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Kioko Ireri

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Four-country newspaper framing of Barack Obama’s multiracial identity in the 2008 US presidential election

Kioko Ireri

Abstract

Though Barack Obama was the first African American presidential nominee for a major party in the history of the US presidential election, his multiracial identity put him under intense scrutiny during the 2008 election – more than any other previous black aspirants for the White House. Using quantitative content analysis of election stories in the newspapers of four countries (New York Times – US; Times – Britain; China Daily – China and Daily Nation – Kenya), this comparative study examines the prevalence of four racial frames associated with Obama’s multilayered racial identity: ‘African American’, ‘black’, ‘Kenyan roots’ and ‘white roots’. In addition, the study investigates the four newspapers’ valence coverage of the four racial frames in relation to Obama’s candidacy. The findings indicate that ‘Kenyan roots’ was the racial frame which occurred most frequently, followed by the ‘black’ frame. Overall, Obama received more positive coverage than negative across the racial frames depicted in the four newspapers.

Keywords: Barack Obama, biracial candidate, framing, multiracial identity, newspapers, race, racial frames, racial identity, US election

Introduction

The rise and rise of Barack Hussein Obama in American politics has been greeted with an upsurge in studies (e.g., Andersen and Junn 2010; Mitchell 2009) focusing on the ascendency of his political star, which reached its zenith during the 2008 US presidential election. The Democratic Party primaries saw Obama floor his rival – Senator Hillary Clinton of New York – to clinch the party’s presidential nomination. He went on to trounce veteran politician, Senator John McCain of Arizona, in the election proper, to become the first black United States (US) president. Since his famous speech during the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, scholars (e.g.,
Parameswaran 2009; Squires and Jackson 2010) have shown an interest in studying media framing of Obama’s binary racial identity.

Taking this cue, the present study compares how newspapers from four countries – The New York Times (US), The Times (Britain), China Daily (China) and Daily Nation (Kenya) framed Obama’s multilayered racial identity in the 2008 watershed US presidential election. Therefore, the purpose of this research is two-pronged: First, it examines the prevalence of four racial frames associated with Obama’s multicultural identity in the four newspapers’ coverage of the said election. The four frames are ‘African American’, ‘black’, ‘Kenyan roots’ and ‘white roots’. Second, the study investigates the newspapers’ valence (positive vs. negative) coverage of the four racial frames in relation to Obama’s candidacy.

Studies on race and media (e.g., Squaire and Jackson 2010) demonstrate that the mainstream news frame race within a static black–white divide. Similarly, studies on media framing of race in the US elections (e.g., Caliendo and McIIwain 2006; Citrin, Green and Sears 1990) focused heavily on the ‘racial cues–voter attitudes’ nexus. Moreover, scholars studying the media framing of Obama’s racial identity (e.g., Andersen and Junn 2010; Harris-Lacewell and Junn 2007; Mason 2009; McIIwain 2007; Squires and Jackson 2010) have also focused on the same ‘racial cues–voter attitudes’ dimensions. While it is important to examine racial cues and voter attitudes, Obama’s multilayered racial identity presents a unique opportunity for scholars to explore how the media framed him beyond these dimensions during an important period in American politics – the US presidential election. Similarly, considering that the 2008 election was the first time American voters faced a biracial candidate on the ballot, the historic event provides fertile ground to investigate Obama’s framing in the media beyond the traditional white–black divide, and the ‘racial cues–voter attitudes’ dimensions.

In addition, the centrality of race in American politics reinforces why it is important to examine the media framing of Obama’s multiracial identity during the 2008 US presidential election. Pettigrew and Alston (1988, vii) note that despite an increase in the number of black candidates winning public office in the US, ‘race has still not lost its power to influence the outcome of elections’. The presence of a viable biracial black candidate in the 2008 election brought race into focus in a manner not seen since 1984 and 1988, when Jesse Jackson Sr., a civil rights activist, ran for the White House (Squires and Jackson 2010). Jackson Sr. was the second African American after Shirley Chisholm to contest for the presidency. Niemi, Weisberg and Kimball (2011) observe that racial attitudes were also activated during the 2008 election.

This study is significant because it cements the groundwork for understanding how local and international media cover a minority candidate with a multiracial identity. Never before in the history of the US presidential elections have the media faced the task of covering a biracial candidate. The study’s comparative approach helps detect differences in framing Obama’s multiracial identity in newspapers produced and operating in different cultural and political milieus. Comparative research of international scope is important as it creates new knowledge aimed at highlighting the media–race relationship in other cultures. Of much concern is the fact that scholarship
on the framing of Obama’s multiracial identity is scarce. Importantly, comparative research of international scope on framing race at the intersection of media and politics is also limited. This study strives to narrow the abovementioned research gaps. Overall, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on the framing of Obama in the news media – within and outside the US.

**Media systems in the US, Britain, China and Kenya**

Various players shape the news production process – chief among them is the ecology in which the media thrive. McQuail (1994) observes that media institutions are deeply rooted in the socio-political environment in which they operate. Thus, it is important to understand media systems in the US, Britain, China and Kenya – the homes of the four newspapers used in this study.

The *New York Times* is a premier member of the elite press in the US and the world (Fahmy and Kim 2008). The newspaper operates in a market-driven environment (McManus 1994). Under this liberal model, the media control is in private hands (Graber 1997). The print presses operate with few legal restrictions on their organisation, institutional structure or content (Kaid and Jones 2004). Newspapers in the US are known to have an ideological identity which they do not shy away from expressing in editorials (ibid.). In this sense, the *New York Times* is considered to be liberal (Dornschneider 2007; Fahmy and Kim 2008). However, the US media exhibit a low degree of ‘political parallelism’ (Dimitrova and Stromback 2005) – defined as ‘the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties or the extent to which the media systems reflect the major political divisions in society’ (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 21).

The *Times*, Britain’s oldest national daily, is regarded as the country’s primary newspaper of record (British Newspapers Online 2011). The British newspaper sector is over 400 years old (Temple 2008) and is dominated by ten daily papers – among them the *Times* (Gavin 2007). Curran et al. (2011) note that in Britain the national newspapers greatly outsell the local press. As in the US, the press in Britain is also based on the liberal model, experiencing little regulation from the state, except for ownership restrictions and legal matters such as defamation (McNicholas and Ward 2004). However, the British media system is stronger than that of the US in terms of state intervention, liberal corporatism and social democracy (Fahmy and Kim 2008). Each newspaper in Britain has its own political leaning and political orientation, which is noted in its news content (Fridriksson 2004). The *Times* is considered to be politically conservative. McNicholas and Ward (2004) classify newspapers into three markets – broadsheets, middle-range titles and tabloids. An Ipsos MORI Poll (2011) reports that journalists are among the least trusted professionals in Britain.

*China Daily* acts as a vehicle for articulating foreign policy for the Chinese government (Stone 1994). Its superb coverage of major world events distinguishes it from other Chinese newspapers (Chang 1989). Unlike in the US and Britain where the media are free, the Chinese press is highly controlled by the state, and is embedded in a hybrid framework of ‘economic freedom and political repression’ (Yu 1994). Yu
(ibid, 38) adds that ‘while the press in China benefits from the new economic openness, it suffers from political suppression’. Chinese media rarely deviate from the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology (Zhang and Kraus 1995). The media are regularly manipulated to bolster the views of the leaders within the ruling party (Lee 1994).

If the Times is the ‘newspaper of record’ in Britain, in Kenya it is the Daily Nation. For years, Daily Nation has dominated inter-media agenda-setting in the country. The Kenyan media operate in a free environment, though not to the same extent as in the US. Paasch (2009) notes that the ability to practise as a journalist in Kenya is unrestricted. Kenyan media have a reputation as fierce defenders of good governance and democracy (Mbeke 2010). The reintroduction of political pluralism in 1991 (Ogola 2011) and the liberalisation of the media sector in the 1990s (Ibelema 2009) have contributed to the freedom of the press in Kenya. The country’s mass media landscape consists of a four-tier system – private, community, quasi-community and public (Ali 2010). Unlike in Britain and the US, where the media’s political leanings are shaped by ideologies, in Kenya they are influenced by ownership, ethnic considerations and business interests (Esipisu and Khaguli 2009).

The Obama phenomenon

Since the 2004 Democratic Party convention in Boston, Barack Obama has become a colossus in American politics. When he first plunged into the murky political waters, he was dismissed with a pinch of salt by friend and foe alike. Despite this, he won the 2004 US senate race in Illinois, becoming the fifth African American US senator. His successful run for the presidency in 2008 received varying reactions from different quarters. Scholars in particular described his rising political star as ‘phenomenal’. Mitchell (2009, 125) refers to Obama as a ‘cultural icon’ and a ‘phenomenon of visual culture’; Radhakrishnan (2009, 150) refers to him as a ‘diasporic candidate’; Parameswaran (2009, 195) adds that ‘Obama’s biography produced new tropes of Black identity that registered both the viability of the “American Dream” and a cosmopolitan global sensibility’.

However, Obama’s racial chemistry put him under more intense scrutiny than any other black politicians who contested the presidency. His multiracial identity made him a subject of both enthusiasm and vitriol among voters. He was dismissed as ‘too black’ to be supported by whites, and ‘not black enough’ to be supported by blacks (Mitchell 2009, 127). Facing a biracial candidate on the ballot for the first time in the 2008 election was a tough choice for many Americans, because biracialism is a complex and complicated subject that is difficult for people to discuss (Rucker 2009). McIIwain (2007) notes that Obama’s candidacy was framed largely around the question: ‘Is America ready for a Black president?’ Juxtaposed between white–black racial tensions, Obama pursued a race-neutral strategy in the election. Reacting to a string of diatribes about his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama emphasised how he embodies all races, and is post-racial (Dumm 2008).
Theoretical framework

Framing race in political news

This research is based on framing theory, which is employed in communication, as it is an important concept at the intersection of media, race and politics. Today, hardly an issue of a communication journal is published without a framing study (D’Angelo 2010). Pan and Kosicki (1993, 57) describe framing as ‘placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual’s cognitive resources’. A frame is a central organising idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding chain of events (Gamson and Modigliani 1987). To be successful, Entman (2010, 391) observes that frames ‘must call to mind congruent elements of schemas that were stored in the past’. Thus, such racial references as ‘African American’, ‘Kenyan father’ or ‘white mother’ are what Gamson and Lasch (1983) call catchphrases or depictions, i.e., conceptual tools in framing.

Scholarship indicates that news coverage of African American candidates makes racial and ethnic identity salient in ways not evident in news framing when only white candidates are involved (e.g., Grainey, Pollack and Kusmierek 1984; Squires and Jackson 2010; Terkildsen 1996). The obsession with minorities’ racial identities in news reporting relegates policy issues to the periphery. Caliendo and McIlwain (2006), for example, found that the media paid less attention to policy issues in run-offs involving minority and white candidates. While blacks are portrayed more negatively than whites in American politics (Niven 2004), they are also framed as race-centered (Zilber and Niven 2000). Blacks are also accorded less coverage in American politics (Terkildsen and Damore 1999).

The neglect of minority candidates in US politics is based on the perception that they are detached from the foci of power and the upper strata of society (Avraham 2003). Thus, focusing on minorities’ racial identity while ignoring their policy ideas can be seen through the prism of Entman’s (1993, 52) framing definition, which is to select ‘some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text’.

Literature review

Framing Obama’s racial identity in the news

Obama’s entry onto the American political scene resulted in a plethora of studies (Andersen and Junn 2010; Harris-Lacewell and Junn 2007; Mason 2009; McIlwain 2007; Squires and Jackson 2010) exploring how he is framed in the news media at the intersection of race and politics. Squires and Jackson (2010) explore how prevailing racial news frames shaped coverage of the 2008 US presidential election primaries. Using content analyses of regional and national news sources, they found that the ‘black–white binary was reinforced, even with the presence of a candidate who celebrated his multiracial family heritage’ (ibid, 376).
In an experimental study, Andersen and Junn (2010) tested four distinctive framings of Obama by systematically altering the degree and content of his racialisation as a black man, and observing the effect of these treatments on Obama’s evaluations. Having used a probability sample of white voters in Illinois during the 2004 senate election, the findings showed that the more deracialised the treatment, ‘the more positive White Democrats were about Obama in their assessment of both his ability and empathy’ (ibid, 463). Mason (2009) content-analysed three geographically diverse newspapers to determine whether there were geographic differences in the frequency with which Obama was referred to by his race, and the frequency with which the race of the voters was mentioned in relation to then-candidate Obama. The study found no difference in how Obama or voters were referenced across the three newspapers.

Harris-Lacewell and Junn (2007) found that Obama was perceived more positively by black voters when he was framed as a multiracial candidate, than when he was framed as black. The authors also examined how various racial and religious cues framing Obama and Alan Keyes influenced voters’ perceptions and assessments during the 2004 Illinois senate race. McIlwain (2007), who analysed the relationship between race and perceptions of leadership so as to assess Obama’s presidential prospects in the 2008 campaign, found that questions of leadership and race prominently featured in media reporting about Obama. This literature review gives rise to three research questions:

**RQ1:** Which of the four racial frames (African American, black, Kenyan roots and white roots) associated with Barack Obama was the most prevalent in the four newspapers’ coverage of the 2008 US presidential election?

**RQ2:** Were there significant relationships between the prevalence of racial frames and the four newspapers?

**RQ3:** Were there significant variations in the use of positive or negative valence for each racial frame across the four newspapers?

**Methods**

Quantitative content analysis was used to establish the prevalence of four racial frames associated with Barack Obama’s multilayered racial identity in the *New York Times* (US), the *Times* (Britain), *China Daily* (China) and *Daily Nation* (Kenya) during the 2008 US presidential election. The four racial frames are African American, black, Kenyan roots and white roots. Content analysis was used to examine the valence coverage of the four racial frames. Berelson (1952) defines content analysis as a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. Several studies (e.g., Major and Coleman 2008; Mason 2009; Squires and Jackson 2010) successfully employ content analysis to investigate racial framing in politics.
The unit of analysis for identifying racial frames and valence coverage was the paragraph. A frame type was counted once per paragraph, for example, if a paragraph contained ‘black’ and ‘white’ frames, the frames were coded distinctly. The same applied to positive or negative tones embedded in racial frames. If, for example, there were three positive mentions on the ‘Kenyan roots’ frame in a paragraph, the mentions were coded as one. Neutral frames were not coded.

The *African American frame* is any mention which explicitly identifies Obama as an African American. It means the word ‘African-American’ is clearly mentioned in reference to Obama. The *black frame* explicitly identifies Obama as black, which means the mention clearly uses the word ‘black’. The *Kenyan roots frame* refers to Obama’s lineage, i.e., his Kenyan father and relatives in Kenya, while the *white frame* is operationalised to mean Obama’s lineage to his white mother and white relatives. Although the four racial frames have not been examined before, there is no doubt they perfectly capture Obama’s multilayered racial identity, hence their importance in this study. By pursuing these frames, the study lays the foundation for future studies to examine Obama’s media framing within the contours of the four racial identities.

In valence coding, *positive* mention in racial frames is a description given by a reporter, Obama or someone else, which communicates that one of Obama’s racial frames will have a positive effect on the campaign, the outcome of the election, or his term as president. *Negative* mention is a description by a reporter, or someone else, which communicates that one of Obama’s racial frames will have a negative effect on the campaign, the outcome of the election, or his term as president. Past studies (e.g., Avraham 2003; Campbell 1995; Major and Coleman 2008) examined the valence coverage of minority political candidates during elections in the US.

The *New York Times* was selected for this study because it is the unrivaled leader in international news. Considered to be the ‘paper of record’ for international news, it influences the content of other mass media (Gitlin 1980). Established in 1785, the *Times* is one of ten national newspapers in Britain. In July 2008 – the climax of the US election campaign – the *Times* had a daily circulation of 612,019 (Guardian 2008). Launched in 1980, *China Daily* meets the needs of China’s open policy and serves foreigners in China (Chang 1989). It has a circulation of 300,000 and belongs to a group of international English-language newspapers that reach an international audience (Stevenson 1994). Established in 1960, *Daily Nation* is the most prestigious national English newspaper in Kenya and is ‘arguably The New York Times of Kenya’s newspaper industry’ (Onyebadi 2008, 20). It commands over 55 per cent of newspaper circulation in the country, with a daily print run of about 185,000 copies and 230,000 for *Sunday Nation*, its sister publication (Onyebadi 2008). In a nutshell, the four newspapers were considered suitable for the present study because of their prominence and extensive readership – within their respective countries and internationally.

This study covered the period between 4 June 2008 and 3 November 2008, i.e., the period between Obama’s nomination as Democratic Party flag-bearer, and election day. The study sample size was 400 stories; each newspaper contributed 100 articles about Obama. The LexisNexis database was used to search for the name ‘Barack Obama’ in the *New York Times* and the *Times*. Search engines for *China Daily* and *Daily Nation*...
were used to retrieve articles. The search yielded 2,493 articles from the *New York Times*, 733 from the *Times*, 143 from *Daily Nation* and 140 from *China Daily*. Because of the high volume of stories in the *New York Times* and the *Times*, systematic random sampling was used to select articles. Simple random sampling was used to select articles from *Daily Nation* and *China Daily*.

Two coders were trained how to code the sample. To ensure internal consistency in coding, the coders undertook a pilot coding exercise and coded 20 per cent of the 400 articles. The exercise yielded a mean kappa’s reliability coefficient of .89 for racial frames. Reliability results for racial frame valences were as follows: African American positive .80; African American negative 1.0; black positive .93; black negative .85; Kenya positive .81; Kenya negative .84; white positive .98 and white negative .97.

Chi-Square was used to test whether the relationships between frame use and newspapers were statistically significant. Cramer’s V was used to establish the level of correlation in the frame use–newspaper relationships. To carry out these tests, all frames were recoded into frame present and frame absent. Paired-samples t-test was used to establish variation in valence coverage of racial frames.

**Results**

The content analysis of 400 articles from the four newspapers yielded 7,103 paragraphs which were content analysed. Of these, *Daily Nation* contributed 2,539 (35.8%), the *New York Times* 1,909 (26.9%), *China Daily* 1,395 (19.6%) and the *Times* 1,260 (17.7%). On average, per newspaper 1,775.8 paragraphs were analysed, which translated to an average of 17.8 paragraphs per story.

Research question 1 examined the prevalence of five racial frames. Table 1 indicates that the Kenyan frame was the most dominant – taking a share of 47.5 per cent. It was followed by the black frame (34.1%), African American (10%) and white (8.4%). However, the bulk of the Kenyan frame occurred in the *Daily Nation*. The black and African American frames were also substantial in the *Daily Nation*, while the white frame was commonly used by *China Daily*. The *New York Times* was the most conservative in mentioning Obama’s racial identity, doing so only 17 times (6.5%).

Research question 2 investigated whether there were significant relationships between the newspapers and the occurrence of racial frames. Table 2 shows that all the relationships were significant. The Kenyan frame–newspaper relationship has the highest correlation – Cramer’s V = .48 – indicating a substantial association. The black frame vs. newspaper relationship yielded a low correlation – Cramer’s V = .22. The relationships for white vs. newspapers and African-American vs. newspapers recorded correlations of less than .20.
Table 1: Racial frames’ prevalence in newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>New York Times</th>
<th>Times</th>
<th>China Daily</th>
<th>Daily Nation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (17.6%)</td>
<td>10 (35.7%)</td>
<td>7 (14.6%)</td>
<td>104 (61.9%)</td>
<td>124 (47.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>15 (53.6%)</td>
<td>28 (58.3%)</td>
<td>39 (23.2%)</td>
<td>89 (34.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>3 (10.7)</td>
<td>1 (2.1%)</td>
<td>16 (9.5%)</td>
<td>26 (10.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1 (5.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>12 (25.0%)</td>
<td>9 (5.4%)</td>
<td>22 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17 (100%)</td>
<td>28 (100%)</td>
<td>48 (100%)</td>
<td>168 (100%)</td>
<td>261 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Racial frames and newspaper correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Chi-Square significance</th>
<th>Cramer’s V correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>(3, N = 400) = 92.617, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>(3, N = 400) = 20.085, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>(3, N = 400) = 13.946, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>(3, N = 400) = 11.408, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research question 3 investigated whether there were significant differences in the valence coverage of racial frames. Overall, Obama received more positive mentions than negative ones across the four racial frames. However, it is only in the black and Kenyan frames where the valence differences were statistically significant. Table 3 shows that the Kenyan roots frame positive mentions ($M = .23, SD = 1.12$) were significantly higher than the negative mentions ($M = .08, SD = .48$), $t(399) = 2.6, p < .05$. For the black frame, positive mentions ($M = .15, SD = .47$) were significantly more than the negative portrayals ($M = .08, SD = .39$), $t(399) = 2.6, p < .05$. On the other hand, the African American frame positive mentions ($M = .05, SD = .25$) were not significantly higher than the negative ones ($M = .02, SD = .16$), $t(399) = 1.72, p > .05$. There was more positive coverage for the white frame ($M = .04, SD = .23$) than negative coverage ($M = .02, SD = .17$), $t(399) = 1.72, p > .05$ – however, this difference was not statistically significant.
Table 3: Paired samples t-test comparing the significance in valence framing across the racial frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial frame</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Standard error mean</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenyan</td>
<td>M = .23, SD = 1.12</td>
<td>M = .08, SD = .48</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>t(399) = 2.6, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>M = .15, SD = .47</td>
<td>M = .08, SD = .39</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>t(399) = 2.6, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>M = .05, SD = .25</td>
<td>M = .02, SD = .16</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>t(399) = 1.72, p &gt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>M = .04, SD = .23</td>
<td>M = .02, SD = .17</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>t(399) = 1.72, p &gt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A paired-samples t-test indicates that positive mentions were significantly higher for Kenyan frame (M = .23, SD = 1.12) than negative mentions (M = .08, SD = .48), t(399) = 2.6, p < .05.

A paired-samples t-test indicates that positive mentions were significantly higher for black frame (M = .15, SD = .47) than negative mentions (M = .08, SD = .39), t(399) = 2.6, p < .05.

A paired-samples t-test indicates that positive mentions were not significantly higher for African American frame (M = .05, SD = .25) than negative mentions (M = .02, SD = .16), t(399) = 1.72, p > .05.

A paired-samples t-test indicates that positive mentions were not significantly higher for white frame (M = .04, SD = .23) than negative mentions (M = .02, SD = .17), t(399) = 1.72, p > .05.

Discussion

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the five-month newspaper coverage of Barack Obama during the 2008 US presidential election: First, Kenya’s *Daily Nation* was more likely than the other three newspapers to mention Obama in terms of three racial identity frames – Kenyan roots, black and African American. Second, the *Daily Nation*’s lopsided coverage of the racial frames saw the Kenyan roots frame take the lion’s share of its coverage. Third, overall, Obama received more positive than negative coverage across the four racial frames.

The *Daily Nation*’s heavier focus on the racial frames than that of the other publications is evidenced by the fact that 64.4 per cent of the four newspapers’ coverage of racial cues appeared in it. The contrast between the *Daily Nation* and the other newspapers in terms of reportage of Obama’s racial frames can be attributed to the socio-political environments in which the four newspapers are produced and operate. Media institutions are deeply rooted in the socio-political environments in which they operate (McQuail 1994).

Unlike in the developed world where politics are issue-based, politics in Kenya are ethnic-based – Kanjama (2011), for instance, notes that the Kenyan media focus on ethnicity as the primary factor of political organisation. In similar vein, Esipisu and Khaguli (2009) mention ethnic consideration as a factor influencing the media’s political leanings in the country. Ireri (2012) also found that Kenya’s four main national newspapers mostly covered politicians from the dominant communities – a ‘political parallelism’ in which African media products mirror
ethnicity. O’Brien (1999) confirms that ethnicity matters in Africa, and that it reaches deep into the media and into the state, often shaping the relationship between the two.

It appears that in covering the 2008 US presidential election, *Daily Nation* saw Obama’s racial identity through the lens of ethnicity, simply because his father was Kenyan. While in American politics candidates and parties announce their stand on issues of national importance in order to win votes (Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder 2008), in Kenya ethnicity is the main factor determining political realignments (Kanjama 2011). Thus, the media in the US operate in an environment of issue-based politics, while the Kenyan media operate in an ethnically charged political climate – hence the likely reason why the *Daily Nation* hugely focused on Obama’s multiracial identities.

The *Daily Nation*’s lopsided coverage of the four racial frames in favour of the Kenyan roots frame explains why the racial frame (Kenyan roots) dominated the publication’s coverage of Obama’s candidacy: Of the 124 times the frame was mentioned, 83.9 per cent appeared in the Kenyan paper. Obviously, the reason why the *Daily Nation* used the Kenyan frame more frequently, is because Obama’s father came from Kenya. Thus, it appears that the newspaper was making a strong case that the man likely to occupy the White House could trace his roots to the East African country. In writing their stories about the historic US presidential election, the *Daily Nation* journalists were overzealous in telling the world that Obama enjoys a kinship relationship with some Kenyans.

Generally, there was little doubt that Kenyans took pride in being associated with the likely American president, given the country’s superpower status. As such, Kenyan newspapers did not hesitate to communicate this message. Though an American, Obama was presented in the *Daily Nation* as a national hero in Kenya. The newspaper’s heavy focus on the Kenyan frame captures Entman’s (1993, 52) framing definition, i.e., the ‘selection of some aspects of perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communication text’. The *Daily Nation*’s focus on covering Obama’s racial identities accounts for the significant relationships between the racial frames and the newspapers’ overall coverage – addressed by research question 2. Similarly, the newspaper’s emphasis on the frame is responsible for the moderate correlation between the Kenyan frame and the four newspapers’ coverage. Without the *Daily Nation*’s input (64.4%), no significant relationships between the racial frames and the four newspapers would exist.

The research findings show that Obama received more positive coverage for racial frames, which is addressed by research question 3. All four newspapers gave Obama favourable coverage. The racial coverage – especially by the *New York Times* – did not focus on stereotypes associated with African Americans (which could have worked against Obama, more so among the white voters). Parker, Sawyer and Towler (2009, 210) found that negative stereotypes of blacks failed to gain much traction amongst those voting for Obama in 2008, since ‘Obama defies the stereotypes often attributed to Blacks’. If this argument holds, it may explain why Obama was covered less negatively. By downplaying the stereotypes associated with blacks, such as being less effective in office, it means the newspapers focused on the positives about Obama – including
framing him as an able leader. Similarly, as noted by Golan and Wanta (2001), positive coverage can influence how positively individuals view candidates. Thus, in electing Obama, voters may have been influenced by the positive coverage accorded to him by the media.

Yet another explanation for the positive coverage might be because Obama pursued a race-neutral election strategy. Jones and Clemons (1993) and McCormack and Jones (1993), amongst others, show that in a race involving black and white candidates in American politics, the blacks try to remove race as an issue because it might spur white voters’ bias against their candidacy. Unlike other African American politicians, Obama was not seen as race-centered in the eyes of the American and the global media. In the same vein, Squires (2007) notes that the dominant press constructed Obama as more ‘legitimate’, thus distancing him from other black political traditions.

Conclusion
The present comparative study examined which of the Obama’s four racial identities (‘Kenyan roots’, ‘black’, ‘African-American’ and ‘white roots’) received the most coverage in the New York Times (US), the Times (UK), the China Daily (China) and the Daily Nation (Kenya). The study also investigated the four newspapers’ valence coverage of the four racial frames in relation to Obama’s candidacy. The findings show that the Kenyan racial frame was the most dominant. As a presidential candidate, Obama received more positive coverage across the four racial identities.

The main limitation of this research lies in the use of but a single US newspaper – the New York Times – which is a liberal publication and endorsed Obama’s candidacy. Future research should include conservative-leaning newspapers such as the Washington Post. Including newspapers associated with African American readers (e.g., New York Amsterdam News, Chicago Defender) would provide very useful insights into how they covered Obama’s multilayered racial identity. This is important because, unlike most African Americans, Obama is not descended from slaves, and therefore is not seen as an authentic black American.

Internationally, future research should consider including newspapers from Brazil, Russia and India which, together with China, make up the BRIC countries. The same should be done for newspapers produced in countries with critical views toward the US, such as, for instance, Iran. While future research should examine newspapers issued in other African countries, it would also be worthwhile to focus on non-African countries whose populations are predominantly black, such as Jamaica and Haiti. Examining newspapers in Indonesia, the country where Obama spent his early years, would also be useful in this kind of research.

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References


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Biographical note

Kioko Ireri, who graduated in 2013 with a PhD in Mass Communication from the School of Journalism, Indiana University-Bloomington, US, is assistant professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the United States International University-Africa in Nairobi, Kenya. His research interests include political and international communication, focusing on how the media shape and portray political issues and events in developing democracies. He is also interested in the practise of journalism in developing countries in relation to politics, especially in Africa. Email: kireri@usiu.ac.ke or kireri@gmail.com