

Public Perception of Parliament Broadcasting in Kenya: Towards Altering Mutual Attitude and Augmenting Knowledge

Sande Wandera¹

John Mugubi²

Abstract

A major problem faced by many countries where Parliamentary democracy is developing, is lack of public knowledge and awareness about the functions of Parliaments and their mode of operation (Miller, 2008; IPU, 2006; Bouchet & Kariithi, 2003). The lack of awareness is said to be accompanied by a general public opinion that Parliament is an opaque institution devoid of transparency and accountability (USAID, 2010; Bouchet & Kariithi, 2003). It is from this background that the concept of live parliament broadcasting was born; the argument being that live parliament broadcasting would engender a channel of communication – an unadulterated channel free from interventions of media owners and media professionals - between the public and politicians. It was believed that such an avenue would lead to greater public awareness and appreciation of the work of Parliament, better public attitude and perception towards parliament, involvement of the public more in Parliamentary debates, hence helping in making politicians more accountable (Miller, 2008; Franks & Vandermark, 1995; Wober, 1990). Miller (2008) quotes a contemporary British Conservative politician, Norman St. John-Stevas, who claims that: "To televise parliament would, at a stroke, restore any loss it has suffered to the new mass media as the political education of the nation." It is in this regard that this paper tries to find out the effects of live parliament broadcasts in Kenya on public knowledge across the social strata. It also investigates the effects of these broadcasts on public attitude and perception about parliament and its work. The paper further assesses broadcasting practices that could help improve live parliament broadcasting in Kenya.

Introduction

Live microphones and cameras were introduced in the Kenyan National Assembly on July of 2008 (Wanjiku, 2008). Prior to this, Kenya's Parliament had many a times been blamed for lacking accountability and transparency in its operations, thus being ineffective in governance. This perception led to loss of public trust and confidence in this very important arm of government (USAID, 2010). As part of the reforms aimed at strengthening this institution and winning over public trust and confidence, the then Speaker of the National assembly, Hon. Marende Otiato constituted a committee to look at modalities of broadcasting Parliamentary proceedings (Balancing Act, 2008). Meanwhile, the speaker allowed trials to run for months on the public broadcaster, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Radio and TV, as the House sorted out the legal and logistical issues that could help it broadcast on their own (Mutai, 2008).

¹ Kenyatta University Radio Station, Nairobi, Kenya

² Department of Theatre Arts and Film Technology, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya

One of the core aims of the undertaking was to enhance public understanding of and confidence in democratic governance, in the wake of the violence that had erupted in 2007 subsequent to the disputed presidential elections (USAID, 2010).

The endeavour further aimed at providing educational value to a public unfamiliar with parliamentary procedures and processes by giving the listeners and viewers a direct and first-hand experience of the House at work, as opposed to what they would otherwise receive from news reports or commentaries prepared by parliamentary reporters (Mwaura, 2008).

For almost six years now, through live parliament broadcasting, the Kenyan parliament has allowed the citizens to listen and watch live proceedings of its sessions on radio and television. However, it has been claimed that, as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments. Hence, the gap in knowledge between these two segments tends to increase rather than decrease (Tichenor et al, 1970:159–160).

Consequently, it is also argued that the broadcasts may fail to inform the public unless care is taken to ensure that it is not just a matter of communicating information, but of also making it comprehensible to the many people who are not familiar with the workings of a parliament (Miller, 2008; IPU, 2006; Raine & Bresnahan, 2003; Clarke et al., 1980). In addition, it is claimed that proceedings in Parliament are too technical to be understood by the ordinary listener who would be liable to get a false impression of the business transacted; thus the need to let the professional, political correspondents explain the ‘mysteries’ of parliament to the public (Miller, 2008; Raine & Bresnahan, 2003; Clarke et al., 1980).

It is in an attempt to validate these arguments that this paper tries to find out the effects of live parliament broadcasts on public knowledge across the social strata. It also investigates the effects of these broadcasts on public attitude and perception about parliament and its work. The paper further assesses broadcasting practices that could help improve live parliament broadcasting in Kenya.

Effects of Parliament Broadcasting

In Canada, the proponents of televising the House of Commons had asserted that parliament broadcasting would stimulate public interest in and knowledge about members of parliament and their work (Franks & Vandermark, 1995). They also argued that TV would raise awareness of the daily activities of Members of Parliament (MPs) and convince the public that indeed the House raises issues that are relevant to them (Clarke et al., 1980). Allan MacEachen (cited in Clarke et al., 1980) remarks that “broadcasting...will inform Canadians about what the government is doing, about what the opposition is proposing or opposing, and about the manner in which members represent their constituents and play an integral role in the governing process.” These thoughts of enhanced public awareness were further emphasized by Walter Baker (cited in Clarke et al., 1980), who observes that: “perhaps for all of us, our constituents will appreciate the grinding tasks that we must perform, and, perhaps, they will come to reject as inadequate analysis the fashionable cynicism purveyed about us from time to time”.

Subsequently, in the surveys carried out on the public after the 1985 six months’ experiment of televising the House of Lords, television was considered the best medium in helping one apprehend more about the workings of parliament. Television was also seen as the best medium for citizens to get to know member of parliament’s true feelings about national concerns. Live Parliament broadcasting was also deemed as the best avenue for encouraging decorum among MPs due to publicity that comes along with it (Wober, 1990).

Wober (1990) also avers that, through televising parliamentary proceedings, the average knowledge about the workings of the House is likely to go up among the elite (who are better equipped with knowledge and appropriate viewing practices) as compared to those who are not, at the outset, interested in this new topic. People of higher social standing veritably are well-informed and also know how and when to use new sources of knowledge more effectively than people who start with less knowledge.

However, Wober (1990) acknowledges that studies on the kinds of knowledge that people gain from the Parliamentary proceedings is a lacuna that needs to be addressed in order to gauge the effectiveness of live Parliamentary broadcasting. He categorizes knowledge about Parliament into three, namely:

- (i) Knowledge about policies, personalities and event - who has done what, when and why.
- (ii) Knowledge on parliament procedure and
- (iii) Knowledge of how television filters reality.

Franklin (2004) asserts that media have a direct and significant effect on the knowledge, attitudes and even behaviour of members of the audience. This view contradicts Schechter's (1997) who avers that the more one watches, the less knowledge he gets. McQuail (1987) terms the debate a controversial one, avowing that this is an area with 'least certainty and least agreement'. In spite of all the divergent points of view, the engagement of media and the audience is such that the media transfers information to the audience (public), who become more informed, subsequently stimulating consciousness that leads to interest and, therefore, encourages apposite action.

Johansen (Cited in Robertson, 2005) discusses a number of issues related to the broadcasting of Parliament: the trivializing effect of television, its visual distractions and distortion of reality, its impact on the French-English question, and Marshall McLuhan's proposition that television would drive home Parliament's obsolescence. Johansen notes that fundamental questions about whether television and parliamentary proceedings were meant for each other had not been addressed: "Is the nature of television as a medium of communication compatible with the nature of Parliament as an institution? Would television coverage of the Commons help or hinder popular understanding of, and participation in, Canadian politics?" Part of the answers to the questions raised by Johansen are in Wober's (1990) article which indicates that the Studies carried out on the House of Lords television experiment in 1985 showed television to have no effect on public knowledge about the workings of parliament. However, Wober (1990) observes that, the same studies had shown that watching specialist parliamentary programming strengthened knowledge of how parliament works; a disposition which could subsequently increase appreciation of parliament as an institution.

It had also been noted that after years of broadcasting the House of Commons, many Canadians were critical of politicians, and detested what they saw of them on television:

Time and again, people have criticized the childishness or irrelevance of politicians, and their behaviour in the House of Commons. Many viewers are fully aware of the tactics employed by Members (such as congregating behind a speaker to make the House look full) and feel that such tactics are juvenile. Whether a public attitude to federal politicians and to Parliament has been exacerbated or not by the presence of television is difficult to say. Criticisms may instead be attributable to the general cynicism that the public feels about its political leaders. However, faced with prospects of losing the parliamentary channel, many Canadians react strongly, saying that it is extremely important that they be able to follow the proceedings (Robertson, 2005:6).

In Kenya, the then Speaker, Hon. Marende viewed broadcasting and televising of parliamentary proceedings as a leap into boosting public awareness of parliamentary activities, enlarging public participation in governance and increasing accountability and transparency in parliamentary dealings:

Opening Parliament to the public will recast the manner in which Parliament does its work. The public will be participants in the national debate by accessing, real time, the deliberations of Parliament and its committees on important national issues, as well as its duty to put the Government in check. The Tenth Parliament is very robust, and I promise you great content. (USAID, 2010)

On the other hand, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Information and Communication at the time of launching live parliament broadcasting, Dr. Bitange Ndemo, indicated that live coverage of house activities offered an opportunity to disabuse the public of the perception that parliamentarians were exceptional people. According to Dr. Ndemo, Parliamentary broadcasting would also enable the electorate to make informed judgments of the performance of their MPs and the national assembly; the latter being viewed in the court of public opinion as a den for indolent, lay-about self-seekers (Afrik, 2008).

After the trials of live broadcasting of parliament proceedings in Kenya, asked to give their thoughts about the effect of the technology, some Kenyans affirmed that it had led to increased public enlightenment and participation in parliamentary work and government (Wanjiku, 2008). The USAID (2010) also noted that Live Broadcasting had made parliamentary debates the most popular broadcast in the nation and that MPs had reported a sharp increase in awareness of parliamentary activity, as constituents expected to see MPs speak during key floor debates.

In a case study executed in a small town in central Kenya called Ruiru on the effects of live parliament broadcasts on the public knowledge, attitude and perception in Kenya, we established that live parliament broadcast had augmented people's knowledge across the socio-economic groups, about parliament and its works. How-be-it, the actual knowledge about parliament as an institution seemed to have gone up among the upper class as compared to the lower class. For instance, only 2% of the lower class group knew the number of MPs that constituted a parliament, as compared to 20% of the upper class respondents. Similarly, 29% of the Upper class Ruiru residents knew the name of the then speaker as compared to 27% from the lower class respondents. In addition, 40% of the upper class respondents stated the right tenure of the Kenyan parliament as compared to 31% of the lower class respondents. When they were asked about the role of parliament, 52% of the upper class indicated that the main function of parliament was to hold the MPs responsible as for their actions. In contrast, 33% of the lower class indicated that the main function of parliament was to cater for the wellbeing of individual citizens.

Arising from the disparities in perception noted, therefore, live Parliamentary broadcasting could be said to have led to a widened knowledge gap between those who were information-rich (Upper class) about parliament and its works and those who were information-poor (lower class).

The case study in Ruiru also established that live parliamentary broadcasts had resulted in increased public interest in parliament and its works. Nonetheless, this interest was slanted in favour of the upper class. A total of 53% of the Ruiru residents were either 'very interested' or 'fairly interested' in parliament and its works. Subtotals of 29% respondents either were 'not very interested' or 'not at all interested' in parliament and its works. The highest interest was recorded amongst the upper class at 13% and the lack of interest recorded amongst the lower class at 5%. 24% of the respondents appreciated parliament and its works whilst 40% disliked Parliament. The middle and upper class respondents recorded the highest appreciation towards parliament and its works at 16% and 7% respectively.

The study also established that live parliamentary broadcasts seemed to have helped the public demystify parliament and its works, just as had been affirmed by the key informants (K2, K3). Live parliament broadcasts had also made the public gain knowledge on the importance of parliament as an arm of government that helped put the executive in check.

Live broadcasts had also made the public assess their MPs and parliament as a whole, thereby enabling citizens to rate parliament's performance and worthiness. Majority of the respondents were dissatisfied and lacked confidence and satisfaction in the Tenth parliament (2008-2013) and its works. 72% of the Ruiru residents thought that parliament was an important institution in Kenya. 6% of the Ruiru residents had total confidence in the Tenth parliament. 75% of the Ruiru residents sampled for the study had either 'little confidence' or 'no confidence' in the Tenth parliament. 38% of the Ruiru residents were either 'satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with the performance of the Tenth parliament. 68% of the respondents believed that television was the best medium for broadcasting live parliament broadcasts.

The study also found out that, among the upper class, most viewers considered Television to be the best medium for broadcasting parliamentary proceedings; at 30%. Radio was the preferred channel among the lower class group; at 63%. The massive preference for the Radio medium among the peasantry could be due to its affordability, portability and wide coverage. 57% and 43% of the middle and upper class respondents respectively indicated their support for live parliament broadcasts to be transmitted via the internet.

A majority of the respondents proposed that the live broadcasts be recorded, edited and replayed at prime hours and that commentators ought to concentrate on explaining to the listeners/ viewers, which MP is saying what and why.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at finding out the effects of the parliament broadcasting on public knowledge, attitude and perception about parliament and its work. The paper further assessed broadcasting practices that could help improve live parliament broadcasting in Kenya. From the findings of the study, we can make the following deductions:

- Social class is a vital variable in informing the public about parliament.
- Parliament broadcasting increases public knowledge about parliament and its works. However, the knowledge is biased in favour of the upper class in comparison to the lower class; thus failing to close on the knowledge gap as had been anticipated by the proponents of live parliamentary broadcast.
- The general public attitude towards parliament is negative. Subsequently, members of parliament ought to work diligently to improve the image of the workings of parliament. Ultimately, in a country where the majority are the beleaguered and deprived lowly, Kenyan Parliamentarians have to ensure that issues addressed are those that aim at improving the livelihood of this group.
- Parliament is an important arm of government for the country.
- Television and the internet are the best channels for live parliamentary broadcasts among the middle and upper class groups. On the other hand, radio is still the popular channel through which the lower social class respondents would like to continue receiving live parliament broadcasts. In as much as live parliament broadcasting should continue, majority of Kenyans feel that it should be recorded and replayed at prime hours. This view was highly recorded amongst the lower social class.

Recommendations

From the foregoing conclusions, several measures can be utilized to enhance public knowledge, attitude, perception about parliament and its works. They include:

1. The Kenyan parliament in collaboration with other partners could come up with well equipped centres in every constituency of Kenya where citizens can be able to listen and watch live parliament broadcasts.
2. Parliament should endeavour to make more information available and to communicate in a manner understandable to the majority. This is to help members of the public that lack accessibility to this information or may also be slow in terms of apprehending and retaining the sheer information given to them.
3. MPs should inject more substance to the quality of their debates by focusing more on issues that affect Kenyans or the world at large. This will not only make the public feel that parliament represents their aspirations, but also make the debates interesting to listen to.
4. Media houses should consider having replays, at prime hours, of the live parliament broadcasts on the salient issues debated. Such a strategy would increase public listenership and viewership. This is because, the time when parliament proceedings are aired, most of the people (especially those that are politically motivated) are at work or in college, and the only time to get most of them is in the evenings and over the weekends.
5. Parliament could also introduce live webcasting of parliament proceedings in order to offer an alternative platform for the high class and middle class citizens who have shown strong support for this idea.
6. The Kenyan parliament should also encourage more interactivity with the public through social media such as; Facebook, Twitter and Google+. This would help parliament:
 - To be presented as an up-to-date and dynamic institution.
 - To engage with different individuals (especially the Youth), who might not get involved with parliament in any other way.
 - To cut down on costs and the speed of reaching a vast number and range of people about an issue, or for awareness and education purposes.
7. Parliament should intensify outreach programs and campaigns aimed at educating and sensitizing the public about it and its works; especially the lower class citizens who seem not to have knowledge of Parliament's composition and functions.

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