

# The Mass Media and Social Cohesion: Mapping the Margin for Sustainable Social Development in Kenya

*Felicity Okoth*

*okothfelicity@yahoo.com*  
*Malmö University*

## Abstract

Sustainable development as a concept over decades has cast its lens on economic and ecological sustainability with little attention given to the social aspect of it, particularly the role of social development in the building of stable, resilient and ultimately economically sustainable communities. Such a realization is hinged on social cohesion which equivocally undergirds the formation of stable communities. Kenya grapples with ethno-political animosities which have destabilized the country socially and economically in the past and still a looming threat. Taking the form of a theoretical discussion, this paper demystifies ethnicity as a concept and shines the spotlight on the relationship between social cohesion and the mass media. Four major types of mass media influence are looked at to this effect. They are: the media's role in defining the political atmosphere in which public discussions take place, the mass media's role in defining the nature of debates within it, the mass media's role in influencing the strategy and behaviour of political and opinion leaders in ethnic tense situations and finally their role in raising and lowering public legitimacy of the a fore leaders. I argue that despite being limited by a set of news values, the Kenyan media can promote social cohesion by presenting the audience with a balanced and no-partisan media coverage. Individual agency is however stressed as it is only through genuine interest of the 'other' that social cohesion and ultimately social sustainable development can be reached.

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Development. Mass Media. Ethnicity. Social Cohesion*

## Introduction

Sustainable development has received much attention in development scholarship as evidenced in its wide and varied conceptualization. Research has however focused more on the economic and environmental aspects of the concept reclining social sustainability to the periphery. This has resulted in some scholars labelling the concept nugatory as without a holistic view that encompasses its social aspects, very little progress can be made in achieving sustainable economic development. They further argue that it is virtually impossible to take away the social aspect of humanity from economics as economic sustainability is best understood in terms of the market and the market is made up of individuals living in a society. Sustainable economic development is thus in every way hinged on sociology (Neuzil, 1996:61).

Having stated the correlation between economic and social sustainability, this paper narrows its scope to the latter which is not only envisioned as equitable but also profitable in the long run as it ensures that the future generations have a stable society capable of giving them a good environment for economic development. Sustainable social development is thus taken up as a value word, that implies desirable social change which differentiates the current and the antecedent conditions in a social structure (Harris et al, 2001; Neuzil, 1996). Development in the same context is taken up as "a significant change in the structured social action of the culture of a given society, community, or context." (Servaes and Lie, 2013:5). From the above definitions it can be claimed that social development has social cohesion as one of its main building blocks; the major premise for this paper's argument.

The discussion seeks to highlight the relationship between the mass media and political actors and the extent to which this relationship can impede or promote social cohesion. The mass media is taken up as channels of communication that reach a scattered audience simultaneously. Social cohesion on the other hand is defined as a society that is cohesive and by so being creates a sense of belonging and promotes trust among its members, fights exclusion, marginalization ultimately giving all its members equal opportunity to move upwards in standing (OECD). Ethnocentrism in Kenya has been an hindrance to the achievement of the a values inherent in social cohesion

with ethno-political discourses presented in the mass media serving to further polarize the country. The paper seeks to illustrate on the relationship between mass media and ethno-political leaders how the media influence if used well can be promote social change and ultimately social cohesion in the country.

Political leaders, news media, a particular news story are situated in various societal levels; the macro level (the country/society), the intermediary (political parties and groups ) or the micro level (individuals). A holistic approach is thus taken up in this discussion as it goes unstated that each of these levels influence each other with the media being the mediator. This is evidence by the way ethnic tension and heterogeneity rapidly expands with increased tension in political dialogue and complication of political discourse as presented in the media (Bryant and Zillmann, 2002).

The discussion will take shape in three main parts. The first section demystifies the concept of ethnicity as it is deemed an integral concept in this paper's arguments. This is followed by a theoretical discussion of the four major news media influences on ethno-political arena as conceptualized by Wolfsfeld (2004 ). The four influences are critically looked with examples drawn from Kenya used to illustrate key points. The final shines its spotlight on individual agency and links all the three sections to social cohesion and sustainable social development. The paper finishes off with a conclusion that summarizes its main points.

### **Demystifying Ethnicity and Ethno-politics**

In this section I look at the concept of ethnicity as it has a major stumbling block to social cohesion and social development in Kenya. Ethnic alignments have acted to subvert development in most modern states that are seeking to build stable national identities especially when such ethnic alignment coincide with economic inequalities (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 275).

Ethnicity has been theorized as a primordial 'given'. This 'givenness' stems from being born in a particular tribe, religion, speaking a particular language or dialect with congruities of blood seen as ineffable and overpowering. Such primordial attachments makes one bound to their kinsman *ipso facto* in that the attachment is not necessarily based on common interest or practical necessity but by virtue of an unexplainable import value of the primordial tie itself (Geertz in Hutchinson and Smith, 1994: 42). Primordialism is essentially a question of emotion or affect that in most cases has been argued to be underived, socially unconstructed, unanalysable, overpowering, and coercive. The modern society has acted to politically manipulate this ties to deplorable pathological levels (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994).

The instrumental nature of ethnicity is stressed by Brass (1979). According to him, ethnic identities are used as a tool by the economic and political elites to harness public support in the universal struggle for wealth, prestige and power. Smith illustrates this theoretical position by positing that elites of ethnic groups select specific aspect of the groups culture, attach new value and meaning to them and consequently "use them as symbols to mobilize the group, to defend its interests, and to compete with other groups." (Brass in Ozkirimli, 2010:88). The term ethno-politics then comes to fore as it is a kind of politics that has ethnicity as its pivot. Ethnicity gives it its legitimacy.

The mass media is important to ethno-politics as it provides an avenue for the articulation and dissemination of ethnic symbols to the masses. Ethno-political and group attributions are hinged on an 'us' vs 'them' nexus in that 'our' interest are defined by 'their' interest (Jenkins, 2008). This is contrary to what social cohesion is about as trust, inclusion and equal development are pushed to the periphery when ethnicity is summoned. The mass media plays an indispensable role in the creation and shaping of peoples opinion and perspectives on ethno-politics and thus is an arenas in which ethnic identification is played. Having situated the mass media in context, the next section will look at the 4 major types of influence the mass media may have with regards to fostering social cohesion.

### **The Mass Media and Social Cohesion**

Peace and news are not the best of bedfellows as conflict is often considered *the sine qua non* of the latter. Put this way, the news media has most often than not reinforced ethnocentrism and hostility towards members of conflicting groups (Wolfsfeld, 2004:4). My standpoint however is that the mass media can play a positive role in the promotion of social cohesion. I argue this using 4 major types of media influence as conceptualized by Wolfsfeld in "*Media and the Path to Peace*". They include the media's role in (a) defining the political atmosphere in which a peace process (social cohesion) takes place (b) their role in influencing the nature of the public debate (c) their role impacting the antagonist strategy and behaviour and finally (d) their role in raising and lowering the public standing and legitimacy of the antagonists (2004: 11). The peace process as argued by Wolfsfeld is equated to social cohesion here.

#### **a) The mass media's role in defining the political atmosphere in which the peace process takes place**

The way news media report about political issues according to Wolfsfeld gives citizens a clue on the political atmosphere in the country. The selection of news sources and how stories are constructed have a significant influence on how the news is interpreted by the audience; how journalist tell stories impact on how the new is received. This is because citizens in a large way depend on the media and news to gauge the political atmosphere. Questions as to whether the atmosphere look positive or negative or whether the overall level of hostility and violence appears to be rising or declining are often answered by media reports . The public support of the government or opposition activities are also deciphered by how the media construct news (Wolfsfeld, 2004:15).

News stories that shape the political atmosphere in most cases than not are of disorder and political unrest. This is because the four major news values immediacy, drama, simplicity and ethnocentrism dictates that stories in line with them garner more media coverage. Social cohesion fundamentally contradicts the major news values and thus poses a problem to ethical journalism (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Drama is a critical means of increasing ratings and research shows that newspapers that have a sophisticated format with less drama, have far less circulation. Need for drama goes beyond *what* is covered to *how* it is covered.

The commercialization of the news media dictates that journalist and editors turn a blind eye to this fact despite wanting to engage in more serious reporting resign to sensationalism as it's the best way of competing for audiences with other news media. The demands for market proves more powerful than the ethical considerations and the strife for social cohesion. Such sensationalism is often seen in newspaper headlines which although commercial have huge effects on the ethno-political atmosphere. The higher the level of sensationalism the news applies in its reporting the more damaging

it can be to social cohesion as sensationalism stirs passion and primordial feelings of ethnicity (Wolfsfeld, 2004) .

Sensationalism usually comes out even more strongly during political waves. "Political waves are sudden and significant changes in the political environment that are characterized by a substantial increase in the amount of public attention centred on a political issue or event. Such waves are often marked by major triggering events such as terrorist attacks, war or an election." (Wolfsfeld, 2004:32). A case in Kenya would be the furore that surrounded the SabaSaba rally which was called by the Kenya's main opposition party ODM and their subsequent calls for referendum. The media's failure to air the live proceedings of the rally may have acted to prevent any ethnic unrest that was anticipated in that period.

The role of the mass media when it comes to such political waves is central as they can catalyse the wave's ethno- political impact just by the amount of space and time they allocate to it. By searching for stories and events conforming to the particular frame, the news media provide the narrative structure for waves. Journalist further give the false impression that there is rise of incidents by going out to the field to specifically find stories relayed to the particular wave therefore shaping the political atmosphere surrounding it (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

In the case of the SabaSaba Rally, particular mass media went as far as splashing photos of members of a particular ethnic groups vacating the towns in which they were a minority. The photos showed the said groups moving with their personal belongings so as to give the impression that what was coming was going to be long-term and grave for them. Such reporting serves to heighten the ethnic tension in the country and has long term implications seen in counter leaflets strewn in towns within the same period.

For social cohesion to be fostered there is need for news organs to make a conscious attempts to present material in a less emotional format as presenting discord in dramatic terms acts to inflame the political atmosphere. According to Wolfsfeld,

"Headlines that focus on threats, accusations and confrontation generate anger on both sides and demands for retaliation quickly follow. Minor glitches become major problems, disagreements are turned into crises. Enemies become more frightened, opponents more vicious" (2004:19).

### **b) The mass media's role in influencing the nature of the debate**

Media establishments often have the power to pick which stories are considered worthy of debate and who is aired in the news. This has been defined by McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997), as agenda setting because the media carries with it the capacity to give particular news story prominence and to shun others. Framing and Priming are concepts closely related to agenda setting. Media frames are the interpretive themes that govern how news are constructed and collected. Framing news in terms of ethical issues like morality and compassion in public discourse makes individuals who come across such frames extend tolerance even to opposing political rhetoric (Bryant and Zillmann 2002). The availability of peace frames changes the setting, emotional tone and language of news stories invariably reducing tensions between the antagonists. Peace frames influence how messages are shaped by political leaders and groups as leader apply more caution and become less extremist in their rhetoric. Priming on the other hand is defined as the exposure to a particular content or message or concept and the thoughts connected to it. Priming can be used to promote social cohesion as focusing on content that inclined on societal values like mutual trust and inclusion may encourage citizens to have a more evaluative stance on ethno-political leaders and ultimately lower their political legitimacy (ibid).

It however lost to this discussion that as much as the media may increase its coverage of social cohesion, it is not enough to help audience work through this issues. This is because new bites are brief, limited in length and thus an impediment to a sustained political reasoning even if the ethno-political leaders are inclined to reason. Simplicity as a news value dictates that journalist limit their stories to uncomplicated and short bits. Put this way personalities rather than institution then become more attractive to the media. This is because they present journalists with opinions rather than reasonable ideologies (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Shorter sound bites are devoid of historical or political context which lead to information being processed episodically rather than critically eventually resulting to more complex and important issues being side-lined (Bryant and Zillmann, 2002).

It is therefore imperative for the media to move beyond just merely reporting to organizing forums and debates where average citizens could come together and discuss ethno-political issues. Deliberative polling in the country could be used to bring different citizens on board (Fishkin, 1996). This is an expensive affair that needs different media houses to liaise together. Other than cost sharing reasons, airing the same debate in all the channels assure the viewers of the credibility of the process as biases associated with partisan inclinations within different media channels are made impossible in such situations.

A similar endeavour was undertaken by the Kenya Television Network (KTN) just before the SabaSaba rally where an open public debate on tribalism was organized in Eldoret; a multicultural town that has suffered the worst ethnic clashes in the country. In as much as the debate was a milestone in promoting public debate, it failed to capture the attention of members of all political divides as the channel in question has been criticized for being partisan in various avenues. This lowers the legitimacy of such a debate as its intentions are questioned by antagonists. Organizing a similar debate but including all the media houses can have more positive results. Journalist with experience on peace processes and diplomacy when assigned to moderate such debates can further increase the credibility and public standing.

Deliberative polling as pointed above though noble has limitations in that it only casts its lens on the public leaving the political leaders out of the debate. The concept of 'shared media' (Wolfsfeld, 2004:42), then comes to mind as it presents a platform for ethno-political leaders from both sides of the political divide to meet, debate and share view-points on common issues affecting all citizens. Shared media is hinged on commonness and collective identity as opposed to ethnic identities. Political and opinion leaders as the participants here with its loci stressing how the country can come solve common problems affecting the citizens. By reaching out to all disagreeing sides, and presenting stories and values of both sides, shared media maintains its commercial interests while playing a constructive role. Further by presenting a platform for ethno-political leaders from both sides of the political divide to debate, the leaders becomes less extreme as they find themselves talking to multiple audiences as opposed to communication with their own people which emphasizes sectarian loyalties and maintenance of a power base (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

### **c) The mass media's role in impacting the antagonist strategy and behaviour**

Antagonist according to Wolfsfeld, are "all individuals, groups, institutions that are attempting to have an influence on the peace process. This include actors involved in any internal debate over peace as well as those from" the other side" (Wolfsfeld, 2004:13). This paper takes up antagonist to ethno-political leaders from all political divides who take part in the political/public discourse and who in most cases find themselves adapting their strategies to conform with media needs. The most impacted antagonist are usually the less politically influential who have to actually fight to get media attention and standing. Such groups often resort to extreme standpoints to get into the news with the alternative being left out in the dark or having a media blackout (Wolfsfeld, 2004). This is done with the implicit understanding that extreme standpoints are more exciting to the media than moderation which is considered dull.

News on internal discord are given more media attention and internal agreements alternately taken for granted and given little media attention. Need for drama sets journalist out to look for the extreme voices which lead to political actors escalating their tactics to find a place in the news. The SabaSaba case applies here too in that it was a bit extreme for the opposition to demand of their supporters to boycott work on a working day and instead attend a rally in Uhuru Park. The highlighting of such extreme cases can be very important in creating a sense of urgency in that it can put pressure on those in government/ power to accelerate reforms. This dynamic is referred to as the CNN effect (Wolfsfeld, 2004:13). The strategy however has not been very successful in Kenya. Instead political leaders in government also adopt extreme voices as a strategy for countering the headlines made by the opposition. All this is done in a bid to maintain public standing and the cycle consequently limiting chances of reasonable public debate.

Another strategy adopted by powerful political groups to get into public discourse is by getting experts to represent them on news and talk show interviews where they provide background information for reporters and by so doing directing the news media to their 'frames' which though subtle are controversial and polarizing in nature (Bryant and Zillmann, 2002). Such ethno-political entrepreneurs often use the media to limit individual options and foci of identification to ethnicity which ultimately is used when legitimacy and loyalty is demanded in terms of public standing and votes (Jenkins, 2008). Access to such media coverage is possible because such politicians have organized interests and resources that enable them get covered either by having shares in the main media houses or by issuing hand-outs to journalists and editors who cover their beats.

This calls for ethics on the part of the journalists, editors and the media house in general because it is the way social cohesion can be harnessed when it comes to such strong political influence. Just from reading an editorial one can have a clear standpoint of a media house. Partisan media establishments operate from particular standpoints that defines their language, values and prejudices. Being inclined to a particular standpoint ultimately means journalists avoid writing stories that offend local sensitivities or editors filtering out unpopular viewpoints. This kind of self-censorship according to Wolfsfeld (2004), comes out strongly as during 'political waves' as earlier discussed hence limiting social cohesion.

### **a) The mass media's role in modifying public perception about various antagonists**

The mass media have the power of raising or lowering the legitimacy of various groups just by deciding who they give media attention. "There is a direct and often circular relationship between media status and public status" (Wolfsfeld, 2004:14). Most often politicians and various interest groups want to be considered forces to compete with even if it means battering down the media

door. Cognizance should be taken of the fact that media attention does not necessarily lead to the attainment of public legitimacy more so when the undergirding reason for antagonism is based on long histories of conflict and ethnic animosity (Wolfsfeld, 2004). Public perceptions of the enemy are largely determined by the political latitudes which are often cold calculations of ethno-political entrepreneurs interests. The new media plays a central role here in that they define how both sides are portrayed.

How different ethnicities are portrayed in the media is core to the process of social cohesion. The more threatening the portrayal of the enemy the more damaging it is to the public. Cultivation theory posits that the more people are exposed to violent news the more they see the world as violent. Wolfsfeld posits that "Notions of peace and reconciliation appear naïve against this backdrop. Concessions to the enemy look at best foolhardy and at worst like acts of treachery." (2004:19). The press can however lower the level of ethnic animosity amongst the public by modifying the images of the enemy in order to convince the public that there is a viable partner on the other side. This could be done by adopting a language that softens the image of the enemy (ibid).

Some mass communication scholars however argue that once a person has established an attitude or belief about something or someone the person avoids cognitive dissonance by exposing themselves only to information that conforms to their attitudes and beliefs (Bryant and Zillmann, 2002). It is however possible to change viewers attitude by consistent exposing them to the image of the enemy. This should be done in moderation or could act to reinforce existing beliefs. However, the more critical and balanced/objective the news media, the less this is likely to happen. Media that focus on a one sided reporting of events acts to reinforce ethnocentrism as ethnocentric individuals avoiding cognitive dissonance tune more to the media that reify their beliefs (ibid). More balanced media is designed to disturb as few people as possible as they balance opposing perspectives. Viewers who watch such balanced news have been found by survey to be moderate in their political views (Bryant and Zillmann 2002: 54). This boils down to the fact that when media is balanced people's opinions become moderate. Thus for social cohesion to be achieved, it is of ultimate importance that all mass media is balanced and objective.

The media can further foster social cohesion by not confining the range of discussion about political issues to the viewpoints represented by the major political forces but other interest parties like civil organizations, NGO's and religious leaders as such bodies tend to draw people from all political divides. These groups provide an alternative ideology to politics and can stand between the state and people (Neuzil, 1996:102). Focus on ideologies is important in that it enables the citizens understand what is at stake or what affects them beyond the face value. Focusing on the complex political and historical underpinnings of an even or conflict if highly regarded by the media can promote social cohesion (Wolfsfeld, 2004:21).

### **Human Agency or Social Structures? Bringing back Sustainable Social Development**

Having shone the spotlight on ethnicity and the mass media's role in promoting social cohesion, this paper brings back the concept of sustainable social development. Individuals (public) are given more prominence in this section as their human agency is considered a bridge between the mass media and social cohesion. According to Kumar (2012), sustainable development is a multidimensional process of the self's social transformation, it is not merely a noun but a verb. She sees the need to cultivate a new language/ identity for sustainable development that is intersubjective in nature; one that acknowledges both a self (individual) and the societal structures. Such as sustainability calls for new ethics and aesthetics of self and the society which she terms as an 'aesthetic ethics of participation' (ibid: 10).

If arguments on individual agency and sociology of the self as posited by Kumar are to be taken seriously, it is imperative to first acknowledge that the mass media in Kenya has done little to encourage citizens to actively participate in

the country's political process. The dissemination of news so far has been a one way process with political news being dominated by ethnic and tribal overtones/interest consequently affecting the balance of national interests (Okoro: 2013:50). The paper sees the need for citizens to debunk the notion of mass media providing accurate representation of political reality and by so doing become more active consumers of news. Jenkins (2008), is positive about this and states that despite consuming mass media information laden with ethno-political overtones, individuals up to a certain extent are pragmatic. He postulates that "The power of formal rationality should thus no more be underestimated than the power of enchantment" (2008: 204).

The more knowledge and awareness citizens have on political discourse the more they can become critical consumers of news media (Wolfsfeld, 2004:22). The mistake audiences do is assume that the little shard of mirror presented by the news media reflects the whole. Citizens need to wake up from this and be more interested to some point in the ethnic 'other' beyond what the ethno-politicians through the mass media present to them. Interest in the 'other's' arguments, errors and achievements should not aim necessarily of coming to an agreement but should be a means of getting used to each other (Appiah, 2006). Such a social cohesion project though ambitious could begin with conversation, where conversation is used as a metaphor for engagement, not limited to talking with a member of the other group but imagining what it is to be them. This form of imagination is possible as ethnic belonging is also imagined evidenced by the fact that all members of an ethnic group never get to meet (Ozkirimli, 2010).

The mass media could harness this imagination by going beyond ethnicity to a communal and nationalistic way of news reporting founded on the symbolic construction and signification of nationalistic similarities. Such as symbolic construction of the nation can only be achieved by the media as it draws and links diverse audiences from different ethnic groups (Ozkirimli, 2010). The symbols that generate a sense of shared belonging could be drawn for example from athletics which usually draw patriotic emotional appeals from citizens in Kenya regardless of their ethnicity during international games. Patriotism is a stepping stone to nationalism and the link between sustainable social development and nationalism is seen in Renan's definition of a nation which he describes as " a large scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by tangible fact, namely consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life" (in Ozkirimli, 2010:30). The catch phrase here is the continuation of a common life which social sustainability is about.

Cognisance is however taken of the fact that ethnic affiliations are thick in nature and often surpass nationalistic feelings. Primordial ethnic bonds are subconscious and emotional rather than conscious and rational in inspirational. Further ethnicity is an identity one is socialized in from childhood thus hard to change. Despite this, it is an identity that is socially constructed thus can be socially reconstructed to encompass nationalistic emotional attachments too (Ozkirimli,2010; Hutchinson and Smith,1994; Jenkins, 2008). This according to Appiah (2006), can be done through stressing the points of cultural overlap. Concepts such as compassion, kindness surpass ethnic divides and can be found in all cultures with minimal variations. Once enough overlap has been found, it is much easier to go beyond the shared values to those that are not shared. Appiah further postulates that "*Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*". To understand all is to forgive all, that people often forgive once they understand or that they become less radical in their ethnic viewpoints when they are presented with information about the 'other' (2006:15). Mass media becomes an effective tool in achieving this because of its diverse, far reaching nature. Pluralism on the part of the individuals however remains pivotal as there are many values worth living by and it is virtually impossible to live by all of them so it is only natural for people belonging to different groups to embody different values as long as they are values worth living by.

Individual agency however cannot be divorced from social structure (mass media) in the promotion of social cohesion. According to Neuzil (1996), ethnic animosity and the accompanying repressions of social cohesion are social as opposed to individual and thus should be analysed holistically at the social-structural level which is represented by the mass media in this paper. The media is part of a social system consisting of those in power and thus has the strong ability of controlling the direction of social change in a society. This paper has highlighted this role specifically in shaping political discourse that set the



ground for social cohesion and sustainable social development in the long run. Social sustainable development in Kenya is thus realistic in the presence of a vibrant and independent balanced mass media.

### **Conclusion**

This paper cast its lens on the influence of mass media on social cohesion and how this in the long can be a hindrance or stepping stone to sustainable social development. As a building block to the discussion, the concept of ethnicity is looked at and the news values that influence news coverage laid down. Four major media influences are critically looked at with illustrations drawn from political waves in Kenya. The mass media is found provide a major platform for ethno-political discourses with antagonists adopting various strategies to ensure their voices are part discourse. The nature of the mass media's relationship with ethno-political entrepreneurs coupled with competition from other media establishments is found to compromise journalists ethics. It is however stressed that for social cohesion to be achieved, it is utterly importance for all mass media to be balanced and objective. This paper highlights the fact that despite the media shaping the political discourse that is ethnically inclined, it can also be a forum in which nationalistic commonalities are aired. To this effect individual agency is pointed out with interest on the 'other' and pluralism rallied. The papers ends its argument by reiterating the mass media's indispensable role in the promotion of social change/cohesion in Kenya and ultimately sustainable social development.

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