

Kenya's violence: were media to blame?

A free and plural media is more important now than it has ever been if Kenya is to heal the deep rifts that have opened in society, according to a new Policy Briefing from the **BBC WORLD SERVICE TRUST**

In January 2008, Kenya suffered the worst violence in its history. An election that saw Mwai Kibaki sworn in as President for a second term was considered by international observers deeply flawed and by many Kenyans as stolen. Within six weeks of the announcement, more than 1,000 Kenyans had been killed, and perhaps half a million had fled or been driven away from their homes.

POLARITY AND POLITICS

Many factors have been held responsible for the violence, and high among them have been the famously free and vigorous Kenyan media – particularly the vernacular media. “The violence after the announcement of the polls was due to the polarity in the media, which were turned into political tools,” Samuel Poghiso, Kenya’s information minister has said.

Free and plural media are as much an answer to Kenya's democratic deficit as they are a problem

↓ **Opposition leader Raila Odinga briefs the media after meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in the wake of post-election violence**



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“Vernacular radio stations in my opinion played a role in the escalation of the violence,” says Caesar Handa, director of the agency Strategic Research and Consulting, whose media monitoring on behalf of the UN Development Programme first drew international attention to the character of some radio coverage.

Some journalists have expressed shock, “The ethnic hate our radio station was propagating about those from outside the community was unbelievable,” one journalist told a forum organised by the media support organisation, Internews.

The crisis has prompted the government to institute a formal review of the media, a step fiercely resisted by the Media Council of Kenya, the independent regulator.

The role of the media in Kenya’s violence has revived the spectre of the role of Rwanda’s Radio Mille Collines, which instigated widespread violence during the Rwandan genocide. It has also raised questions of whether media can be too free in fragile states such as Kenya.

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The BBC World Service Trust Policy Briefing challenges such conclusions. While highlighting the abuses that did occur, it argues that the crisis demonstrates that free and plural media are as much an answer to Kenya’s democratic deficit as they are a problem. The Policy Briefing suggests that the role of the local-language media during the crisis was the



← Political parties in Kenya have reached a historic agreement paving the way for an end to the violence that has wracked the country. Parts of the media have been accused of fanning the violence – but more recently they have shown that they could play a key role in calming it

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product of a chaotic regulatory policy and lack of training – especially of talk show hosts, whose programmes provided the platform for most of the hate speech – while also pointing out that many local stations played a role in calming tensions as well as inflaming them.

Kenya’s most politically and economically marginalised have least access to information on issues that shape their lives in the languages they most often use. They have historically had very few channels through which they can communicate their perspective in public debate. The local-language stations – almost all of which have emerged in the last four years in a chaotic environment – have provided just such a channel.

PREVENTING ABUSES

Years of pent up frustration have found their voice on these radio stations, which – because they were set up principally as commercial entertainment vehicles – have struggled to mediate the complex and angry debates that have ensued. The popularity of talk shows and phone-ins has made them a mainstay of programming, but in the period immediately following the election some radio stations effectively lost control over their own shows. The result was sometimes appalling hate speech.

Abuses were preventable with better training and support

BBC World Service Trust’s analysis is that, while there is a complex range of media issues, such abuses are preventable with better training and support, better media monitoring, and a more coherent regulatory and policy framework.

The Policy Briefing says media liberalisation and increasing ubiquity of information through mobile phones and blogs is fundamentally changing how people access information. Kenya provides a clear example of what can happen when those changes are ignored or poorly understood in media and development policy. The country’s vibrant media is likely to be critical in healing Kenya’s damaged democracy in the months and years ahead. ■



● **The Kenya 2007 Elections and their aftermath: the role of media and communication is**

the first of a new series of Policy Briefings produced by the BBC World Service Trust, the BBC’s international charity. It was researched and written by JAMAL ABDI, Research Officer, and JAMES DEANE, Head of Policy Development at the Trust. Copies can be downloaded from bbcworldservicetrust.org