

Political Communication in Kenya: Secrets, Lies and Free Sugar

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Kenya can sometimes seem like a country obsessed with politics. Focussing on the goings-on of individual politicians, politics forms the subject matter of heated discussions, jokes and speculation in offices, bars and on street corners around the country. As one informant told me: ‘we want politics with our breakfast’.

But where do people get the information on which they base these opinions? I will argue that despite improvements in media reporting, word of mouth—the so-called ‘radio trottoir’—remains the prime channel of political information. This has expanded rapidly in terms of volume and reach through the use of ‘small media’ and new communication technologies such as sms and mobile internet. Gossip and rumour form an important component of this communication, due to misunderstanding, to deliberate misinformation and diversion tactics on the part of politicians, to one-upmanship on the part of the narrator, but also, I believe, for entertainment value. In fact, entertainment seems to be one of the motivating factors of individual involvement in the political process. Even the media focus on individual politicians, their fallings-out and the formation of alliances, something I compare with western tabloids’ focus on stars of soaps and reality shows. The spread of rumours can, however, also have deadly serious consequences, as seen during the post-election violence of 2008.

Based on extensive fieldwork including observation of electoral campaigns—local and national—interviews with politicians and voters and media analysis, the proposed paper will interrogate the spread of information about politics in Kenya. The focus will be on how political messages are presented to and received by the general public and how this impacts upon political understanding and behaviour. A three-tiered approach is utilised in which campaign events are analysed and contrasted with media representations of the events, and with an examination of how the public talk about and utilise media representations. Questions that will be addressed include: what issues do the media choose to focus upon and how do these choices affect the public’s understanding of the political process in the country? How is political information filtered through various informal social and political networks? How (if at all) is ‘fact’ differentiated from rumour? Finally, how do the public evaluate and make use of the messages they receive via campaign events, the media and the rumour mill when forming their political opinions?