres that have a centrifugal effect on public opinion, escalating political controversy, thriving in divisions and at the same time aggravating them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study makes a qualitative analysis of three aspects of tabloidization of content in *The Standard* newspaper that have become common during the multi party era when society is politically polarized. These aspects include a skeptical handling of hard news. Introducing a "pinch of salt" perspective. The second is the personalization of public conflict. The last is the adding of a discursive aspect to basic truths, making them to appear contentious. The study will assess selected articles from issues of *The Standard* newspaper drawn from the years between 1995 and 2015.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In a politically polarized environment, supporters of the government will always side with any government action , decision or policy. The supporters of the opposition will tend to be critical

of the government, sometimes for the sake of differing with "the enemy." In such a situation the press tends to sit on the fence, presenting news in a fashion that makes them to appear non committal. They can not afford to lose the custom of any of the " warring " sides. The resultant news items will have a skeptical tone, a pseudo objectivity, that makes the reader take in the information with a dubious (pinch of salt) feeling. Articles in *The Standard* in the years after 2004 have this doubtful element, usually with a veiled criticism of some government official or casting doubt on the accuracy of some official claim.

The cynical and skeptical approach can be traced back to the days of relative political cohesion. During that era this approach was used to make attacks against the then weak opposition. A case in point is the article on page 3 of *The Standard* of Monday the 6th of March 1995. He article is entitled : "Opposition Originated in Heaven" It reads: "A catholic priest said yesterday that opposition started in heaven and God tolerated it. Bishop Urbanus Kioko of Machakos Diocese said in Kisumu that pluralism was not a new phenomenon as it existed before creation of mankind. He said God tolerated opposition by allowing Satan to reign over the wicked. Bishop Kioko said that when angel Lucifer defied God and was thrown out of heaven, he became opposition.

In using this news item the Standard is using clever ambivalence and fence sitting. The innuendo on the one part equates the opposition to the behavior of the devil opposing God (the de facto one party regime of the day). This was meant to appease the government of the day, which saw the newly formed opposition parties as devilish detractors. At the same time the government intolerance of the opposition is cleverly criticized by mentioning the fact that God did not wipe out Satan, but allowed him to run his opposition party. (If God Himself is magnanimous enough to allow Satan to operate, who is the government to harass the Kenyans in opposition parties ?)

A more graphic example of the skeptical approach can be seen in the reporting by *The Standard* newspaper of 26th September, about the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the up market Westside Mall in Nairobi. This is now the time of political polarization. The journalist still uses the fence sitting approach but leans a little bit more on the opposition side, courtesy to the relative press freedom compared to the situation in 1995. The reporters showed a minimum of patriotism and a thinly veiled disdain for the government. The first article can be seen on the first column of page 3 of the paper. The heading reads : *Authorities on the spot over Slip Ups* The article reads:

Apparent contradictions in official accounts of the four day siege on Westgate Mall have put authorities on the spot. A classic example was who started the fire that caused plumes of thick black smoke that billowed from the building on Monday. Initially authorities claimed security forces had done it as a tactic but they later blamed it on the attackers. At some point senior government officials and security officials contradicted each other in the open and then made belated alterations under the guise of official information.

The second news item, placed on the extreme right column of the same page 3, is written in a way that raises doubts as to the efficiency of the country's security system. The reporter lists a number of questions about the terror attack which he alleges the government failed to answer convincingly.

It is headed: **The Burning Questions over Attack**. It reads:

Five days after the siege at Westlands Mall, Kenyans remain an expectant people as government officials continue to duck questions from the media, We list some of the questions and responses so far.

Who owns Westgate Mall building? Have they been taken in for questioning?
The mall is owned by Althaus Service Limited. Tenants pay rent to Sony Holdings Limited. Main shareholders are Israelis Alex and Maya Trachtenberg, who refused to talk to the media.

How many hostages died?
President Uhuru said 61 so far but sources say government asked the Red Cross to preserve about 100 body bags. Interior Minister Ole Lenku says there was an insignificant number of a hostage left.

Are there people burnt beyond recognition or buried by debris in the mall?
Response from the government not clear. Troops say terrorists burnt some of their own who died so as to hide identity. There are fears of bodies buried by debris.

How many terrorists were involved and what is their fate?
The government says 11 were captured but not clear if any of them was arrested at the mall. Troops involved in the assault say they shot dead all the terrorists.

Was there a female among the terrorists?
The government issued contradictory statements on whether a female was involved or not. Witnesses say

that they were shot by a female attacker. A soldier claims to have killed the "white widow," Samantha Lewithwaite.

Did any terrorist escape from Westgate?
Inspector General of Police, David Kimaiyo, denies such reports despite a witness seeing someone change clothes before leaving the mall.

Did the attackers rent a shop at the mall?
Sources say they did but information still being investigated.

Was NIS aware of the attack?
Nairobi Senator Mike Sonko claims they were aware. NIS director not talking. News items usually have an element of conflict. Where the conflict is between different official parties on matters of policy or procedure, tabloidised press usually presents the conflict in a manner that portrays it like a personal contest between whoever is officially representing the opposing official viewpoints. In a politically polarized situation, the public is divided into camps akin to those of fans of league football teams who are always engaged in a verbal and sometimes physical conflict when discussing the prowess of their side with the fans of the opposing side. The tabloidised press usually catalyses this conflict with a mischievous glee, in the process boosting their sales. One way of effecting this political catalysis is the sensationalizing of official conflict, especially if it involves key political players on either side of the political divide. The conflict is reported as if it is personal. One way of doing this is the use of headlines that use personal names of the official actors instead of using their official titles.

For example:

Kimunya orders Mbela Land Repossessed (The Standard March 9th page 6) Kimunya was the Minister of Land and was in his official capacity ordering the repossession of the land of Darius Mbela a deceased former government official.

How Kambi court blunder could give teachers billions (The Standard, March 11, 2015) (Kazungu Kambi in his capacity as Cabinet Secretary for Labour was trying to withdraw a memorandum filed at the industrial court by a department in his ministry that proposed a 128% increase in teachers' salaries by Shs 137 billion in four years).

On the same page as the story on Kambi (above) there is an article entitled: **" Raila steps in as Ababu seeks open PAC hearing** " The mention of Raila ,the opposition icon is likely to draw interest from both sides of the political divide. Supporters of the ruling side are always delighted whenever Raila and the opposition ODM party is shown in bad light. In this case, Ababu Namwamba, one of Raila's lieutenants is in apparent problems and being criticized in his capacity as the chairman of the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee. The situation is here presented as though Raila is stepping in to rescue Ababu from a street gang.

One other way in which newspapers tabloidise a news item is by presenting an established fact like a point of departure in a discussion, lending a public forum perspective to it. This technique is rife in politically polarized situations in which the opinion of the opposite side , however undisputable, will not lack criticism from the other side. The newspapers exploit this situation by introducing discussion forums about issues where all and sundry are invited to contribute an opinion. Some of the contributors have no expertise in the areas of discussion and can not contribute informed opinion.

On Friday March 11 the story about Mr Kamlesh Pattni is given in a discussion forum format. Mr Pattni was the main defendant in an international fraud case in which a briefcase organization headed by the gentleman allegedly defrauded the government of Kenya of billions of shillings, by importing non existent gold into the country and selling it to the government of Kenya. Billions of shillings were paid to Pattni through his Goldenberg Company, but no gold was coming in. The story is packaged in several portions , each bearing a different heading and showing Pattni in a different light.

For example:
Pattni is free (page 1) This heading tops the section of the story that reports the acquittal of Pattni. He is shown in a picture, carrying his toddler son. The impression here is that Pattni is a regular straight family man being harassed by the legal system.

" Why Murgor's case Was Doomed to Collapse," (page 2) This section belittles Mr Murgor, the Director of Public Prosecution for presenting a poorly investigated case against Pattni, The case collapsed.

" The Man , his life and run ins with the law ," This section cheers pattni, potraying him as a con genius whom the law can not pin down.

" **Joy and Songs of Praise at Pattni's Home ,"** This section shows Pattni, who has since converted from Hinduism to Christianity and opened a church, in a God praising celebration, with his congregation thanking the Almighty for setting Pastor Paul (Kamlesh) Pattni free.

This split personality portrayal of Pattni as a villain, innocent victim , family man, con artist and saved , charismatic Christian , lends a forum discussion angle to the news about his alleged crime, long court case and acquittal. There is no single impression the reader is left with. You are left to form your own opinion about the con artist turned saint.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully establishes a link between political polarization in Kenya and the tabloidization of content in *The Standard* newspaper. The newspaper is an established spreadsheet and a bulk of its writing is in the elitist spreadsheet style. The Standard is, as is the case with such papers, given to adjusting its journalism towards a tabloidised mode. The usual explanation is that elitist papers do so in order to get a share of the market, which is dominated by tabloids due to their popular way of presenting news. This study has successfully identified another cause of tabloidization of content, namely a polarized society, with multiple public spheres, which will force an elitist paper to engage in the journalistic gymnastics of their counterparts in the tabloid sphere.

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