

Rwanda: Media Coverage of the
Parliamentarian Elections (September 15th 2008)

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore the role and behavior of the media and media workers during the electoral process in Rwanda in September 2008. Firstly, I conducted a deep analysis of the role of the media in democracy. I therefore found that the media are the kernel of democracy when they act as watchdogs, hence impeding governments from trampling on foot citizens' rights. In the contemporary world, the role of the media in all aspects of societies has proven insurmountable. As such, the media provide enough information to the population which enables them to make informed decisions concerning their welfare. Democracy, amongst all the political systems, proves to be the most pervasive and the most cherished all over the world. Elections are a vivid indicator of this process. Peter Forau (2006) puts that “elections define democracy while the media enlightens and sustains it”. The media form therefore a free forum for citizens to voice out their views. In that vein, the media guide electoral processes by providing accurate and impartial information.

Manoah Esipisu and Isaac Khaguli (2009: 04) summarise the role of the media in elections as follows: educating voters on strategies to exercise their democratic rights; reporting on developments and issues related to the election campaigns; providing a platform for the political parties to communicate their messages to the electorate; providing political parties with a space in which to debate issues with each other; reporting results and monitoring vote counting; and scrutinizing the electoral process itself in order to evaluate its fairness, efficiency and probity;

It becomes therefore clear that electoral processes cannot be thoroughly conducted if the media are not put to profit. And for this to happen, the media need to have a very conducive environment whereby freedom of expression, amongst other things, is granted.

The present research therefore aims to investigate the behavior of the media and its role during the parliamentary elections that took place in Rwanda on September 15, 2008.

The study explores the media landscape in Rwanda which spans from the various media houses to the legal framework that guided the media before or during the campaign, during elections or after the electoral period. Among the main trends of my study, it is worth mentioning that the

various political parties and candidates harnessed the media to succeed in their campaign. However, the extent to which this was done varies depending on how powerful and popular are the parties/candidates in the country. It was also observed that some media were biased when reporting on some parties/candidates.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, the role of the media in all aspects of societies has proven insurmountable. No wonder then if the media is believed to be the kernel of democracy. As such, the media provide enough information to the population which enables them to make informed decisions concerning their welfare. Democracy, amongst all the political systems, proves to be the most pervasive and the most cherished all over the world. Elections are a vivid indicator of this process. Peter Forau (2006^[1]) puts that “elections define democracy while the media enlightens and sustains it”.

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- Reporting on developments and issues related to the election campaigns.
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2. Media and democracy

As far back as the 19th century, the role of the media in democracy was already emphasized to the extent that the media were seen as the Fourth Estate added to the three existing estates: Priesthood, Aristocracy and the Commons. Nowadays, the media are still viewed as the Fourth Estate that monitors and serves as watchdog to the executive, legislature and the judiciary to prevent these powers to overstep their bounds. The central prong here is that the media are an important tool to develop a politically active civil society.

Media influence works in a context where there is freedom of media. Article 19 of the

1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. Although this article does not show clearly the span of media freedom, it however sheds light on what the media environment should look like. Media pluralism is a must, and more important, credible outlets must be developed to allow multiple voices of citizens. A strategic approach released by the Centre for Democracy and Governance (CDG) holds that “a media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest” (CDG, 1999).

Ungar (1990), like many other scholars, highlights the importance of the media in democratic processes as follows:

“In any country where political institutions and opposition groups are not yet – or are no longer – operating freely, a press able to report and reflect popular discontent with the course of national policy or with the government of the moment can serve as an important warning light, identifying early problems that demand solution if political stability is to be maintained. Far from subverting public order in unstable societies, free and robust media can actually promote conciliation by encouraging discussion of controversial issues before they reach a volatile or explosive stage”.

If one cannot doubt about the real meaning of freedom of the media, however, the reality on the ground has shown that freedom of the media should not be taken as a one-size-fits-all kind of blueprint that can be applied from one society to another. There always appears to be some no-go zones that, if reported on by journalists, may ignite troubles into societies. In general, this is the case in countries marred by civil wars or by corruption.

Scholars warn against the risk by many of viewing citizens in the democratic debate as mere ‘listeners’ who are given good and accurate information. The goal should be also to make sure that citizens are also ‘speakers’ who participate actively in the civic discourse. If citizens’ voices are not heard, democracy will not succeed and may even turn into autocracy. This is where the media tap in to give voice to the voiceless and to bring to the knowledge of decision makers the needs of citizens.

At the outset, it is not granted how the media do what they do in democratic processes. In this regard, researchers elaborated a variety of theories to explain how the media hold sway. Early theorists such as Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, etc dwelt on media effects whereby one stream of theorists believed in powerful effects (media seen as the only social change agents) while others talked about minimal effects (media seen as one amongst many other change agents) on society.

In the recent years, there was a paradigm shift where the media are no longer viewed as ‘doing things’ to citizens, but rather the media shows the direction to people by insisting on salient issues citizens should think about and how they should think about them. This new tendency is

known as ‘agenda setting’ or ‘priming’. This phenomenon illustrates for instance how the media depict political parties or candidates and citizens eventually know their position during elections. If critics view agenda setting as appropriate to understand the role of the media, they however express vagueness on the timeframe in which this phenomenon takes place.

To illustrate how the media sway on citizens, Meyer (2002:38) draws from Habermasian public sphere and argues that mass media contribute in some way to the political life of citizens. This is done by allowing citizens to represent themselves and their interest, giving them “a space – a ‘public sphere’ – within which they can reflect on the conditions of their lives and how these might be changed for the better”.

Contemporary studies deplore the role played by globalization and economic liberalization in diverting media houses from their social responsibility. Thus, it turns out that the media are driven by market forces and trample underfoot citizenship. They are no longer interested in being a forum for citizens’ dialogue. Instead, there is a tendency to transform citizens into consumers by pumping them with entertainment rather than education, knowledge and information. In this kind of commercialism, the media are rather attracted by celebrity personalities and scandals. Furthermore, it appears that “verbal duels and loud, often one-sided, arguments find audiences more easily than reasoned, balanced debates. Talk show pundits grab attention with extreme positions, usually negative attacks on targets that are not in the room to defend themselves (Cooper, 2003b).

Spanning from this idea of commercialism, Sheila Coronel (2008: 05) warns against the belief that private ownership of the media would be a guaranty of democracy:

“Most everywhere, the complaint is the same: because most of the media are organized as for-profit enterprises, the performance of democratic services is often secondary to profit-making. Sometimes there is a fit: profit motives spur concern for the public welfare. But often the goals collide. There is a design flaw: critics say that privately owned media, independent of the state but slave to the market, are at best, episodic and unreliable watchdogs”.

As a result, both journalism and politics are jeopardized by this profit oriented business. Curran (2002: 150) argues that when the media simply cover prestige institutions as an economical and effective way of collating the news, they drastically hamper the public's knowledge of the overall democratic landscape and widen the gap between elite and less visible groups in society, supporting the power structure while stigmatizing dissent as extreme and rare (Curran, 2002:138). Worse, it turns out that the watchdog function is also seriously altered by close relationships (Curran, 2002: 150). In any case, market forces seem to be inevitable. However, they put media's independence under jeopardy and they are not "the rock on which the fate of watchdog journalism rests", concludes Coronel (2008: 07).

3. Covering elections

Scholars suggest that during electoral processes, good journalism, in addition to being free, is expected to be reliable, trusted and be able to have opportunity to form independent and diverse views. For this to happen, the media need to be accurate, impartial, responsible, truthful, which entails the obligation to avoid defamation, corruption, malicious and derivative news, amongst other things (Manoah, 2009; Ross, 2004). Therefore, the guiding principle for the media must be an effort to foster freedom of expression.

However, media critics are convinced that some of the abovementioned normative ideas do not always stand firm. For example, objectivity as a concept is seen as deceitful, erroneous, misguiding, and hence incoherent. From the experience of Kenyan referendum and elections in 2002, the world has learnt that objectivity and balance are sheer utopia as long as media workers are human beings who cannot eschew market and political pressure. Media owners who had profit from candidates or a political party were overtly biased. As a result, their media houses cast votes long before the population, and the latter had no choice but follow the orientation given by the media. Later on during presidential elections in December 2007, media objectivity melt away when the media degenerated into political activism by supporting openly Mwai Kibaki or Raila Odinga. Hence, the media failed to help daunting violence that followed elections.

4. Media landscape in Rwanda

The role of the mass media depends on a number of factors including the degree of media development and diversification. Citizens have differing access to media, and this impinges a lot on how they participate in democracy. Even in countries where technological advances such as internet and television are not yet commonplace, radio and aural communication are mainly used. In addition, it is believed that respect for free expression and other media rights are very necessary for the good quality of elections and democracy.

4.1. Media houses

From a report by the High Council of the Press (HCP, 2008a), it appears that there was commendable progress in media development, especially as regards media infrastructures, an increased number of media houses, the level of professionalism and freedom of the press. However, some complaints were leveled by some media monitoring organizations alleging a number of violations of press freedom. Various voices, including the Government of Rwanda, questioned accuracy and objectivity of these allegations.

Among other media infrastructures, a modern printery was established in Kigali to boost the quality and periodicity of local publications. As regards newspapers, there was creation of Izuba Rirashe, a tri-weekly published by The New Times, Inyenyeri and Weekly Post to increase the number of newspapers. There were 57 newspapers registered by the Ministry of Information 2007, of which only 37 published at least one issue in that year. Periodicity was a general problem for these 37 newspapers as the print media in Rwanda has only one daily, two bi-weeklies, 8 weeklies, 20 bi-monthlies and a couple of monthly newspapers. In 2007, The New Times became daily.

There was also tremendous progress in electronic media. Audiovisual media houses reached 17, among which 11 radio stations are privately owned. However, there is still one Television Station (Rwanda Television) despite Government having licensed some private commercial televisions.

Amongst foreign media with local correspondents that covered the 2008 elections, it is worth noting broadcast media mainly VOA, BBC.

As it appears, even if there is still much to be done, the media field in the country has grown diverse, which is a very important landmark in democracy. For the media to be efficient there must be diversity of ownership. Once there is no concentration of the media, the media strive a lot to deliver more various and richer contents. In addition, many voices can be heard. As democracy theorists argue, freedom to publish should be understood as freedom for all and not for some people who are privileged either by ruling regimes or by their wealth (Cooper, 2003a).

However, if diversity is one thing, one should reckon that the type of ownership is another. Baker (2001:120) argues:

“[O]ur system of free press expression must include a plurality of speaker types, including commercial mass media, government subsidized noncommercial media, independent publishers, political and nonprofit associations, universities and individuals. To some extent, each of these speaker types offsets, complements, and checks the rest”.

The same scholar goes on to show that, notwithstanding problems posed by ownership, media diversity is also important in a sense that it prevents governments from encroaching on journalism:

“A society’s capacity to maintain its democratic bearings or its ability to resist demagogic manipulation may be served by a broad distribution of expressive power, especially media-based power. Such a distribution may be harder for a demagogue to manipulate or control or may be better able to deter political abuses because of being more difficult to control. On this account, the value of a wide distribution of media ownership lies not in any particular media product that this ownership produces on a day-to-day basis (such that the value will be reflected in market sales) but the democratic safeguards that this ownership distribution helps provide” (Baker, 2001: 297).

4.2. Media training

In addition to the School of Journalism and Communication of the National University of Rwanda and the Faculty of Social Communications of the Catholic University of Kabgayi, the Great Lakes Media Centre (GLMC) was created to help practicing journalists get hands-on skills and therefore improve on their professional level that has always been questioned either by political leaders, media workers themselves or citizens. So far, the GLMC's intake is 30 journalists.

Furthermore, a series of seminars and training workshops are regularly organized by the High Council of the Press, Ministry of Information, the GLMC and other public and civil society organizations to boost professionalism of Rwandan journalists. Of outstanding importance is also the Regional Media Centre that came out of the resolutions set up by the media conference organized in November 2008 in Kigali. The Centre slated to start in May 2009 will be a golden opportunity for media practitioners in the Great Lakes Region to bridge the many bottlenecks that ceaselessly ruin the media sector.

Notwithstanding this endeavor to train journalists, professionalism in the media sector is still of very low quality. This could be noticed from cases whereby journalists committed some offenses such as defamation, unfounded accusations, unbalanced stories, interference in privacy of individuals, inability to differentiate/ intention presentation of opinions as news and many other unprofessional practices characterized the print media as this report will highlight. Most of the audio media were by and large unable to quote sources of their news stories (HCP, 2008a).

4.3. Media regulation

The media activity in elections is often regulated by specific requirements set in national electoral laws. The regulatory framework for media coverage of elections is twofold. One, it comprises generally applicable laws (*lex generalis*) and specific regulations (*lex specialis*) devised by media regulation bodies in different countries. Obviously, constitution is the most paramount text that establishes fundamental freedoms in a democratic society and ensures a statutory framework that meets the international requirements.

These regulations are set to guide the duration of campaigns, the existence of a campaign period or a period of silence or reflection, and establish the rights of parties and candidates. These regulations differ from country to country. However, analysis of these regulations shows that they intersect on the universal principle that media are there to report, inform and educate and most of all, give equal access to candidates/parties.

As regards Rwandan elections in 2008, the regulations in place included the Rwandan Constitution of June 2003, especially Article 34 on freedom of the press and freedom of information; Article 74 of the Media Law elaborated in 2002 that provides for the obligation of the Media High Council to ensure that political parties are given equal access to public media; and the Code of Ethics for journalists and media of 2002.

In addition, a special journalistic code of conduct during elections was set up in 2008 prior to the electoral campaign. The main focus in this code was on access to the media by political parties and independent candidates; access to information by journalists; relationships with sources and good conduct of journalists; journalism principles such as fairness and accuracy; security of journalists; synergy with other media workers; and political activities.

The regulation on airtime and space in the media allotted between three and four minutes of airtime in news to public electronic media, and between 15 and 30 minutes of talk shows. As for public print media, one page was the maximum. However, the code of conduct did not clearly indicate when journalists should start and end coverage of the electoral process.

4.4. Main challenges

The media landscape in Rwanda is marred by a number of heavy challenges. The following are some of the most recurrent:

- Lack of enough professional skills for media workers
- Lack of funds for media outlets and hence lack of sustainability
- Journalists' poverty and hence pervasive corruption

- Some leaders prevent journalists to access information. This is mostly due to ignorance of the importance of journalism on good governance and the Rwandan citizens, in general.
- Lack of advertisements for private media
- Weakness of media auto regulating bodies (HCP, 2006).

5. Research methodology

Media monitoring activities usually should use statistical analyses along with media content and discourse analyses to evaluate fairness in the coverage. However, for the present research, time and means were against the researcher, reason why only qualitative data are available. Therefore, some radio or TV scripts were recorded before and during campaign. Electronic media included Radio Rwanda, TV Rwanda, Radio Contact, Radio Salus, Community Radio Huye and Radio Flash on the one hand, and BBC and VOA on the other hand. I also gathered a number of newspapers such as Imvaho Nshya, La Nouvelle Relève, The New Times, Amani, Umuseso, and Focus.

6. The media at the heart of Rwanda's elections

It is an undeniable fact that the media participate in a very large number of activities during elections. Albeit private or public media, they all intersect in giving forum for debate to the political community and the citizens. In the media, the main place is also given to debates and interviews with candidates. Other media largely report and comment on the candidates' activities. In addition, it is commonplace to see politicians who campaign incognito by seeking access to certain types of media content that is not directly linked to campaigns because such content attracts large audiences. For instance, during presidential elections, the incumbent presidents tend to campaign far before the period legally slated, but no one can level critique on them as they do so during their usual attributions.

6.1. Coverage before the campaign

Like in any other country, it was noticed that the electoral process in Rwanda started far before the campaign was launched. During this pre-campaign period, the media dwelt on activities such as voter education and discussion of the electoral system. The media focused on both activities to help citizens participate in an informed debate about the electoral system, which is only possible when the public is thoroughly educated on how the system works. In addition, this pre-campaign education was crucial for voters to know well who is eligible to vote, why it matters to accomplish their civic duties by subscribing on the voters' roll, and how to register to vote. The whole task was done mainly by the public media such as the media under ORINFOR (Rwanda Information Authority), which include Radio Rwanda, Imvaho Nshya and La Nouvelle Relève newspapers, TV Rwanda and community radios.

6.2. The campaign period

The media was a very instrumental tool for the campaign by informing and educating the electorate to be able to make informed choices. The competing political parties had an opportunity to choose what kind of media they could afford (in the case of private media). They used radio stations, newspapers, television stations, the internet or any other forms of media to reach their targets. The messages through the media spanned from traditional methods, such as advertisements telling people how to vote, which party to vote for, to educational soap operas.

6.2.1. The place of competing parties in the media

Scholars admit that if the public media has the duty to publish or broadcast equally on candidates or parties, however a host of conundrums spring when it comes to determining a number of issues especially because advertising can hardly eschew market or profit pressure. Manoah (2009) singles out five areas that need to be seriously addressed: The first is whether to have paid advertising, free access, or a mixture of the two. In some cases, all parties are allocated free direct access but can top this up with paid advertising.

The second problem resides in the allocation of time or space among the competing parties. At the outset, one would assume that parties who can pay are likely to be given more time. However, things are not that simple and the criteria to be taken into account when allocating time or space to political parties are not clear-cut. Manoah (2009: 19) lists criteria such as “equality (every party gets equal time); equitability or fairness (parties are allocated time according to popular support); past electoral support (the number of seats currently held in parliament); opinion polls or the number of candidates running”.

Thirdly, the timing of slots poses some problems to regulators as regards for instance how to give time to parties especially during prime time and how to line them up.

The fourth issue concerns who pays and who makes the programmes, either the parties or the public broadcaster. Lastly but in the same vein, regulators often hit a snag as to determining the content to be aired or published or if the competing parties can design their own contents.

In the case of Rwanda, it was noticed that public media neatly outclassed private media in covering campaigns. Talk shows, airtime in news and advertisements were regularly aired and space in public newspapers was provided. However, it was clear that political parties were given unequal chances. As shown by HCP report (2008b), all the talk shows broadcast on TV Rwanda between August and September gave precedence to PL and RPF’s coalition, whereas Radio Rwanda’s talk shows seemed to be given longer airtime in favor of PSD.

In most cases, the reporting dwelt on providing details on the electoral process. The details were given by the Rwanda National Electoral Commission mainly through the “Kubaza bitera kumenya” (question and answer) program broadcast live on Radio Rwanda and Rwanda Television. The program contributed a lot in voters’ education as citizens could interact with elections organizers for more than two hours.

“Ubwisanzure bw’itangamakuru” (freedom of the press) is another live program that was key to the campaign. The program was concurrently aired on Radio Rwanda, Radio Salus, Flash FM and Contact FM. The main focus of the program was to serve as a forum for media workers and citizens to discuss a number of issues pertaining to the freedom of the press. The Rwanda Editors Forum (REFO) seized this opportunity in September 2008 to discuss with media workers on the

law governing the media during the electoral period. The debate was doubtlessly of much importance as not all the journalists in the country had acquired a copy of this code of conduct. Also, the program helped shun away any confusion that the code could contain.

Noteworthy is the fact that the independent candidate, Mr HARERIMANA Jean Marie Vianney, was almost absent in the media as he alleged total ignorance of his right to access the media as well as other competitors or capacity constraints. Even when he was given time on Rwanda Television, it was less than what he was allowed and journalists could hardly let him complete his ideas, they interrupted him quite often. This was noticed especially during talk shows on Radio Rwanda.

Private media did not value much reporting on the independent candidate as they are mostly profit oriented. For instance, The New Times counted only one article on this candidate. The article bore a very neutral tone as it read: “Rwanda independent candidate appealing for votes” (The New Times No 1595, Sept 13, 2008). The fact was that for instance private radio stations were very enthusiastic towards advertisements from political parties. Their reporting therefore tended to dwell on parties that offered more money i.e. more advertisements. For instance, advertisements of the RPF’s coalition were mainly aired by Radio Contact, as it is believed to be one of the best stations in the country so far. Other political parties, such as PSD used Radio Salus presumably to target voters in the Southern Province.

The New Times, one of the leading papers in the country, tried to report on campaigns in a neutral way. However, in many cases, the paper was adamantly hailing the RPF’s coalition either by advertisements or feature articles. Opposition parties, such as PL and PSD were underrepresented, which was probably a problem of means.

In general, the campaign period was massively covered by the media not only to educate voters but also to describe how political parties and independent candidate campaigned throughout the country. It was observed in the media that only the RPF was able to thoroughly put forward its realizations and future perspectives. Amongst other media, it is no need to mention the bias shown by La Nouvelle Relève, a government run paper in French. The paper wrote for instance “il n’y a de meilleur choix que le FPR” (The RPF is the best choice) (Issue No 689; August

2008) as a series of achievements were numbered such as successful gender policy; growing economy; various development projects; good governance; etc. This was a clear indication that no achievement in Rwanda could be reported without mentioning the RPF.

In addition, analysis of different media contents shows that opposition parties failed to distance themselves from the RPF's political line as whatever they claimed to be their own achievement or future perspective was not really different from RPF's. No wonder therefore if the latter largely superseded its opponents not only in the media but also during public rallies and eventually prevailed during the elections.

One more fact that was likely to undermine the image of the opposition is coverage of negative events. On the one hand, it was reported that one PSD's candidate was dropped from the list allegedly having something to do with the 1994 Genocide. This might have influenced voters in one way or another as some of them might have over generalized and portrayed the whole party as having participated in the Genocide. In addition, Umuvugizi newspaper (Issue 44, September 2008) highlighted the wrangle that erupted between the PSD and the RPF over Mutuelle de Santé (local health insurance scheme). The former claimed to have initiated this health insurance, whereas the latter categorically refuted this. Once again, this was further evidence that PSD's political arguments were not strong enough.

On the other hand, the Liberal Party (PL) was branded by the media as a party without followers. This appeared from articles in newspapers or news on radios that described how the party had to bribe motorcyclists so they can attend its rallies. Umuvugizi newspaper further criticized the PL as having failed to logically line up its candidates as compared to the RPF. As evidence, VOA (September 01st 2008) reported on how PL was represented by some candidates whose educational background was distrustful as the country's legal provision did not draw limits on candidates' education as long as they were literate. This, according to the media, was an indication of poor political maturity.

However, the RPF was surprisingly not free of negative coverage. For instance, the Amani newspaper (Issue 100, August 2008); Umuseso (Ussue 311, September 2008) and Umuvugizi (Issue 44, September 2008) tended to tarnish the RPF's image by reporting on some incidents

such as the population's complaints on 'forced' fundraising whereby people were coerced to contribute or simply money was raised from their salaries unknowingly. Also, Amani reported that the RPF forced citizens to participate to its rallies.

In the same vein, foreign media such as the VOA and BBC were somewhat critical towards the RPF (and coalition) as these stations were a forum whereby opposition leaders frequently had a free speech. This attitude triggered RPF's resentment to provide any kind of information to these international media. Hence, only PL and PSD's views were heard through VOA or BBC.

6.2.2. The meager role of Internet

The Internet, as one of the most recent technology in communication, is gradually influencing the way in which elections are reported. Manoah (2009) suggests that the Internet has ended the practice of "news blackouts" or "reflection periods", as it is not easy to regulate it. Other media analysts also point out that the Internet is playing a very crucial role in electoral campaigns. For example Jessica Guynn (2008) predicted that the Internet would be of outstanding use during the 2008 presidential campaign in the US and elsewhere in the world. She also notes:

"There are two distinct schools in the use of the Internet in politics. One will use it for top-down political message delivery. The second will use it to build a more robust and participatory democracy where the process of being involved in politics will become more relevant to a voter's daily life. Hopefully, the second school will become more prevalent and people will be able to hold their elected leaders more accountable and improve results".

To Cooper (2003b) however, the Internet's influence to democracy should not be overemphasized as there is a number of limiting factors some of which depend on technology and other on policy. These factors make it difficult for the Internet to become a forum for democratic debates and therefore transform politics.

Regarding use of the Internet before, during and after the September elections in Rwanda, it is a fact that the majority of online information was provided by the National Electoral Commission on its Website www.comelena.gov.rw. The information posted comprised of indications on elections' guidelines i.e. how citizens and political parties (and the independent candidate) needed to behave during the whole process. The website was also an official channel for the commission to publicise the elections results. According to authorities from the commission, the online postings were of great help for Rwandese from Diaspora. After elections, the Website was used to convey congratulations to citizens for their massive participation.

Amongst the political parties that used online communication, the RPF and its allies were the most important. The website www.rpfinkotanyi.co.rw provided mostly details on candidates' lists; and speeches of important leaders of the alliance that called upon and guided citizens on why and how to vote. Opposition parties (not allied to the RPF) namely the Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party allotted no significant importance to the Internet as they had no website during the electoral process.

However, it would be quite challenging and evidenceless to determine whether or not citizens really exploited online information provided either by the National Electoral Commission or by various political parties. Radio, public rallies and newspapers seemed to have more influence on citizens as they reach out to many people.

6.3. Reporting on the very day of elections

All the media outlets in country allotted the bunch of their time on elections proceedings all around the country. Of course, this coverage highly depended on the means that the owners availed. For instance, it was an outstanding fact that the Rwandan Television (RTV), in conjunction with the Rwanda Information Technology Authority (RITA), was able to cover the parliamentary polls live from four upcountry areas by using the Internet Protocol Teleconferencing. As such, it was possible to get various views comments from citizens in Rwamagana (Eastern Province), Huye (Southern Province), Musanze (Northern Province), and Karongi (Western Province). This rendered much easier election coverage than having to send journalists in those different areas. But the gist of public media coverage was massively

dominated by Radio Rwanda that relied on reports from permanent reporters scattered all around the country.

In addition, the Rwandan Editors Forum (REFO) facilitated journalists from various outlets, both public and private, to cover voting proceedings across the five provinces of Rwanda. In general therefore, the information provided by electronic media and the New Times, the only daily in the country, bore a twofold face: on the one hand, the media kept on educating and calling upon all the citizens to cast their votes as this is both their right and civil duty. On the other hand, the coverage aimed to monitor and describe the elections proceedings; hence the reporting tone was quite neutral. Apart from reports done thanks to REFO's facilitation, private media largely covered events in their vicinity, i.e. Kigali town and surrounding areas.

6.4. Coverage of results and post-election period

The elections were said to have attracted about 90% of turn-up. Moreover, the elections were conducted peacefully, according to the national police. They were proclaimed to be “consistent with the AU guidelines and standards for the conduct of democratic elections”, as said the representative of African Union team of observers. The European Union observers also found the elections peaceful and well prepared.

This positive stance towards the elections sparked positive coverage by the media in the post-election period. Most media dwelt on the *pride* that Rwanda garnered from being able to conduct successful elections. Some media went even further to show that Rwanda had accomplished something rare in many other African countries. For instance, in The New Times (No 1597, September 16, 2008) a Zimbabwean citizen suggested that parliamentary elections in Rwanda should inspire his country, Zimbabwe, whereby presidential elections and power sharing deal have hit a snag, thus ushering in an unprecedented impasse.

Furthermore, the media highly lauded the RPF's coalition victory, which was seen as sign that the population of Rwanda, after the 1994 Genocide, had acquired much maturity and were able to make right and reasonable choices. Most media tried to substantiate how the RPF deserved its victory. The major reason put forward was that RPF set up an unbeatable record of metamorphosing the country torn out by the Genocide into a stable and prosperous country.

Another outstanding topic that appeared both in electronic and print media is *gender and politics*. After elections, the majority of the Rwanda's Parliament was composed of females. This, according to all the public media covered by this study, was one fact Rwanda should boast of as no other country in the world had such a majority (more than 56%).

As a result, the Rwanda parliamentary elections triggered a heated debate and coverage in the media as regards women and politics. It was an opportunity for a number of outlets in the country to laud the good governance put in place by the Government of Rwanda in the post-genocide period. The outstanding achievement pinpointed by the media was the promotion of equal and effective representation of women in various decision making organs, which is enshrined in the Rwandan constitution.

Most media seemed to support this policy by highlighting that women can participate in democracy not only as voters, but also as very vocal political party activists, advocates and – why not – candidates. For this to happen, the media were told, amongst other things, to help women participate by giving them more voice and visibility during the electoral processes in the future and avoid cultural stereotypes that kept women behind for so long.

However, some other private outlets such as Umuseso viewed the victory of women in the parliament as unreal and pure masquerade by the Rwanda Government to bemuse the international community by showing how democratic and gender-sensitive the country is rather than a sign of women emancipation. In an interview on BBC, Charles Kabonero, the chief editor of Umuseso newspaper, bitterly criticised the elections results. He thought women in the parliament, especially the Speaker of the Parliament, were not politically mature enough.

On the other hand, some media's attention was attracted by critical views from some organisations such as the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme dans les Grands Lacs (LDGL), which is a regional human rights watchdog. The views sustained that the elections were marred by inconsistencies. Some public media tackled the critiques by giving voice to the Chairman of the National Elections Commission, Professor Chrisologue Karangwa who seriously refuted them. Radio Salus and other community radios reported neutrally on the LDGL's report and no comment was slipped in the news or any other program on the elections.

On the contrary, some other media such as Umuseso tended to fuel these critiques by showing how the results were biased. The Voice of America (VOA) gave room to opposition leaders who severely condemned the elections.

Also worth highlighting is the media representation of the opposition parties and independent candidate after elections. The New Times (Issue No 1599, September 18, 2008) gave a somehow balanced coverage of all the concerned parties by allowing them to speak out their impressions of the elections' outcomes. However, it was clear that public media were obsessed by the coverage of the RPF's coalition while the private media attempted to advocate for the opposition. Notwithstanding having gained quite a few places in the parliament, opposition leaders surprisingly neither expressed bitterness in the media nor did they contest elections results. Only the independent candidate was reported to complain that his votes were miscounted.

Critical media in the post-elections period also included Amani newspaper (Issue 101, September 2008). The outlet had a particular focus to showing that the elections were not rose. It even went far to allege without enough evidence that incongruities occurred. For instance, the paper showed lack of professionalism as the journalist, from some isolated cases where he met only ONE person, drew conclusions that the elections were not trustworthy. The same newspaper displayed its bias by covering and emphasizing complaints from the independent candidate while failing to allocate place to other political parties.

7. Conclusion

The present study established that the media, both privately and publicly owned, were crucial for the various competing parties by allocating space and time. The media also contributed a lot to the citizens' education before, during and after the Rwandan elections in September 2008. However, lots of bottlenecks were disclosed. Not only space and time allocated to the parties were unequal, but also the latter were unaware of their rights to access the media or simply did not take seriously the potential of the media and hence failed to conduct massive campaign.

In addition, it is a fact that the campaign in the media was fair and peaceful as no major incident occurred. As a reason, the debates in the media were not too fierce as presumably their ideologies per se did not totally diverge. Though, the media tone differed as some were inclined to lauding one party and, on the contrary, blackening another. This study showed that the broadcast media stood out for being more neutral—and also less negative—than most other news outlets i.e. print media.

However, the data of this study is not conclusive as to whether one media or another that gave poor or rich coverage to a candidate/party did it knowingly. This can be reflected by the tremendous lack of professionalism in the Rwandan media industry. In other words, one cannot deduct with firm evidence from the data that the media were pro or against one party/candidate or another. However, the data may offer strong suggestion that winning higher coverage of the media would mean winning elections. This because, as stated earlier, voters' choice is highly framed by media discourse. But this has to be seen into context because a number of other variables such as interpersonal communication are likely to influence voters.

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