A study of newspaper columnists’ framing of Kenyan politics in post-2007 election violence

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A study of newspaper columnists’ framing of Kenyan politics in post-2007 election violence

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Abstract

This research investigates the prevalence of five media frames in op-ed articles published in Kenya’s Sunday Nation newspaper: attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest and international interest. Through the lens of the attribution of responsibility frame, the study examines who, between President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga, was blamed for problems facing Kenya. How the two leaders were framed – positively or negatively – was also analysed. In total, 90 opinion column articles were content analysed in the 18-month period following the formation of Kenya’s Grand Coalition Government in 2008. The results show that the conflict frame was the most prevalent, followed by international interest, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences and human interest. Kibaki was blamed more, and thus framed more negatively, than Odinga.

Keywords: columnist framing, framing theory, Kenya, Mwai Kibaki, newspaper columnist, Raila Odinga, Sunday Nation

Introduction

Kenya’s general election of 2007 will go down in the annals of history because of the violence that engulfed the country after President Mwai Kibaki won a second term in office. Kibaki’s re-election for his last constitutional tenure was fiercely disputed by his opponent, Raila Odinga, who claimed the election was rigged in favour of the incumbent. This triggered post-election violence which left 1 333 people dead and 350 000 displaced (Mugonyi 2008). Kibaki ran for the presidency on the Party of National Unity (PNU) ticket, while Odinga was the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party candidate. The post-election violence was quelled after Kibaki and Odinga struck a power-sharing deal. The two agreed to form a Grand Coalition Government by amending the constitution to create the post of Prime Minister for Odinga. They also agreed to share power equally. Their power-sharing pact was unprecedented in post-
independence Kenya: for the first time a Kenyan president had to share power with another politician. Thus, the new governance structure brought together two hitherto bitterly opposed political camps – the PNU and the ODM. Politically, in Kibaki and Odinga, the power-sharing arrangement also brought together two rivals with different political ideologies. Because of the deep-seated suspicion between the two camps, Kenyans feared the coalition government might collapse before the next election cycle in 2013.

Founded on framing theory, this research investigates the prevalence of five media frames in opinion articles authored by three *Sunday Nation* columnists during the 18-month period following the formation of the Grand Coalition Government in April 2008. The five frames are: attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest and international interest. Through the lens of the attribution of responsibility frame, the study examines who, between President Kibaki and Prime Minister Odinga, was blamed for the problems facing the country. In addition, the valence framing of the two leaders is analysed.

Because this research focuses on op-ed framing in the *Sunday Nation*, the results should be interpreted with caution. The findings are not generalisable to columnists in other newspapers, or to news framing in *Sunday Nation* or other publications. This is because op-ed framing differs from news framing in that unlike column writing, news reporting is guided by editorial policies. Berkowitz (2010, 645) notes that unlike news items which ‘remain closer to the role of factual conveyer’, opinion columns ‘allow a more purposive and open effort to explain events and give them meaning’. The findings of this study do, however, provide useful insights into the nature of op-ed political framing in the *Sunday Nation* – the most-read publication in the country.

This study is significant because it explores a new area in media frames research – opinion columns – as opposed to traditional newspaper and television news packages. Through their commentaries, newspaper columnists help to shape public debates touching on issues of national importance. Their role in shaping public dialogues justifies an examination of how they frame issues and political elites. It is also important to analyse op-ed articles, because in writing commentaries, columnists pursue certain agendas. The findings will not only cast light on columnists’ underlying agendas, but will also provide useful insights about their contribution to the political discourse of the country.

Studies on media frames focus heavily on news framing (De Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Major and Coleman 2008), ignoring the role of columnist framing in public affairs. Related framing research is heavily tilted towards issue-framing, not object-framing. This is supported by De Vreese, Peter and Semetko (2001, 107), who note that ‘research in media frames has primarily focused on how issues are presented and covered in the news’. This research also examines valence framing, an understudied area in political communication (see, for instance, De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003). In fact, most studies of valence framing are found in other disciplines such as psychology, marketing and health communication (Schuck and De Vreese 2006). Moreover, most studies on media framing have been conducted
in developed nations (Brewer 2002; Entman 1991; Major 2009; Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese 1999), with little framing research in Africa.

Kenyan politics in the post-2007 election violence provide the perfect opportunity to fill these research gaps. While this research contributes to the growth of framing theory, expanding framing research beyond the Western domain creates new knowledge on the interaction of media and politics in an African political setting. In the same vein, this study makes an important contribution to African mass communication research.

The press system in Kenya

The development of the press in Kenya can be classified into three phases: the press during a) the colonial era, b) the post-independence era (1963–1990), and c) the multiparty era (1991–present). Missionaries and British settlers established the modern Kenyan press in the 19th century (Ochilo 1993). *Taveta Chronicle*, published in 1885 by Rev. Robert Stegal of the Church Missionary Society, was one of the early newspapers. By 1952, there were 50 newspapers in the country (Ainslie 1966), but most of them folded when Kenya attained independence in 1963.

The pre-independence press can be grouped according to a hierarchy or three-tier system: the European, Indian and African presses (Faringer 1991). The objective of the European press was to provide missionaries and settlers with news from England, to legitimise the rights of the colonial masters, and to provide a channel for social communication among the settlers in Kenya (Ochilo 1993), while the African newspapers focused on the independence agenda.

In post-independence Kenya, the press remained dormant throughout the single-party era until the restoration of multi-partism in the early 1990s. Before 1992, the media in Kenya functioned within an ‘extremely harsh political and legal environment’ (Aling’o 2007, 110). During the 24-year reign of President Daniel arap Moi, Kenya’s second president, the press freedom to criticise the government remained elusive. The regime restricted political expression through the press and criminalised certain critical journalists and their media outlets through sedition trials (Kalyango 2011). In 1983, the then ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU), bought Hilary Ng’weno’s *Nairobi Times* and renamed it the *Kenya Times* (Abuoga and Mutere 1988). The publication became the mouthpiece of the ruling party and government. The newspaper did not, however, survive long after the KANU government was voted out of power in 2002 – it folded in 2010.

Since the advent of pluralistic politics the press has become more diverse and vibrant. The reintroduction of political pluralism in 1991 (Ogola 2011) and the liberalisation of the media sector in the 1990s (Ibelema 2009) have contributed to press freedom in Kenya. In fact, Paasch (2009) notes that the ability to practise as a journalist in Kenya is unrestricted.

Today there are six daily newspapers in Kenya, plus several magazines and weekly publications. While the *Standard* is the oldest newspaper in the country, established in 1902, the *Daily Nation*, founded in 1960, is the most prestigious and influential newspaper in the region. Though 66 per cent of Kenyans are able to read in English,
only 55 per cent of urbanites read newspapers, compared to 36 per cent in rural areas (Media Council of Kenya 2005). Kenyans are, however, known to consume news and information voraciously (Ismail and Deane 2008).

Obonyo (2003) categorises the Kenyan print media into four sectors: regular daily newspapers, magazines, regional newspapers and printed sheets (which pass for newspapers in urban centres). Though Kenyan newspapers have no ideological leanings to differentiate them (Obonyo 2003), the media’s political leanings are influenced by ownership, ethnic considerations and business interests (Esipisu and Khaguli 2009).

Theoretical concept of framing

Framing has become significant fertile ground for research in mass communication. The concept is ‘considered to be one of the most prominent features within the field of communication science’ (Scheufele 2004, 401). Reese (2007, 148) notes that framing has ‘gained popularity in both the scholarly literatures and the public imagination’. It has become more common than agenda-setting and priming – two other leading communication theories. The use of framing rose from two articles being indexed in Communication Abstracts from 1976–1980, to 76 from 1996–2000 and 165 during the period 2001–2005 (Weaver 2007).

Entman (1993, 52) defines framing as the ‘selection of some aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in a communication text’. A frame is ‘a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events’ (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) observe that a frame plays an important role in unifying information into a package that can influence audiences. By selecting, emphasising and excluding certain ideas, feelings and values, news frames can ‘encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions’ (Price, Tewksbury and Powers 1997, 483).

In politics, Entman (1993) argues, framing plays an important role because a news text is really an imprint of power – it registers the identity of actors/interests that competed to dominate the text. Frames are also known to be important determinants of public opinion (Nelson, Oxley and Clawson 1997). To underscore the importance of news framing, Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) use an art analogy. They explain that the way a frame is placed around a painting can affect how viewers react and interpret the painted image. In this regard, Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009, 17) write that some artists take great care in how they present their work, choosing a frame that they hope will help audiences see the image in just the right way. Journalists – often subconsciously – engage in essentially the same process when they decide how to describe the political world. They choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies.
Media frames

Framing research is divided into two categories: studies on a) media frames and b) audience frames (De Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001). The present research focuses on five media frames, examined in previous research, namely the attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences and international interest.

‘Attribution of responsibility’ presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Iyengar (1987) has demonstrated that news media shape public understanding of who is responsible for causing or solving social problems. The ‘conflict’ frame emphasises disagreements between individuals or groups as a means of capturing audience interest (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Research indicates that conflict is a prominent determinant for identifying events which attract media coverage (McManus 1994).

The ‘economic consequences’ frame reports an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have for an individual, group, institution, region or country (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). It reflects a preoccupation with profit and loss (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992). Gamson (1992) suggests that news producers use the consequence frame to make an issue relevant to the audience. In addition, ‘consequence’ is a central news value for selecting what becomes a news story (Graber 1993).

The ‘human interest’ frame is an effort to personalise, dramatise or ‘economise’ the news, in order to capture and retain audience interest (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Also described as a ‘human impact’ frame, Neuman et al. (1992) found it to be common in news. The ‘international interest’ frame is what Guo (2009) refers to as the ‘international condemnation’ frame. It refers to a situation where international efforts or interventions are enlisted to resolve conflict in a country. This frame was a common feature in Guo’s study (2009), which examined the framing of the 2008 Tibet riots on the BBC and CNN.

Valence framing

Media frames mostly contain inherent valence, which suggests either a positive or a negative portrayal of an issue, object or situation. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003, 363) describe valence frames as indicative of ‘good and bad’ and as carrying ‘positive or negative elements’. Some media frames are inherently valenced, while others are neutral (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003). Valence frames thus evaluate political issues or situations in either positive or negative terms (Schuck and De Vreese 2006).

In addition, valence frames serve as an evaluative platform to influence citizens’ thoughts, attitudes or perceptions. Research in psychology, marketing and health communication has found the ‘considerable effects of valenced frames on perceptions, judgments, evaluations and behavior’ (Schuck and De Vreese 2006, 6). In public opinion, the positive effects of news coverage lead to learning and mobilisation (Newton 1999), while negative effects increase cynicism and demobilise citizens (Cappella and
Jamieson 1997). Framing research in marketing and psychology is more concerned with the impact of framing on decision-making (Schuck and De Vreese 2006), while in health communication, valenced frames are conceptualised in terms of ‘gains’ vs. ‘loses’ or ‘benefits’ vs. ‘costs’ (Schuck and De Vreese 2006).

**Literature review**

Since ‘framing is a potent tool for swaying how people think about issues’ (Brewer 2002, 305), a great deal of research has examined frames which dominate news (De Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001; Guo 2009; Luther and Zhou 2005; Semetko, De Vreese and Peter 2000; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000; Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese 1999). Several framing studies have investigated the attribution of responsibility in news stories (Iyengar 1996; Luther and Zhou 2005; Nitz, Ihlen and Egge et al. 2009; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). In addition, some framing studies have explored valence framing (Bizer, Larsen and Petty 2011; De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; Entman 1991; Kiousis, Bantimaroudis and Ban 1999; Rossler 2001; Tiung and Hasim 2009).

De Vreese, Peter and Semetko (2001, 107), who analysed the main evening television news programmes in four countries during the launch of the Euro, reported that ‘journalists in all countries were more likely to emphasize conflict in framing general political and economic news’. They also noted that greater emphasis was placed on framing the news in terms of economic consequences. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) content analysed 2 601 newspaper stories and 1 522 television news stories during the period when European heads of state met in Amsterdam in 1997, and found that responsibility was the most common frame. This frame was also most prevalent in De Vreese, Peter and Semetko’s (2001) study which examined television news during the introduction of the Euro currency in 1991. In the same vein, Semetko, De Vreese and Peter (2000) found that British news reported the event in terms of economic consequences.

Guo (2009), who investigated the use of online news frames during the 2008 Tibet riots on the BBC and CNN, found that both media outlets gave prominence to the responsibility frame, followed by the human interest frame. Examining news frames in coverage of the SARS virus by newspapers in China and the United States (US), Luther and Zhou (2005) found evidence of the economic consequences, responsibility, conflict and human interest frames. They reported, however, that the economic consequences and responsibility frames were more common in the US newspapers, while the Chinese publications carried more human interest frames.

In assigning responsibility for an issue, Nitz et al. (2009) examined how Norwegian newspapers covered the 2004 US presidential election. They found that President George Bush received the most blame (21%) for causing such problems as global instability. The front page of the *Dagbladet* the day after the election stated that ‘the next four years will bring danger for abortion laws, crisis in NATO, and Norway will be pushed closer to the EU’ (Nitz et al. 2009, 121). The US government, along with its culture and citizens, were second and third respectively in receiving the blame.
Iyengar (1996) examined the influence of television news on viewers’ attribution of responsibility for political issues. He reported that causal responsibility for both crime and terrorism was assigned to the individual perpetrator. The treatment responsibility for the problems was reserved for society and the government – to address underlying political/economic grievances or to inflict harsher retaliation and punishment on terrorists and criminals. According to Luther and Zhou’s (2005) study, US newspapers assigned responsibility for the spread of SARS to China. By contrast, the majority of Chinese newspaper articles credited China with containing the disease. The results of Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000, 106) study showed that in Holland, responsibility was attributed to the government, because ‘in Holland, where there is a strong social welfare state, the government is expected to provide answers to social problems’.

As regards valence framing, Tiung and Hasim examined how Datuk Yong Teck Lee, a Malaysian politician, was framed in 11 local newspapers. The findings indicate that some newspapers portrayed him in a negative manner, while others framed him as a hero. Kiousis, Bantimaroudis and Ban (1999) found that people’s impressions of a candidate’s personality traits mirror media portrayals of those traits. In an experimental study, Bizer, Larsen and Petty (2011) tested whether valence framing influences attitude resistance, and reported that negatively framed attitudes were held with greater certainty than positively framed attitudes.

De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003) investigated how a key European Union (EU) summit was framed in the national news of Britain, Germany and the Netherlands. The results showed that participants who had been exposed to negatively framed news showed lower levels of general EU support. Entman (1991), who examined news coverage of two airline accidents – KAL and Iran Air – found that the US print media most frequently reported Soviet action in the KAL incident as an ‘attack’, while the US involvement in the Iran Air crash was treated as a ‘tragedy’.

This literature review paves the way for this study’s two hypotheses and three research questions:

**HP 1:** The more a leader is blamed through the attribution of responsibility frame, the more he is framed negatively.

**HP 2:** There are positive correlations among the columnists’ frame agendas.

**RQ 1:** Does the most prevalent frame vary significantly by columnist?

**RQ 2:** Does the negative valence of the leader framed most negatively vary by columnist?

**RQ 3:** Does the positive valence of the leader framed most positively vary by columnist?

**Methods**
Quantitative content analysis was employed to scrutinise the prevalence of five frames in opinion articles appearing in Kenya’s *Sunday Nation* newspaper. Also content analysed was the valence framing of President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga. Berelson (1952) defines content analysis as a research technique used for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Several framing studies used content analysis to examine the
prevalence of media frames (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003; De Vreese, Peter and Semetko 2001; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000).

The unit of analysis for identifying news frames, responsibility blame (on either Kibaki or Odinga) and frame valence, was the paragraph. A frame type was counted once per paragraph. If a paragraph carried different frames, each frame type was coded independently. For example, if ‘conflict’, ‘economic consequences’ and ‘human interest’ frames appeared in the same paragraph, each was coded distinctly. If Kibaki or Odinga were blamed more than once per paragraph, the blame was counted as one/a single instance. The same applied to positive or negative tones in the articles. If, for example, there were three positive mentions in a paragraph, these were coded as one. Neutral frames were not coded.

The three columnists whose articles were content analysed are Gitau Warigi, Mutahi Ngunyi and Makau Mutua. Although Sunday Nation has other columnists, these three were preferred based on the popularity of their commentary, judging from reader reactions posted online at the end of each writer’s article. Of all the Sunday Nation columnists, Ngunyi’s articles received the most readers’ comments: 408 during the 18-month period under study. Next came Warigi’s articles with 99 and Mutua’s with 45 reader responses. Their commentaries revolved around topical issues of the week, which are of great importance to the nation.

Columnist Warigi is an editor in the Internet-digital division of the Nation Media Group which owns Sunday Nation. He oversees coverage of West and Central Africa on the newspaper’s Africa Review website. Ngunyi is a political scientist with The Consulting House, a policy and security think-tank for the Great Lakes Region and West Africa. He taught political science at the University of Nairobi, the University of Leeds and the University of Helsinki. Mutua is dean and distinguished professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo Law School. He is also chair of the Kenya Human Rights Commission.

Sunday Nation is a sister publication of Daily Nation, the most prestigious and influential newspaper in the region. Daily Nation, an independent publication, is ‘arguably The New York Times of Kenya’s newspaper industry’ (Onyebadi 2008, 20), commanding over 55 per cent of the newspaper circulation in Kenya (Onyebadi 2008). The Nation Media Group – a media conglomerate operating in Eastern and Central Africa – owns both publications and is listed on the Nairobi Stock Exchange (NSE). It also has market interests in neighboring Uganda and Tanzania (Ireri 2009, 39). Daily Nation and Sunday Nation have a daily print run of 185 000 and 230 000 copies respectively (Onyebadi 2008). Alexa Internet, a California-based web traffic tracking firm, ranks Daily Nation’s website (www.nation.co.ke) ahead of all other sites for media outlets in Kenya. Overall, the site ranks 10th in Kenya and 7 888th globally. Its reputation stands at 3 791 sites linking in.

The sampling period was defined as 1 May 2008 to 31 December 2009. From this time period 90 articles (30 per columnist) were selected using simple random sampling from a population of 123 commentaries, which mentioned either Kibaki or Odinga. Ngunyi had 54 articles mentioning either leader, Warigi had 36 and Mutua 33. The
A study of newspaper columnists’ framing of Kenyan politics

Kioko Ireri

A sample of 90 articles represents 73.2 per cent of the 123 commentaries. The search engine for *Sunday Nation* was used to retrieve articles from its website.

The period under study was selected because it was characterised by suspicion and internal wrangles involving the PNU and ODM – the parties forming Kenya’s Grand Coalition Government. While the National Accord signed to end the 2007 post-election chaos called for equal power sharing between the parties, the ODM complained that it was being treated as a junior partner in the coalition. This was also the period when contentious issues of national importance attracted heated public debate, pitting the PNU against the ODM. The issues included constitutional reforms, the eviction of illegal settlers from Mau forest (an important water source), the prosecution of perpetrators of the 2007 post-election violence, and corruption.

The five frames whose prevalence was scrutinised are the attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest and international interest. The first four frames were adopted from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), but were modified to fit the Kenyan context. The definition of ‘international interest’ was borrowed from Guo’s (2009) ‘international condemnation’ frame. Unlike Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), who measured frame occurrence using a series of 20 questions to which the coder had to answer yes (1) or no (0) for frame appearance, in this study frame existence was measured based on frequency count in op-ed articles.

The ‘attribution of responsibility’ frame refers to blame being assigned to either Kibaki or Odinga. It addresses questions such as the following: Does the story suggest that the president or prime minister is responsible for the issue/problem? Does the story say the president or prime minister has a solution to the problem/issue? The ‘conflict’ frame addresses the following questions: Does the story reflect disagreement between parties/individuals/groups? Do the parties/individuals/groups reproach each other? Does the story refer to two sides/more than two sides of the problem/issue? Does the story refer to winners and losers? Does the story emphasise the actions of an individual/party/group? The ‘economic consequences’ frame raises such questions as: Is there mention of financial losses/gains now/in the future? Is there mention of the costs/degree of expense involved? Is there reference to the economic consequences of pursuing/not pursuing a course of action? The ‘human interest’ frame brings a human face/emotional angle to the presentation of an event/issue/problem facing Kenya. It is concerned with whether the story provides a ‘human face’ to the issue, or employs adjectives/personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage/empathy-caring/sympathy/compassion. The ‘international interest’ frame refers to a situation where international efforts/interventions came into play, either by resolving specific thorny issues, blaming the Kenyan government and its officials for certain problems, or supporting government and its officials in solving internal problems. The ‘international interest’ could come from well-known world leaders/institutions/organisations/presidents of foreign governments/foreign officials/the African Union/the United Nations/the EU, etc.

In valence framing, positive framing refers to the depiction of the two leaders in a good light – for example, supporting their initiatives and leadership, or agreeing with their policies. Negative framing refers to the leaders being mentioned in a bad light –
for example, disapproval of their initiatives and leadership, or disagreeing with their policies.

Two coders were trained in the coding procedures and the definitions of the frames and valence framing. To ensure high inter-coder reliability, the two coders undertook a pilot coding exercise where 20 per cent of the 90 articles were coded. Wimmer and Dominick (2006, 166) point out that data obtained from a pilot study are useful because ‘poorly defined categories can be detected, and chronically dissenting coders can be identified’.

The pilot coding exercise yielded a mean Scott’s $pi$ reliability coefficient of .85 for the five frames. Each frame’s reliability coefficient was as follows: attribution of responsibility = .84; conflict = .93; economic consequences = .76; human interest = .82; and international interest = .92. The mean $pi$ reliability coefficient for attribution of blame on the two leaders was .77 – Kibaki = .75 and Odinga = .78. For valence framing, the $pi$ reliability coefficient was .82. The reliability coefficients for valence framing were as follows: Kibaki positive = .90; Odinga positive = .90; Kibaki negative = .71; and Odinga negative = .77. A minimum reliability coefficient of .75 is acceptable when using Scott’s $pi$, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2006). A one-way ANOVA was used to test difference of means among the three columnists in their mention of the five frames, and the two leaders. To establish variation in valence framing between Kibaki and Odinga, a paired-samples t-test was used. Spearman’s ($rho$) was used to determine correlations among the columnists’ frame agendas.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that the more either President Kibaki or Prime Minister Odinga was blamed through the attribution of responsibility frame, the more he would be framed in a negative way. Hypothesis 1 is supported because Kibaki received more blame than Odinga. Subsequently, the president was portrayed more negatively by the three columnists than the premier. Table 1 shows that Kibaki was blamed 117 times, and portrayed negatively 270 times. The difference in negative mentions between the two is statistically significant. Table 2 indicates that Kibaki’s negative mentions ($M = 3.0, SD = 3.30$) were significantly higher than Odinga’s ($M = 1.7, SD = 2.80$) $t(89) = 3.3, p < .001$. On the other hand, Odinga’s positive mentions ($M = 1.0, SD = 2.19$) were higher than Kibaki’s ($M = 0.9, SD = 1.54$), $t(89) = -.30, p > .001$, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Table 1: Comparison between Kibaki and Odinga in attribution of blame and valence framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Attribution of blame</th>
<th>Positive valence</th>
<th>Negative valence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kibaki</td>
<td>117 (61%)</td>
<td>84 (48%)</td>
<td>270 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odinga</td>
<td>76 (39)</td>
<td>92 (52%)</td>
<td>155 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>193 (100%)</td>
<td>176 (100%)</td>
<td>425 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Paired samples t-test comparing the significance in valence framing between Kibaki and Odinga

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valence</th>
<th>Kibaki</th>
<th>Odinga</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>M = .90, SD = 1.54</td>
<td>M = 1.0, SD = 2.19</td>
<td>.260</td>
<td>t(89) = -.30, p &gt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>M = 3.0, SD = 3.30</td>
<td>M = 1.7, SD = 2.80</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td>t(89) = 3.3, p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- A paired-samples t-test indicates that positive mentions were not significantly higher for Odinga (\(M = 1.0, SD = 2.19\)) than for Kibaki (\(M = .90, SD = 1.54\)), \(t(89) = -.30, p > .001\).
- A paired-samples t-test indicates that negative mentions were significantly higher for Kibaki (\(M = 3.0, SD = 3.30\)) than for Odinga (\(M = 1.7, SD = 2.80\)), \(t(89) = 3.3, p < .001\).

Hypothesis 2 predicted positive correlations among the columnists’ frame agendas. This is in terms of how the five frames ranked on each columnist’s agendas. The hypothesis is supported because the correlations (Spearman rho) for paired columnists are robust: .70 for Warigi vs. Ngunyi; .90 for Warigi vs. Mutua; and .90 for Ngunyi vs. Mutua. The .70 correlation is high, indicating a marked relationship between Warigi and Ngunyi’s agendas. The .90 correlations involving Warigi vs. Mutua, and Ngunyi vs. Mutua, indicate very strong relationships.

Question 1 asked whether the most prevalent frame varied significantly by columnist. Table 3 shows that the conflict frame was the most dominant. A one-way ANOVA tested significant differences between two columnists on how the conflict frame occurred in their articles. Table 4 shows that the use of the conflict frame only differed significantly between columnists Warigi and Mutua, \(F = 3.84, df = 2, 87, p < .05\). Warigi had a mean of 3.03 and Mutua 6.07, hence a means difference of 2.77. This shows that the latter used the conflict frame significantly more than the former did.

Table 3: Frame prevalence in columnists’ articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Frame prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>391 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International interest</td>
<td>184 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of responsibility</td>
<td>163 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic consequences</td>
<td>97 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human interest</td>
<td>57 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>892 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Columnists’ mean differences on the use of the conflict frame, Kibaki negative framing, and Odinga positive framing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Columnists</th>
<th>Conflict frame</th>
<th>Kibaki negative framing</th>
<th>Odinga positive framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warigi</td>
<td>-.36667</td>
<td>-1.93333</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngunyi</td>
<td>.36667</td>
<td>1.93333</td>
<td>-.86667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutua</td>
<td>-.276667*</td>
<td>.23333</td>
<td>-.86667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngunyi</td>
<td>.276667*</td>
<td>-.23333</td>
<td>.86667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warigi</td>
<td>2.76667*</td>
<td>.86667</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. Mean difference for conflict frame is significant at the .05 level. $F = 3.84$, $df = 2, 87$, $p < .05$.

*Mean difference for Kibaki negative framing is significant at the 0.05 level. $F = 4.18$, $df = 2, 87$, $p < .05$.

Mean difference for Odinga positive framing is not significant at the 0.05 level. $F = 1.59$, $df = 2, 87$, $p > .05$.

The second research question asked: Does the negative valence of the leader framed more negatively vary by columnist? Table 1 indicates that Kibaki was framed more negatively, with 270 negative mentions. A one-way ANOVA was used to test significant differences among the three columnists on how they framed Kibaki negatively. Table 4 indicates that there was a significant difference between Ngunyi and Mutua on how they portrayed Kibaki negatively, $F = 4.18$, $df = 2, 87$, $p < .05$. The significant mean difference of 2.17 means the former framed Kibaki in a more negative manner than the latter did.

The third research question asked whether the positive valence of the leader framed more positively varied by columnist. Table 1 shows that Odinga was framed more positively than Kibaki, although as Table 2 indicates, this difference is not statistically significant. Odinga received 92 positive (52%) mentions and Kibaki 84 (48%). That the difference in positive mentions was not significant is supported by a one-way ANOVA test, which yielded no statistically significant variations among the columnists, $F = 1.59$, $df = 2, 87$, $p > .05$. In fact, the difference of means between Warigi and Ngunyi was zero, while the pairings of Warigi and Mutua, and Ngunyi and Mutua, were statistically insignificant (see Table 4).

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 and research questions 2 and 3 are all interconnected, because the valence framing of Kibaki or Odinga are dependent variables. How the two leaders were framed or mentioned (positively or negatively) in the op-ed articles depended on the
amount of blame apportioned to each, through the attribution of responsibility frame. Also, whether their valence portrayal varied by columnist depended on how individual columnists blamed each man for the problems facing the country.

In line with hypothesis 1, Kibaki received more blame than Odinga and was subsequently framed more negatively. Kibaki was blamed 117 times compared to Odinga’s 76. He received 270 negative mentions compared to Odinga’s 155 – representing 64 and 37 per cent respectively. As the results show, the difference in negative framing is statistically significant. Kibaki’s negative portrayal is further buttressed by the fact that there was a significant difference of means on how Ngunyi and Mutua framed the president. Ngunyi framed Kibaki negatively 131 times, compared to Mutua’s 66. It means Odinga was portrayed more positively than Kibaki. He received 92 positive mentions (52%), compared to Kibaki’s 84 (48%) – a slight difference without statistical significance. Although Odinga received more positive framing in aggregate, the differences in positive mentions in paired columnists were not statistically significant.

One possible reason why Kibaki was blamed more than Odinga, is because he is the country’s president. Though constitutionally he shares power with the prime minister, the president enjoys more political power: he is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, chairs cabinet meetings, and assents to all bills passed in parliament, among a host of other high-profile responsibilities which encapsulate the trappings of power and authority. As the country’s chief executive, Kenyans look up to Kibaki for good leadership, and for addressing the problems facing them. When the country is deemed not to be moving in the right direction, Kenyans are more likely to blame the president than the prime minister. This fact was supported by the columnists’ opinions, which tied the president to the nation’s problems. The columnists felt the president was not steering the country in the right direction. In their daily duties, presidents across nations carry the burden of proving that they care about the welfare of their citizens.

Ngunyi’s more negative portrayal of the president than the premier is proven by the fact that most of his articles targeted the president, accusing him of lack of leadership, promoting Kikuyu hegemony, and showing a lack of political will to fight corruption in government. In his articles, Ngunyi did not mince words as he repeatedly reminded the president that he had failed as a leader. This reflects objective journalism, considering that the writer and the president are not only from the same Kikuyu ethnic community, but both are from Nyeri County.

The same argument can apply to Warigi’s articles. He portrayed the president in a bad light, despite the fact that they are both Kikuyu. It means, in writing their opinions, Ngunyi and Warigi were not swayed by ethnic considerations – something which shapes Kenyan politics and permeates the political content of the media. Since the tribal factor is pervasive in Kenyan politics, it influences the attention politicians receive in the media (Ireri 2012). Ethnicity also influences media political leanings in Kenya (Esipisu and Khaguli 2009).

The positive–negative dichotomy in the framing of the two leaders can also be analysed from a public opinion perspective. Although the columnists used positive mentions to discuss Odinga, and negative tones in regard to Kibaki, it remains unclear
what effects the valence framing of the two leaders had on the public. Going by public opinion polls, however, it is clear the columnists’ framing of the two men was reflective of the public mood.

A series of public opinion polls showed that the premier was more popular than the president and was also more trusted. In a public opinion poll coinciding with 100 days of the coalition government, Odinga had approval ratings of 75 per cent compared to Kibaki’s 68 per cent (Otieno 2008). It means that most of the Kenyan respondents viewed Odinga positively when judging how he performed his duties, compared to Kibaki (Otieno 2008). Yet, in another poll, Odinga’s ratings stood at 65 per cent compared to Kibaki’s 47 per cent (Kumba and Oduor 2009). Tom Wolf, an analyst with the Steadman Group (which conducted the survey), attributed Kibaki’s low ratings to the fact that ‘in their last terms, presidents are hardly popular’ (Kumba and Oduor 2009). Similarly, another poll found that 48 per cent of Kenyans were not happy with the president’s performance, compared to 36 per cent who were dissatisfied with the premier’s performance (Mathenge 2009). If Kibaki’s low ratings in polls are influenced by negative portrayals in the media, then the findings here give credence to the hypothesis which suggests that the negative is more powerful than the positive (Baumeister, Bratslavsky and Finkenauer et al. 2001). In fact, negative information tends to influence evaluations more strongly than comparably extreme information (Ito, Larsen and Smith et al. 1998).

The results show that the three columnists were moving in the same direction in terms of their agendas, judging from how the five frames ranked on each columnist’s agenda. The frame agendas recorded very high correlations (Spearman rho), meaning that they shared similar thoughts/views on the problems facing the country. This is interesting, because save for an adherence to journalistic ethics in writing opinion articles, Sunday Nation columnists are not guided by editorial policies on which topic to write about. As such, their high correlations in terms of frame agendas appear tied to the fact that their stories were mainly guided by major events of the week.

For instance, the conflict frame topped all three columnists’ agendas in that they focused on issues involving conflict. An issue is deemed whatever topic is contentious (Lang and Lang 1981). The ‘potentially conflictual nature of an issue’ (Dearing and Rogers 1996) makes it attract more media attention, including that of opinion writers. The international interest frame ranked second in the frame agendas of Warigi and Mutua, whereas the human interest frame ranked fifth in the frame agendas of all three columnists. That the conflict frame topped the frame agendas is supported by the fact that overall it was the prevalent frame, occurring 391 times (44%).

Moreover, it was no coincidence that the conflict frame dominated each columnist’s agenda. This is due to the fact that the period under study was characterised by problems which were conflictual in nature, and thus demanded more attention from journalists. Contentious issues included strife in the newly formed coalition government, the debate centering on the prosecution of perpetrators of the 2007 post-election violence, and the eviction of illegal settlers from Mau forest.

The first few months after the formation of the coalition government were marked by incessant wrangles pitting PNU against ODM politicians. There were accusations
and counter-accusations between the two camps. The PNU accused its coalition partner of scheming to destabilise the government, while the ODM complained that it was being treated as a junior partner of the PNU, yet the parties were supposed to share power equally. The ODM also complained that Kibaki’s henchmen were undermining their leader, Odinga. At one time, a frustrated Odinga made a scathing attack on the president’s leadership style, describing it in Swahili as ‘*Jua Kali*’ (informal) and ‘primitive’ (Ringa 2009).

The squabbles in the coalition were so bad that they were made public. As a solution to the persistent wrangles, an opinion poll indicated that most Kenyans favoured early elections (Mathenge 2009). Public support for the power-sharing agreement between the PNU and the ODM plummeted by a whopping 44 points, from a high of 77 per cent in July 2008 to 33 per cent in April 2009 (Mathenge 2009).

The prosecution of the perpetrators of the 2007 post-election violence raised political temperatures among both PNU and ODM adherents. The issue also drew in the church, civil society and the international community. Whereas some were in favour of prosecuting the masterminds of the violence in the International Criminal Court at The Hague, others preferred the local courts to try the culprits. These conflicting views explain why the international interest frame emerged as the second-most dominant (after conflict). The issue attracted the interest of the international community, which not only underscored the importance of political stability in the country, but also justice for the victims of the election chaos.

The conflict frame showed up a significant difference between Warigi and Mutua, in that the latter used it more. It appears that as a lawyer, Mutua focused on commenting on issues involving justice – mainly the prosecution of the 2007 post-election violence ringleaders. As a law professor and chair of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, Mutua viewed conflict from a human rights perspective. In his articles, he put forward a strong case that justice should prevail for those affected by the skirmishes.

**Conclusion**

This research has investigated the prevalence of five frames in op-ed articles published in Kenya’s *Sunday Nation* newspaper: the attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequences, human interest and international interest. Through the lens of the attribution of responsibility frame, the study examined who – President Mwai Kibaki or Prime Minister Raila Odinga – was blamed for the problems facing Kenya. The valence framing of the two leaders in opinion articles was also examined.

The study found that the three newspaper columnists framed stories about Kenya in terms of the conflict frame, followed by international interest and the attribution of responsibility. Because the international interest frame was the most prevalent after the conflict frame, its use in the articles was dependent on conflictual issues in the country. Usually, the presence of the international community is noticed when conflict arises in a certain region of the world.

The findings indicate that the responsibility of blame was attributed to the president, not the premier. This confirms the influence the institution of the presidency yields in
the country’s governance structure, which puts it under intense scrutiny from the media and the public. Under the old Kenyan constitution (during which this study was done), the presidency was very powerful, but the presidential powers have since been whittled down in the new 2010 constitution. The columnists pursued similar frame agendas, and were almost in agreement on how they viewed and interpreted issues affecting Kenyans. This was reflected in the robust correlations between paired-columnists’ frame agendas.

Although the study’s findings are useful for advancing the knowledge of media frames in a non-Western context, this research has some limitations which future research should strive to address. One limitation hinges on the fact that only three columnists’ articles were analysed, yet Sunday Nation employs many op-ed writers. Although the three columnists were selected based on the popularity of their articles, future research should include all Sunday Nation opinion writers. As such, the present study’s findings, however important, should be interpreted with caution. Incorporating columnists from the Daily Nation is another important move which future studies should pursue.

Knowing the influential role of ethnicity in Kenyan politics, future research should balance columnists whose articles are analysed in terms of their tribe. It was difficult to interpret the results from an ethnicity bias point of view, because there was no balanced match in terms of ethnicity identity between the columnists and the two political figures. While Mutahi Ngunyi and Gitau Warigi are from the president’s Kikuyu tribe, there was no columnist from Odinga’s Luo tribe. Having a balanced match will help understand the columnists’ intentions, and whether their tone of writing favours politicians from their own ethnic groups.

While this study delved into an ignored area in framing research – columnist framing – future research should consider news framing, where there is a paucity of research. To further strengthen the present study, future research should incorporate public opinion and compare it to the content of articles authored by columnists. That way, it would be possible to tell whether columnist framing has any effect on the public’s evaluation of politicians. Experimental studies can thus be effective in testing columnists’ framing effects on citizens.

Acknowledgement

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Note

1 This article was first presented as a paper at the International Communication Association Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, 26–30 May 2011.

References

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Biographical note

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