

# **In the Cartoonist's Mind: Exploring Political Comic Strips in Kenyan Daily Newspapers**

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## **Abstract**

This study sought to establish the intentions of cartoonists in coming up with political comic strips. In-depth interview was used to gain insight into the intentions of a selected, experienced, and renowned cartoonist. The data also consisted of editorial cartoon strips sampled from the Daily Nation newspapers. Data were analyzed qualitatively, guided by the Social Action Theory postulated by the communication theorists, Anderson and Meyer [1988]. The study found that editorial cartoons are very subjective and can easily polarize society along various lines. Given the fact that cartoons are highly opinionated, negative, and sectarian, the study recommends that there is need for policies and regulations to govern the use of these cartoons.

## **Introduction**

“The primary purpose of political cartoons is to make social and political commentary that simplifies the subtle and often complex underlying issues of a news story” (Fairrington, 2009: 205). This assessment serves to underline the great significance attached to editorial/political cartoons in contemporary society. Feldman (2005) defines an editorial cartoon as a representational or symbolic drawing that makes a satirical, witty, or humorous point about a political subject, be it a topical issue, event, or person. The writer further says that the graphic images in editorial cartoons convey concepts that might otherwise only be thought of in terms of verbal abstractions.

Fox and Hoffman (2011) agree and go further to say that editorial cartoons convey things that pure text would not, such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, satire, and irony. But the greatest impact of editorial cartoons on society lies in their inherent nature to sway public opinion. Lordan (2006) says that editorial cartoons go beyond mere aesthetics and serve to persuade individuals and groups towards certain political perspectives or to take a particular stand on social issues. He further states that the politicization of cartoons is meant to make political statements in what is essentially a humorous medium and reach out to the masses with serious messages aimed at persuading them to join a political cause through humor.

This assessment is better exemplified by Jimoh's (2010) assertion that Nigerian cartoonist Akinola Lasekan's editorial cartoons in the late 1950s helped bring about the end of colonial rule in Nigeria and a new dawn for a self-governing country. Jimoh (2010) further says that editorial cartoons in Nigeria have always striven to put political and social issues in context and helped the public better understand and appreciate happenings through humour and satire. Many scholars in the area of editorial cartoons agree that in Africa, the emergence of editorial cartoons has been influenced by a need to have an alternative platform to voice unpopular political opinion in the face of government or regime crackdown on dissent. In South Africa for example, James (1997) says that black oppression in the face of white authoritarian rule drove political dissent underground and political cartoons founded a platform for resistance where mainstream press would ordinarily muzzle these opinions.

Many political cartoons had racial and political undertones with a narrative of oppression and resistance predominant in the content. Kinghorn (1999), still writing on the origins of political cartoons in South Africa, says that the Boers were the originators of political cartoons in South Africa as protest to perceived British dominance in local political affairs. The refrain is similar: oppression and resistance, and the need to find an alternative platform to voice unpopular political opinions. It can be said that political cartoons are popular because of their off-tangent portrayal of opinions. They are not hard tackling like a straight-up editorial piece castigating excesses of government, but react to such issues in an indirect way thereby massaging government sensibilities but putting across the point in the most indirect of manners.

In Kenya, editorial cartoons are an everyday facet of local newspapers, so much so that their place on the op-ed pages is a guaranteed formality. All newspapers in the country adopt a similar page layout with the editorial cartoons prominently displayed in the op-ed pages near the beginning of the paper. The fact that they are situated at the heart of the paper's opinion and editorial page, laying out the paper's take on socio-political issues marks editorial cartoons as the virtual mouthpiece of the paper providing editorial direction.

The impact of mass media in Kenya, more so newspapers, as Ogonda (1992) notes, is far-reaching in society. This is because they are used as sources of information. A majority of Kenyans perceive the mass media as one of the most credible institutions in society because of the media's relentless fight to expose graft and other social evils. The mass media are ahead of government institutions such as the police, parliament, and the judiciary. Newspapers are important to Kenyan society because they are pervasive much more than any other forms of mass media. They are widely read and are a source of political information. During election periods, Kenyan newspapers are bound to have headlines with political leanings more than any other period. This underscores their importance to the public, both the electorate and the aspirants, as a platform to articulate and access various opinions and agenda of different political parties and personalities.

## **Literature Review**

Editorial cartoons as a means of communication are very subjective. Indeed, Hess and Northrop (2011) say that good cartoons and cartoonists should be "unabashedly subjective" (p. 11). Bohl (1997) says that political cartoons are inherently negative, critical, and cynical. He says that the editorial cartoonist's role is to engender thought and inspire action amongst his audience. Honest criticism of the people in power should be his mantra. The political cartoonist must first and foremost have a political opinion to put across, and then have the courage to state the opinion (Bohl, 1997). The point here is that editorial cartoonists must have a political opinion and are required to put it across.

Political cartoons are therefore an instrument used to perpetuate a person's/group of people's political opinion and influence others to gain that perspective. Unlike journalistic writing, they are not required to present facts and remain objective though they operate in the same space and perform the same functions. Because of the subjectivity of editorial cartoons, they are often biased and therefore can be used to advance the interests of the cartoonist, the editorial objectives of the newspaper publishing it, and/or the interests of a politician or a political lobby group that supports the publication. It is therefore no guarantee that journalistic ethics, that serve to guide much of the content in the newspaper or magazine and thus ensures that subjective and politically motivated content that is not factual stays out of the newspaper pages, will carry on to the editorial page that carry the editorial cartoon and will be religiously followed when publishing it. Harmful content may be sneaked in through the editorial cartoons under the guise of humor. It is therefore imperative to set professional parameters with regard to the use of editorial cartoons.

Humorous depiction of political events and actors is the mainstay of political cartoons. But these messages are not often directly put across. They are hidden under layers of innuendo, satire, and parody. The lampooning of political figures/events serves to attain two key objectives, according to Feldman (2005): One, political cartoons depict the core concerns surrounding circumstances, issues, or individuals and reflect the local political realities of the day and two, they influence the political attitudes and dispositions of the public towards the political process. They therefore operate in a culture-specific environment because, for the audience to decipher the hidden meanings, they must be able to interpret correctly the various political players, issues, and circumstances being parodied.

The motive of the editorial cartoon and its timing helps to identify potential biases that the publisher may be interested in bringing about amongst the audience. This assessment is necessary to decipher the relevance of the cartoon to the issues of the day. It may also help in identifying agenda-setting behaviour of the publisher. McCombs (2004) says that mass media audiences only get a second-hand reality from journalists and media outlets who structure reports about events and situations. The media influences what part of an event forms realistic news and how the news is conveyed to consumers. He describes agenda-setting as the careful orchestration of events and affairs such that the public is forced to focus their attention to those particular events as depicted by the media, and further, in the particular manner they are depicted. Media consumers are thereby “duped” into believing that the issues as depicted in newspaper and TV news are of particular relevance to them. It is in much the same way that editorial cartoons work in ensuring that the issues in focus stay in the domain of public discourse.

Coleman et al (2009:149) say that the “first level” of agenda setting deals with the ability of the mass media to influence public focus on issues by the amount of coverage they accord a particular issue, while the second level called “attribute agenda setting” deals with how these issues are depicted in public sphere. With regard to editorial cartoons, the second level of agenda setting occurs in two ways: one is the “substantive elements” of the cartoon that conveys the substantive attributes of the person or issue depicted in the strip (such as ideology, qualifications, and personality if the person is a political candidate), and the other is the “affective elements” which contain the emotional tone with which each substantive element is conveyed to the reader (Coleman et al, 2009:150).

Agenda setting in editorial cartoons makes the audience to focus their attention on the particular person or issue depicted in the cartoons and cultivates an environment where public discourse on the issue or person is encouraged, as has been earlier established. Further, the cartoons ensure that the political discourse is carried out in a manner dictated by the cartoon by driving the emotive content of discussion and prescribing the nature, tempo, and urgency of argument to suit a certain political objective.

This much can be seen from the above arguments. The general effect, therefore, of the generation and guidance of political discourse in the public domain using politically targeted messages is to band together public opinion on given issues. This creates a situation where public opinion is swayed either to support or reject a given political candidate or issue through the emotions engendered by the editorial cartoons.

## **Newspapers in Kenya**

Sobania (2003) says that the first newspaper to be established in Kenya was *The African Standard* established in 1902 by two businessmen; an Asian named A. M. Jevanjee and a white named W. H. Tiller. The two established the newspaper to give native Africans a voice in the white-dominated public press. Indeed, the period preceding independence in 1963 was the most vibrant in African media even though the white minority who controlled Government tried its best to muzzle the community press that published in Kamba, Swahili and Kikuyu (Sobania, 2003). Sobania (2003) says that many of the African publications during this period expressed hopes of African self-rule and therefore were viewed negatively by whites. *The African Standard* was later renamed *The East African Standard* and was used to propagate the views of the white minority. It also had affiliations to other smaller publications which catered to the needs of the native Africans. These were: *Baraza*, *Mombasa Times*, and *The Tanganyika Standard*.

Several other publications sprung up after the whites successfully took over the *East African Standard*. These were: *Muigwithania* published by Jomo Kenyatta between 1928 and 1934, *Mumenyereri* published by Henry Muoria in 1945, and *Ramogi* and *Nyanza Times* published by Achieng Oneko and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga (Iraki, 2010). These publications were, however, short lived in the face of government crackdown and persecution of their publishers. The publishers also lacked editorial and management skills as well as the resources to make these ventures viable businesses in the long term. The *East African Standard* survived the tumultuous colonial and post-independence period and was renamed severally, before settling on *The Standard* which it operates up to date. In 1959, the Aga Khan purchased a Swahili weekly, *Taifa Leo*, and renamed it the *Sunday Nation*. *The Daily Nation* was created soon thereafter and has grown to be Kenya's most visible daily newspaper followed by *The Standard*. Between them, the two dailies command a majority following in the country. Later publications include *The Star* and other tabloid publications.

## **Methods**

This study utilized In-depth Interviews (IDI) as a data collection tool. IDIs enable qualitative researchers to dig deep into the feelings of individuals regarding particular experiences while disregarding the social circumstances that surround those experiences (Kaar, 2007). Three editorial cartoon strips from the Daily Nation were purposively selected from newspapers ranging from January 18<sup>th</sup> to February 5<sup>th</sup> 2013. IDI was used to gain understanding on the circumstances and reasons why the cartoonist came up with the sampled cartoon strips and the political opinion he intended to pass. This entailed a one-on-one discussion with the cartoonist using an interview guide that addressed the objectives of the study. This technique enabled the researcher to set up appointments and interview the respondent at the most appropriate times and at their preferred locations of interviews. Appointments were made via telephone and emails. In total three interviews that lasted on average forty-five minutes each was done. Hence, data was qualitatively analyzed by describing findings from the institutional respondent (cartoonist) to find out the political messages that are inherent in the editorial cartoons.

## **Findings**

The key informant for the study was Mr. GADO the cartoonist who has been doing cartoons for the daily Nation, Saturday and Sunday Nation since 1992 and the author of the cartoon strips utilized by this study. Mr. GADO said he majorly constructs political cartoons adding that in Africa everything is connected to politics. “ Everything in Africa is politicized, whether you are talking about a social or a health issue, politics takes the biggest share,” he said.

On how he comes up with ideas for cartoon editorials, the cartoonist said he ensures he is “on top of events.” “This helps me to come up with relevant drawings that are in tune with the events of the day. “He said he reads newspapers a lot, policy documents, books, among many other publications. He also said he watches news events on television and listens to radio.

## **Intention of the Cartoonist**

The cartoonist confirmed to the researcher that at times the cartoons show the opinion of the newspaper organisation and other times it is his own independent opinion. However, he quickly added that political cartooning is like doing political commentary, expressing the opinion of the cartoonist thus his stand on various political issues.

The cartoonist admitted to having been sued severally for defamation as a result of offensive cartoons. “As I speak to you now there is a pending court case resulting from one of my cartoons” he said. He, however, said some politicians and lawyers threaten to sue him but they never implement the threats.

In his view cartoonists should be allowed to use satire to express their take on various political happenings saying that this is the essence of freedom of press. He, however, said it was difficult for freedom of press to be enjoyed during the regime of the senior presidents Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi than in the Kibaki and Uhuru regimes. He was of the opinion that there should be no restrictions on free expression, and particularly in the use of cartoons.

According to the interviewed cartoonist, political cartoons, over the centuries have been used to provoke thoughts. They are supposed to say something and pass a message, though the messages are hidden in humor. They are supposed to lampoon political leaders and other famous people. From the cartoonist’s interview, he clarified to the researcher that he did not intend to attract readers to the newspaper by drawing cartoons that they like, rather his core business was to pass the message he wishes to pass. “I am not in the business of pleasing people. If my cartoons succeed in making the audience to laugh the better and if they annoy them, so be it, after all cartoons are supposed to antagonize some people,” he said.

He said that editorial cartoons have a license to point out what people fear to say and they are also meant to provoke thoughts and not entirely, as many perceive, making the audience laugh. On whether his work is edited before publishing, the cartoonist confirmed having editors who go through it and when they feel something is too sensitive, they comment to have it toned down. He was however quick to add that they don’t decide for him the topic to draw on.

We will now examine some of his cartoons:



GNASHING OF TEETH | Macharia Gaitho

**Cartoon I:** With regard to the cartoon strip I, the cartoonist did indicate he used simple self-explanatory symbolism which refers to Hon. Raila with his cronies. For him, his intentions were simply to mean, during that Orange Democratic Movement party nominations (conducted in January 2013 before the main parliamentary elections), there was nepotism, cronyism and favoritism in favor of those close to the former Prime Minister, Hon Raila Odinga. He also intended to say the nomination process was marred by violence and lack of transparency.

He identified the cronies as, Otieno Kajwang, Anyang Nyon'go, Ruth Odinga (his sister), Jakoyo Midiwo (his cousin) and Oburu Odinga (his brother), all of whom were vying for various elective positions in the last elections. He went ahead to identify other objects and images used as stones, teargas canisters and flies indicating violence and a `dirty` nomination process.



**Cartoon II:** In this cartoon, the cartoonist identified the characters used as Martha Karua's giant leg being supported by her then running mate for the presidency Mr. Augustine Lotodo. The interpretation he gave was that it was not easy for Mr. Lotodo to help Hon Karua win the election. It was an uphill task for him to mobilize any votes for her since she was not a top contender for the presidency and because Lotodo was a non-starter in national politics.



**Cartoon III:** According to the cartoonist, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) officials are covering their noses as they receive nomination certificates from various candidates. He said he wanted to pass the message that, even though the party nominations were evidently a sham, marred by corruption, violence, bribery and other social ills, the IEBC officials had no choice but to accept those candidates who he described as “actually stinking to the high heavens”. The flies and arrows show that there was violence and unclean practices that bedeviled the party primaries of diverse political parties.

## Discussion of Findings

According to the first objective of this study, which sought to find out the intentions of the cartoonist in constructing political cartoons, Mr. Gado, who is the cartoonist for the Nation newspapers said he follows keenly what the media disseminates among other informational materials. He said he reads newspapers, watches television, and listens to radio, reads policy documents and others. He said by doing this he is able to come up with relevant drawings that resonate well with the political environment of the day. This confirms the Social Action Theory postulated by Anderson and Meyer that guided this study, in that the public shapes media content and media also influences the behavior of the public.

For the cartoonist to construct relevant cartoons he has to find out what the people are doing and what they are saying especially politicians and what the feelings of the audience are in reaction. In short, social action informs media content (cartoons) and vice versa when the audience reacts to the cartoons. Therefore, the influence of the mass media on the actions of individuals in society cannot be likened to the action of a “doer” upon a submissive subject, but takes the form of an interactive influence where individuals shape media messages as much as the messages influence the individuals.

The cartoonist further admitted that he had pending cases in court as a result of his cartoons. This implies that those who took him to court were agitated and were emotionally affected by the messages that came out of the editorials. This is testimony to assertions by Feldman (2005), as discussed in the literature review, who argues that while language is inarguably competent in conveying messages and putting arguments together, it does not have the proven ability of visual images to arouse emotions. It is this arousal of emotions that may have propelled certain individuals to seek legal redress in court against Gado.

Still in his response, the cartoonist informed the researcher that even though there are editors who go through his work to ensure it is not so hard-tackling, the space is fairly unlimited to allow him free will to express his opinions. He said the editors do not decide for him what to draw and the message to pass qualifies the fact that editorial cartoons as a means of communication are very subjective. This confirms what Hess and Northrop (2011) aver that good cartoons and cartoonists should be “unabashedly subjective” (p. 11). We have discussed this view in the literature review section. Nevertheless, perhaps to illustrate this subjectivity further is the statement made by the cartoonist that “I am not in the business of pleasing people. If my cartoons succeed in making the audience to laugh, the better and if they annoy them, so be it, after all cartoons are supposed to antagonize some people”. This implies that his opinions come first before everything else.

On specific cartoons, the cartoonist intended to show the rot in terms of nepotism, tribalism, violence and other vices in Cartoon I. During the time the cartoon was published, party nominations had taken place and they had been characterized by all manner of social ills that amounted to a completely undemocratic process. In ODM for example as shown in the cartoon, politicians perceived to be close to the party leader including some of his kinsfolk were seen to be favored by the party for various political slots they were competing for. This was despite the fact that they were not preferred by the public. They seemingly enjoyed favor from the party leader. In fact these undemocratic nominations are said to have been one of the reasons ODM did not perform well enough in the general elections. Discontented popular candidates defected to other parties and tried their luck once more. The same happened in the rival party The National Alliance (TNA) where some candidates that considered themselves popular even had to rush to court to seek redress for what they perceived to be an unfair nomination process.

The lampooning of political figures/events serves to attain two key objectives, according to Feldman (2005): One, political cartoons depict the core concerns surrounding circumstances, issues, or individuals and reflect the local political realities of the day; and two, they influence the political attitudes and dispositions of the public towards the political process. In this case, the cartoonist intended to drive home serious concerns plaguing the Kenyan political scene such as nepotism, corruption, violence among many others, and therefore influence the public against these practices.

In cartoon II, the cartoonist, intended to tell the public that Hon Martha Karua's choice for running mate Mr. Augustine Lotodo was inconsequential as he would not help Karua to win the election, since he was not famous enough to attract any votes. As discussed above, the cartoonist also wanted to draw the attention of the readers to the key issue on the political scene which was that Hon Karua had made the wrong choice for running mate by appointing Mr. Lotodo as her running mate.

We would point out here that the cartoons are not always interpreted as intended by the cartoonist. Some readers assumed this cartoon meant that Hon Martha Karua was a very difficult person to work with and, in fact, it appeared Mr. Lotodo would have a hard time being her running mate. So, whatever the interpretation it is clear in the tone: it is not a very pleasant experience for the pair.

For cartoon III, the cartoonist once again attacked the party nomination exercise showing it as having taken place in a corrupt and opaque manner. As discussed above and as authoritatively confirmed by Feldman (2005), the cartoonist intended to draw the attention of once again key issues in the political arena that is the social ills of corruption and dirty politics and influence people to take a stand on them. It was hard for any one party to claim to be better than the rest: all were very filthy and stank. It was only due to lack of time that the IEBC, the body conducting elections had to accept the nominations though they all went against known best practice. This cartoon reminds all Kenyans that they cannot castigate any one party as they were all full of corruption. In the face of the New Constitution and perceived reforms this cartoon paints a grim picture that the adage that 'the more things change, the more they remain the same' still rings true in Kenya.

## **Conclusion**

This study lends credence to available literature that affirms the subjectivity of editorial cartoons in passing political messages. The interviewed editorial cartoonist averred that he decides what to pass across to the public and goes ahead to pass it with minimal checks from the management of the media organisation. Effectively, this study establishes that editorial cartoons are highly opinionated as opposed to news stories that are required to be objective in nature. With all the effort to produce objectivity in a newspaper a single cartoon can ruin it all and raise political temperatures by polarizing readers.

## Recommendation

This paper recommends that given the fact that the cartoons are largely subjective, there should be policies and regulations that govern use of these cartoons to avert polarization of the society through use of perceived unfriendly cartoons. Being allowed free will to say what they feel like through cartoons may occasion antagonizing messages to find their way into the newspaper hence brew animosity among various socio-economic and political groups. Nevertheless, media freedom is a fundamental human right so this regulation should be achieved, preferably by the media self-regulation mechanisms rather than by gagging of the media by governments.

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