

Political Communication in East Africa. An introduction

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For a long time, the role of media and communication in African politics was relatively neglected. This neglect can, as Leila Demarest² argues, to some extent be explained by the authoritarian turn that took place in many African countries after independence and the tight control of state governments on the press, as well as violent repression of dissenting voices. As Bruce Mutsvairo and Beschara Karim have shown in their edited volume on political communication in Africa³, the introduction of constitutionalism in many African countries following years of colonial subjugation was expected to play a leading role in determining the destiny of party politics. As many African countries democratised, liberalisation made communication all the more important in the political domain, and many saw newly-gained press freedom as one of the best instruments to put lingering authoritarianism under pressure. Also, of increasing importance across the continent was the role played by technology in influencing political processes. Studies show all the same how media's role in elections, political processes and decision making varies within an affiliation of emerging democracies and long-standing dictatorships⁴. Therefore, we argue, it makes sense to 'zoom in' and have a closer look at political communication in one specific region, namely East Africa to which this special issue is dedicated.

In this introductory article we give an overview of political communication research in general and the three – or four – ages of political communication, before tuning in to political communication in East Africa and the presentation of this special issue's articles.

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² Demarest, Leila (2018) "Book Review. Perspectives on Political Communication in Africa", *Journal of Communication*, Volume 68, Issue 4, pp E50–E51.

³ Mutsvairo, Bruce and Karim (2018) (eds.) *Perspectives on Political Communication in Africa*. Palgrave, Macmillan.

⁴ Mutsvairo and Karim (2018)

An Overview of Political Communication Research

In his contribution to the *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* Paolo Mancini points out in the article on political communication that it as a “[...] field remains uncertain and difficult to be captured within a single definition.”⁵ A broad characteristic of political communication is that it deals with the how means of communication function within political processes. It entails the interaction of three main actors: political actors, the media, and the public. It involves all elements of the communicative chain – the production of political messages, the dissemination of these, the reception and interpretation of such communications. Political communication entails formal and informal settings, public and private environments and all forms of mediation. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to pinpoint what is political communication related to other fields of communication research such as the political economy of the media, or development communication.

A Question of Power

Political communication is a process that is central to political institutions and particularly the traditional news media but increasingly on other media platforms and formats such as social media. Thus, political communication includes both traditional mass media and new media such as social media, and particularly now the interrelationship between old and new media and how they relate to political processes. It involves how citizens act politically, whether individually or organised, in parties, and interest groups, etc. It is the interaction between the different actors and institutions that matters in political communication. Messages flow downward from governing authorities to citizens, horizontally between political actors, and upward from citizens and groups to the political institutions. Mancini points out that an important element of political communication processes is that they involve matters of public interest which are subjects of controversy and conflict. It implies a struggle or some sort of negotiation about social influence and power.

⁵ Mancini, Paolo (2011) «Political Communication», *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*. Seven Oaks. Sage Publications. Several of the arguments in the following build on this very perceptive article.

Politics is at the core of much media content. This regards both how politicians are being treated and act in relation to the media. It has to do with different political topics and areas of interest – military strategies, economic policies, foreign and regional issues, party politics, the relationship between parliament and the executive, legislative politics. The actors that are part of this process consist of state institutions, political parties, interest groups, economic and industrial companies, NGOs, individuals. It encompasses both domestic and international and regional interests and issues. Political communication is about the mechanisms of power and influence in society. It deals with the distribution of power among different competing views, actors, and interests and how communicative processes influence the distribution of power in society.

A central interest in political communication world-wide is the relationship between communication systems and economic power. There has been wide concern about the concentration of economic control with media and communication platforms – both traditional such as the press and broadcasting and the new Internet based social media. Thus, political communication as a field of study is closely linked to analyses of the political economy of communication in its focus on the connections between the political and economic.

Aspects of Political Communication Research

Political communication as a field of research deals with the following aspects: The creation, shaping, dissemination, processing and effects of information within the political system and the media system. Thus, it deals with the interplay of communication and politics. It includes the activity of citizens, individual political figures, public and governmental institutions, the media, political campaigns, advocacy groups and social movements. It encompasses the communication from those who govern to those who are governed as well as the debate about the political system and events in the media.

To analyse the production aspects of political communication involves the processing of stories in the media, finding the story, identifying sources, creating the story through framing and the rhetorical slanting of mainly journalistic content. This means that the study of political communication involves both an investigation into the content and effects of political messages on audiences of different kinds and users of a variety of media. In this context it is relevant to mention that the one of the foundations of modern communication research was political media effect studies. In this context voter behaviour and election studies is an important area.

Research on political communication deals with how information, stories, images, debates, opinions presented in the media promote certain values and interests, and with how political decisions are being influenced by the media. Under what circumstances do media affect voters, leaders, and the political system? How do exchanges among individuals and groups affect what they know about politics and how do they interpret and act about politics? This means that the context of the political processes and the forms of communication is essential for the analyses of media and politics.⁶ Of course, the context varies with political systems as well as with media structures. There is no doubt that in the last decades the development of communication formats has changed the how political processes are being communicated. Nevertheless, the issues in political communication research have to do with access to and control over the means of communication, contents of the media, strategies for reaching diverse audiences, impact on opinions and behaviour.

Such issues are at the heart of the debate over media and control, whether a political system is authoritarian or democratic. The different communication platforms and who control them decide the context of political communication. Do we deal with an open or closed society? Who gets their voices heard? What role do stereotypes play in the political communication processes, content and effect, and the ensuing narrative?⁷

⁶ For the importance of contextualisation of political communication research see, Salgado, Susana (2019) “*Never Say Never ... Or the Value of Context in Political Communication Research*”, *Political Communication*, 36:4, 671-675, DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2019.1670902

⁷ For the question of how well gender is mainstreamed in political communication research see e.g., Beasley, Vanessa (2006) “Gender in political communication research: The problem with having no name”,

What are limits to communication and political action and influence? On the one hand media always function to a greater or lesser degree as channels for information from state institutions informing or persuading citizens to act politically. In an authoritarian society the media will function as propaganda machine for the government. In a democratic society the media will provide channels for debate and inform citizens of their rights as well promoting engagements in issues of central importance to development of society. Political communication is ideally about the interactions between government and citizens. In a democracy public communication deals with matters of public interest and with scrutinising those holding social and political power. The different media platforms support political communication that provides channels for messages from social movements, civil society advocacy groups and political parties in order to create a sphere for an open and free public discourse. Ideally it should be the role of the state to secure that this is the case. However, even in closed societies new communication platforms provide opportunities for public debate of issues that are of interest to citizens.

Three – or Four – Ages of Political Communication

In a widely quoted article⁸ Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh identify three ages in how changes and in society and media have shaped the development political communication since the second world war, mainly in western democracies, but with implications for shifting patterns in other societies. The authors start by identifying changes in the interaction social change and developments in the communications sphere. They are modernisation; individualisation; secularisation; economisation; aestheticization; rationalisation; mediatisation. Such changes may be summed up by focusing on among others these tendencies.

There is an increased social differentiation and specialisation. Social organisations are being fragmented into specialised and often sharply conflicting interests, lifestyles, and

SAGE Handbook of gender and communication, Ch.11.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412976053.n11>

or Agunbiade, Tayo and Akiode, Olajumoke (2017) “Gender and political communication in Africa”, in Omotoso and Olukotun (Eds.) *Political Communication in Africa*. Springer.

⁸ Blumler, Jay G. & Dennis Kavanagh (1999) “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features”, *Political Communication*, 16:3, 209-230, DOI: 10.1080/105846099198596

identities. Personal aspirations and consumerism are being elevated, while support for traditions and established institutions are weakened. This includes the extended family, mainstream religion involving loss of institutional support for religious institutions. Political parties lose their support and official politics their status. Audiences are treated as consumers rather than citizens and believers. Authority holders lose their credibility. The respect for elites disappears and they lose their credentials also leading to the dissolution of traditional political groupings, which again results in political and media populism. Economic factors increase the influence on the political agenda and in culture and sports. formerly more autonomous spheres (e.g., higher education, publishing and journalism) are subordinated to economic criteria. Media audiences are increasingly preoccupied with popular cultures of taste, style, image, and presentation. Facets of organisation and administration are subordinated to an increasing and apparent rationalisation. Experts and consultants increase their influence based on market research and public management-oriented arguments and rationalisations. Media platforms of all kinds move to the centre of social processes.

The first age that Blumler and Kavanagh identify covers the two decades of the post second world war period. It may be called *the golden age of party politics*, and communication systems was to a large degree dependent on relatively strong and stable political and media institutions. The dominant media were the printed press and radio. Firstly, political messages were “substantive”. Politicians concentrated on principles and policies that distinguished between the different parties and positions. Secondly, politicians had ready access to the media, which were marked by partisan differences. Thirdly, voters tended to respond to the messages by support or disagreement.⁹

The second era is *the age of television*, in Europe in the form of public service limited channel broadcasting. According to Blumler and Kavanagh this resulted in four transformations. The first implied that the possibilities for one sided political news and messages. There was more room for discussions and patterns of communication that took several sides into considerations. Secondly political journalism was based on non-partisan

⁹ Ibid. P. 213.

norms and aimed at an impartial and objective presentation. Third, television enlarged the audience for political communication by reaching a public that previously were uninterested in politics as TV reached everyone. Immediate news and political messages became more prominent than political principled programming. Thus, fourthly TV news became the most important forms journalistic format increasingly influencing the scheduling and framing of political messages. It also involved an increased focus on politicians' personalities rather than political positions.¹⁰ Presidential politics and primary identities rather than party and ideological positions take the forefront.

The third age of political communication¹¹ is the one that still exists. Borrowing a term from Todd Gitlin it may be called the age of media unlimited.¹² It involves a global media system marked by a proliferation of media platforms, multiple channels, global reach, fragmentation of audiences. There is a media saturation that implies that communication messages are everywhere. There is a torrent of images and sounds that overwhelms audiences all over the world. The Internet and mobile communications technologies have destabilised media and political and social systems. Internet based communications platforms and social media have drawn audiences from established media – both in news and entertainment. This has affected the level of advertising and the economies of traditional media. It has also created new expectations to what kind of content and forms of presentation that news should contain. Not least involves a continuous and never ending and instantaneous flow of news, information and disinformation, entertainment and commercial content in particular on mobile platforms that are searchable and shareable. Audiences become steadily more diversified and fragmented and log into a never-ending content flow. Conventional political journalism come under great pressure and is losing in trust. The increasing number of communication outlets appeal to multiple publics. Each of the platforms provide multiple messages and are being interpreted in equally multiple manners, which results in volatility of political and ideological affiliations and often fleeting support. Personalisation of politics become even more prominent. These aspects

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 213 ff.

¹² Gitlin, Todd (2001) *Media Unlimited*. New York. Metropolitan Books.

of a new media and political age are global, even if they manifest themselves in widely different contextual manners locally, nationally and regionally.

In 2016, Blumler introduced a fourth age of political communication¹³, which he describes as having “certain features of the third age, which have spilled over into the fourth age, albeit “more so” or somewhat differently perhaps”. In this age the logics of media and digitisation shapes the public sphere and algorithms increasingly determine what we become aware of. One feature that Blumler argues has developed further in the fourth age is “centrifugal diversification”. The possibilities for more diverse content to be produced; more voices to be heard and more audience members to be reached has in the words of Blumler “gathered yet more steam”. He gives the example of the increased number and range of non-party but civic-minded bodies that are now on the political scene and how the advent of the Internet has “unleashed an incredibly diverse range of globally expansive and temporally synchronous communicative networks, enlarging opportunities for linkage between dispersed social actors». Furthermore, the Internet has facilitated a mushrooming of civic associations, making it easier and less costly for them to mobilize support, coordinate action, keep regularly in touch with members and sympathisers and send messages off. Blumler describes an emergence of an ecology of two different levels of political communication; institutionalised ones and grassroot ones. Hence, important questions to study will be a) how they compare and contrast with each other, b) how they relate – or perhaps do not relate – to each other and c) what this could mean for citizenship and democracy.

Political Communication in East Africa

This issue of JAMS includes analyses of the interrelationship between political events and issues and the media in select East African cases. The point of departure is how media (both privately and publicly owned) in East Africa set the tone and trend for politics, not only in relation to election periods, but also in the periods between elections. In one way

¹³ Blumler, Jay (2016). The Fourth Age of Political Communication. *Politiques de Communication*. 1 (6). Presses univ. de Grenoble. 10.3917/pdc.006.0019

or the other the contributions to the issue touch upon the main aspects of political communication research: (1) political audiences, (2) media organisations and professionals, (3) political organisations and politicians, and how these actors communicate with each other, primarily through formal media, but also through a wider media system. It is possible to identify five major areas of research into political communication. The first is linked to political economy and deals with issues such as patterns of ownership, the role the state and of private media conglomerates, media regulation. The second approach is linked to the political in the strict sense of the word dealing with the role of media in elections and political campaigns. The third form of analysis focuses on the role of actors that influence political agenda setting from outside a strict political context – consultants, spin doctors, NGOs, civic organisations. The fourth focus is on discourse and involves textual analysis of political messages. The fifth approach deals with analysing implications of the expansion of media systems in the form of among others the role of social media for political processes. The basis for all political communication analysis is the characteristics of the changing political and media systems in the societies being observed.

Six East African countries form the regional intergovernmental organisation The East African Community (EAC). This consists of the Republics of Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, the United Republic of Tanzania, and the Republic of Uganda. The modern roots of the EAC are found in 1967 when Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania established the organisation after the collapse of earlier attempts at regional cooperation in through what was called East African Common Services Organisation (EACSO) (1961 – 1967). In 1977 the then EAC also collapsed and was re-established in 1999. 2007 Burundi and Rwanda joined the community, and in 2016 South Sudan acceded the EAC treaty. During its history there have been attempts at increasing regional integration (Customs Union, a Common Market, the East African Monetary Union Protocol) with the view of establishing a common East African market and ending with a full political federation. The integration process has had its ups and downs, not least because of serious political unrest in Burundi and civil war in South Sudan. The four main countries have also had different perspectives on how to achieve further integration linked to confliction political interests – Uganda and

Rwanda, and unequal economic strength – Kenya being by far the strongest and most developed economy.

The political systems in the EAC countries differ, but they nevertheless have some common characteristics. They may with some qualifications be called dominant party systems or hybrid regimes or authoritarian states. In the Economist Democracy Index for 2019¹⁴ Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are characterised as hybrid regimes, Rwanda and Burundi are designated as authoritarian, and South Sudan is not ranked, and we would characterise it as close to a failed state.

All EAC countries have been through periods of one-party rule. Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda have also had periods of military dictatorships and civil war. When the Ugandan military dictator Idi Amin was ousted in April 1979 it was partly the result of a military intervention into Uganda by Tanzania. Rwanda was the scene of genocide, and then a war waged partly with the support of Uganda. South Sudan was borne out of a long war of liberation with Sudan and has since independence been through periods of civil war and political unrest.

The six countries are ranked between 103 and 160 of a total of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2020 Press Freedom Index.¹⁵ Kenya being 103, Tanzania at 124, Uganda at 125, South Sudan at 138, Rwanda at 155, and Burundi at 160. The RSF ranking as well as other descriptions of the media systems in EAC point in the direction of a regional media system marked by authoritarian tendencies.

The same way as there are political integration tendencies in East Africa there is also a certain media integration. The Nation Media group¹⁶ with its main base in Kenya controls 18 different media outlets – print, broadcasting, digital – in the four major East African countries – Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda. It is one of the few examples of a proper

¹⁴ <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index> (Last accessed April 26, 2020)

¹⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> (Last accessed April 26, 2020)

¹⁶ <https://www.nationmedia.com> (Last accessed April 26, 2020)

media conglomerate in Africa. The media outlets in the group in general represent a relatively independent journalism. And the regional paper *The East African* is an important channel for independent political comments on developments in the whole region. In 2019 The group was subject to a trolling campaign by pro-government Kenyan activists.

As the 2020 RSF report shows there are harsher or milder restrictions on media freedom in all the six countries, particularly at election times. There are laws that gag the media in spite of the constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression. In all the countries government media play a significant role both as regards broadcasting and print. Nevertheless, there are private and independent and community media that to a certain degree serve as an alternative to government information. There are also an increasing number of websites that serve as vehicles for alternative news, though they are also often marked by rumours and not proper reporting. In both government and private media there exists a degree of self-censorship and there are also examples of politicians buying positive coverage.

While Kenya has quite a strong private media presence, not least through the Nation Group presence, RSF nevertheless characterises the situation in the following manner in 2020: “Kenya has seen a slow erosion of media freedom in recent years. The political situation and security concerns have been used since 2016 as grounds for restricting the freedom to inform.” After John Magufuli was elected president in Tanzania the country has become increasingly authoritarian. Media have been closed, journalists arrested and abducted. As RSF reports: “None of the 180 countries ranked in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index has suffered such a precipitous decline in recent years.” The situation in Uganda is similar to the one in Tanzania, and there are many examples of almost daily threats and intimidation and violence against reporters. In addition, authorities have been trying to curb Internet and social media sites. There are reports about surveillance and in 2018 a social media tax was introduced further undermining possibilities for reaching audiences on social media. Rwanda is one of the countries where the media is both controlled and where independent reporting is dangerous. Since 1996 eight journalists have been killed or gone missing, and there is constant harassment of those criticising the government. Defamation laws are often

used to curb independent views. In Burundi the situation is also deteriorating with government using the media both government-controlled and independent for spreading disinformation. Reporters from independent media are often arrested. Social media to a certain degree serve as an alternative news source. According to RSF no journalist was killed in South Sudan in 2019 for the second year in a row, but at least ten have been killed since 2014. The civil war in the country has seriously weakened the media, which exist in a precarious situation and they are being censored and prevented from covering issues linked to the conflict.

In spite of the restrictions on media and the threats that exist against independent journalism, the contributions to this issue of JAMS bear witness that there exists a real debate over political issues in the region. The articles deal with the following topics: The coverage in the East African press of the political integration process in East Africa; Election reporting in Uganda; Election reporting in Kenya; Reporting of climate change action in Uganda's media; Civil disobedience in conventional and social media in Uganda; Coverage of referendum processes and constitutional change in Tanzania. Through content analyses the articles attempt to answer questions about how media influence voters, leaders, and the political system. The findings feed into a broader discussion on how exchanges among individuals and groups affect what they know about politics and how they interpret and act on political issues of different kinds.

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