

# How Television Viewing Affects Public Opinion of Devolution in Embakasi South-Nairobi

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## **Abstract**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effects of television viewing on public opinion of devolution. The specific objective was to examine the devolution content transmitted on television channels. It was important to determine how devolution is presented on television channels which in turn affect public opinion of devolution. This study was informed by the agenda setting theory. The researcher used the descriptive research design. The methodology involved the use of survey research through the use of a questionnaire to assess the effect of devolution content transmitted on television channels. Questionnaires for media producers were administered in Nairobi area since most television stations have their head offices there. Questionnaires for audience members were administered in Embakasi South. The data collected was edited and recorded. It was also analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings were then discussed to find out how the independent variables identified in the study interacted to affect public opinion of devolution. The study concluded that television viewing affected public opinion on devolution through the devolution content that was aired on local television channels. The study recommended that media producers, reporters and editors should have more positive themes and framing for devolution content transmitted on local television channels.

**Keywords:** Public Opinion, Representation, Devolution, Agenda Setting

## **Introduction**

The mass media are often referred to as the fourth branch of government because of the power they wield and the oversight function they exercise. The media's key role in democratic governance has been recognized since the late 17th century, and remains a fundamental principle of modern-day democratic theory and practice (Holmes, 1991). Through its

surveillance function and extensive news-gathering resources, the mass media is the conduit through which most people get their news.

There is plenty of evidence that the media have a strong influence on people's perception of which issues are important and which problems they want their government to do something about (McCombs and Reynolds 2002). The media also serve as a conduit between governors and the governed and as an arena for public debate that leads to more intelligent policy- and decision-making. By providing information and acting as a forum for public debate, the media play a catalytic role, making reforms possible through the democratic process and in the end strengthening democratic institutions and making possible public participation.

The opinions that people express about matters of political concern are not always thoughtfully derived. Surveys on news awareness consistently demonstrate that people are both uninformed and misinformed about current events (D.M. McLeod & Perse, 1994). The political matters that are the substrates for public opinion are rarely unobtrusive, that is, directly experienced (McCombs, Einsiedel, & Weaver, 1991). It is through the mass media that most people learn about political issues, assess which issues are important, and gauge which positions are endorsed by the majority.

News framing research holds that how the news is presented also affects what people think about issues, people, and events. Framing involves selection and emphasis: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). News framing research, then, posits that the structure and content of news stories have short-term effects that may have long-term implications. Directly after watching news, framing effects are seen in the thoughts and impressions of the audience. These thoughts and impressions may become accessible and affect more long-term impressions and political opinion (Iyengar, 1991).

The news media contain huge amounts of information, much more than any person can possibly handle. It is therefore theorized that humans are economizing the processing of the information they receive from news media as well as from other sources (Graber 1988, 2001). The first step in the handling of information is selection. People chose which news media to read, watch, and listen to, according to their needs and preferences. They are screening the media for interesting information, ignoring topics that appear to be irrelevant to them, redundant, remote, boring, or too complicated to comprehend.

People turn overwhelmingly to television for news. Since the early 1960s, people have named television as not only their primary source for news, but also the news medium with the highest credibility (Roper Starch Worldwide, 1995). News awareness is especially important in a representative democracy. This encourages people to form informed decisions. Unlike the print media, television does not require literacy. Citizens with access to television have the opportunity to get information disseminated through this medium. The utilization of television in democracy is very crucial because democracy requires vital well-informed public, eager to participate in debates and struggles concerning political issues of common interest. Democracy

depends on reason and a well-informed citizenry; television on the other hand depends on sub-rational manipulation of audiences.

According to Graber (2001), television news focuses on emotional appeal rather than intellectual appeal, and has inability to provide enough information appropriate for a democratic society. As a society turns to television for its primary source for news, it is obvious that its members will not hear the full story. Television is a unique medium that has obvious limitations. The need for dramatization, the problem of time constraints, the need for visual content, and the need to clarify complex stories all factor into the problem. The real story is not investigated in-depth like it is in other media sources such as newspapers, magazines, or even the Internet. Democracy has declined as a result of television.

Most citizens say that television news provides them with enough information and many purposefully turn to television for this information. Television encourages viewers to make political decisions based on emotions rather than engaging in logical thinking to make such choices. Most people focus their learning on a limited number of political areas that are important to them but television news provides tidbits of information about everything rather than focusing on the two or three most important stories of the day (Graber, 2001).

Graber's (2001) research proves that even though citizens know a little bit about important political issues, there are important aspects of politics that they do not know. Large numbers of people lack knowledge on important policy issues that could directly affect their lives such as devolution which is designed for them. A democratic society should offer political information to citizens in a way that they can clearly understand. Since television news is reliant on pictures, the nature of it being an audiovisual message means that it does a better job at showing particular conditions while words do a better job at explaining how often and under what circumstances a condition occurs. (Graber, 2001).

Graber (2001) further argues that the audience is unable to reflect on television messages because of the fast pace of words and pictures. Hidden cues in pictures are often missed and alternative meanings are missed as well. Graber cites research done by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder in 1987 which concluded that when journalists frame news stories around emotional experiences of individuals or groups, audiences mistakenly get the impression that the story only affects this individual and not society at large (Graber, 2001).

The focus on human tragedy on television makes stories into mini-dramas. The ability for television to create mini-dramas can also be observed in its coverage of political campaigns. "Campaign hoopla stories tend to distort the size of crowds and misrepresent their mood by selectively focusing on the most enthusiastic or the most hostile groups without adequate explanatory comments" (Graber, 2001). This influences the audiences to form opinions based on these images.

In Jamieson and Waldman (2003), the idea of performance and the audiences of politics is defined. The larger audience, the voting public is one audience while the other is the press that

is both an audience member and a participant. The television journalist edits the politician's roles and tells the public how the performance should be judged. Television allows the ability for a politician to have sound bites, five or ten second spots of the actual speech. "We recall these exchanges not because they were so compelling that they implanted themselves forever in our memory, but because in the wake of each debate they were played on television and quoted in newspapers again and again" (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003).

Repetition of images deepens the memory traces so when the images are repeated over and over, most audience members will remember those pictures rather than the actual facts going on at the time. If the scenes of the pictures are distorted because of a lack of appropriate information, events can be permanently misconstrued in citizens' minds (Graber, 2001). Kenyans watch opposing politicians arguing about the implementation of devolution. When the images are repeated, they will remember devolution as an acrimonious issue without really remembering what the acrimony was all about.

The media sets the agenda for its audience. The idea of agenda setting is that the public's social or political priorities and concerns-their beliefs about what is a significant issue or event-are determined by the amount of news accorded various issues and events. In one experiment conducted in 1982, viewers were showed a series of newscasts containing three, six or no stories dealing with U.S dependence on foreign sources of energy. When exposed to no news coverage on this subject, 24 per cent of the participants cited energy as among the three most important problems facing the country. When participants watched three stories, 50 per cent of them regarded energy as an important problem. Finally, when the participants watched six stories, energy was cited as the most important national problem by 65 per cent of the viewers. Cohen (1963), says that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about". Television, therefore as it presents news on devolution tells its audience what to think about.

In Africa, and Kenya in particular, the excessive utilization of television has brought about western model of democracy. Citizens learn that those who are unable to come up with a sound bite that the media chooses to associate with the candidate or even choose to use at all, has a low chance of winning votes from the public. Western democracy promotes the ideology of individual competitiveness for individual gain. Television images are modeled according to the western ones thus there is a lot of information on local political issues which lacks in-depth content to enable citizens to make informed decisions and choices.

The constitution of Kenya 2010 structures the state into a devolved system of government in terms of article 6 and chapters 11 and 12 of the constitution. The constitution set two levels of government, national and county governments. Many Kenyans do not or can not read the provisions of devolved government in the constitution and therefore rely on television to read and interpret the constitution for them. Television helps form public opinion on devolution by disseminating information on this kind of leadership and governance thereby people will accept or reject it. Therefore, there was a need to conduct this study so as to examine the effects of television viewing on public opinion of devolution in Kenya.

## Literature Review

The theory that was used in this study is the agenda-setting theory. Agenda-setting theory describes the "ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda." That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. By comparing the salience of issues in news content with the public's perceptions of the most important McCombs and Shaw (1968) were able to determine the degree to which the media determines public opinion. This theory is relevant to this study because this research aims to investigate the effect of television viewing on public opinion of devolution and devolution news is constantly featured in the news thus made salient.

Agenda setting occurs through a cognitive process known as accessibility. Accessibility implies that the more frequently and prominently the news media cover an issue, the more instances of that issue become accessible in audience's memories (McCombs & Shaw, 2002). When respondents are asked what the most important problem facing the country is, they answer with the most accessible news issue in memory, which is typically the issue the news media focus on the most. The agenda-setting effect is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which has a different content but all of which deal with the same general issue. Mass-media coverage in general and agenda-setting in particular also has a powerful impact on what individuals think that other people are thinking, and hence they tend to allocate more importance to issues that have been extensively covered by mass media (McCombs, 2002). Since devolution gets a lot of coverage on the Kenyan television channels, it is then considered important and people will ultimately form opinion about it.

Some groups have a greater ease of access than others and are thus more likely to get their demands placed on agenda than others. For instance, policymakers have been found to be more influential than the overall group of news sources because they often better understand journalists' needs for reliable and predictable information and their definition of newsworthiness. Cobb and Elder (2001) ascribed even more importance to decision makers, claiming that in order for an issue to attain agenda status, it must be supported by at least some of key decision makers as they act as guardians of the formal agenda. They also asserted that certain personages in the media can act as opinion leaders and bring media coverage to a particular issue. Government-affiliated news sources have higher success rates in becoming media agenda and have been found by a number of scholars to be the most frequently appearing of sources at the local, state, and national levels. Devolution content transmitted on television is usually sourced from political sources and opinion leaders and thus gets on the media agenda and gains salience.

Devolution is a new political dispensation in Kenya and television channels need to find sources for this information. News sources can provide definitions of issues, thus determining the terms of future discussion and framing problems in particular ways. What interpretation of reality will dominate public discourse has implications for the future of the social problem, for the interest groups and policymakers involved, and for the policy itself. . Different ways of framing the

situation may compete to be accepted as an authoritative version of reality, consequently spurring competition between sources of information for definition of an issue. Very powerful sources of information can even influence whether an issue receives media attention at all (Gusfield, 1972). Therefore, devolution news is constantly on the news for there are several sources.

McCombs and Shaw (1968) created the concept of "need for orientation," which "describes individual differences in the desire for orienting cues and background information." The concepts of relevance and uncertainty define an individual's need for orientation. Relevance suggests that an individual will not seek news media information if an issue is not personally relevant. Many news organizations attempt to frame issues in a way that attempts to make them relevant to its audiences. This is their way of keeping their viewership/readership high. The level of uncertainty is the second defining condition of need for orientation. If at any point in time viewers have high relevance and high uncertainty about any type of issue there was a high need for orientation. Research done by Weaver (1977) suggested that individuals vary on their need for orientation. Need for orientation is a combination of the individual's interest in the topic and uncertainty about the issue so an individual would be considerably likely to be influenced by media stories. Devolution news is highly relevant among Kenyan viewers because this explains the way they will be governed. With devolution being newly enacted, there is high uncertainty about it hence a high need for orientation.

### **Research Design**

This study used a descriptive research design. In this design, the subjects were observed in a completely unchanged natural environment (Labaree, 2012). In this case, the study involved identifying television viewing as the variable that would affect public opinion of devolution.

In this study, television viewing which is the independent variable and public opinion of devolution which is the dependent variable were not manipulated. The purpose of the data collection methods was to evaluate how the independent variables affected the dependent variable. This data was used to draw relationships between television viewing and public opinion of devolution.

### **Study Location**

This study focused on the population based only in Nairobi area-Embakasi South. This location was chosen because many households had television sets and many television stations are mainly based in Nairobi. The target population consisted of media producers and consumers of both genders. The target population was made up of people in the age bracket of 18-60 years.

### **Findings**

This study aimed to find out whether local television channels transmitted devolution content. The study also sought to find out the devolution content transmitted on local television, if audience members understood what devolution is, whether local television stations provided

enough devolution news, and whether television news on devolution is always true and if this influenced their opinion of devolution.

### Descriptive analysis results of audience responses

Below are the descriptive results of audience members responses to the questions posed to them in the questionnaires.

**Figure 4.2.1 Television channels preferred**

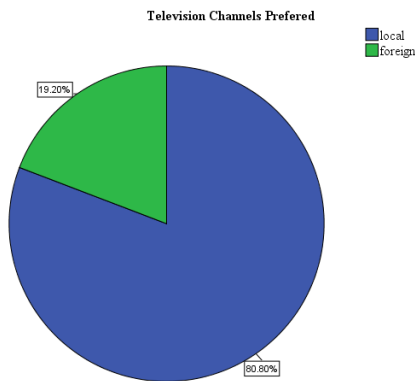


Figure 4.2.1 shows that 80.8% of respondents prefer local channels and 19.2% prefer foreign channels.

**Figure 4.3.2 Hours spent watching TV in a day**

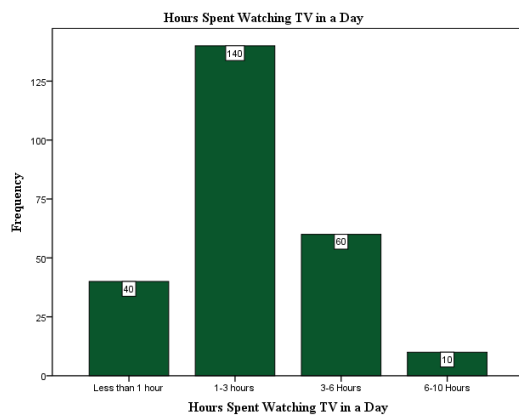


Figure 4.2.2 shows that 16% of the respondents watch TV for less than 1 hour, 56% watch 1-3 hours, 24% 3-6 hours and 4% 6-10 hours.

**Figure 4.2.3 Do respondents understand devolution**

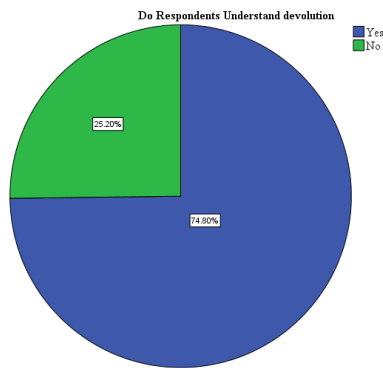


Figure 4.2.3 shows that 74.8% of the respondents understand what devolution is whereas 25.2% do not.

**Figure 4.2.4. Local television provide devolution news**

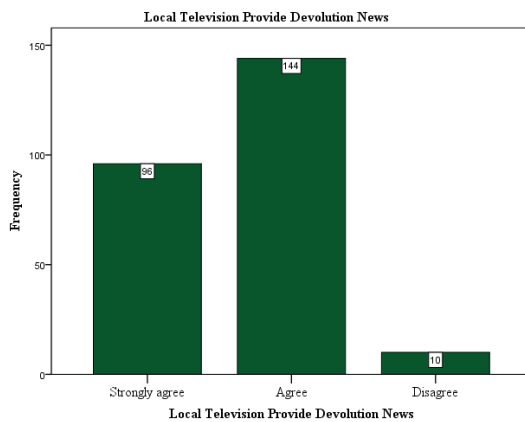


Figure 4.2.4 shows that 96 % strongly agree and 4% disagree that local television provide devolution news. A majority of respondents agree that local television provide devolution news.



**Table 4.2.5 Devolution news content aired on local television**

Devolution content aired	Strongly Agree	%	Agree	%	Strongly disagree	%	Disagree	%
Crime	96	57.6	144	40	0	0	10	5.6
Developments In counties	10	4	60	24	140	56	40	16
Future financial plans	14	5.6	28	11.2	100	40	108	43.2
Scandals and conflict	118	47.2	98	39.2	7	10.8	27	2.8

Table 4.2.5 shows that 97.6% of the respondents agree that devolution content aired is on crime. 5.6% of the respondents disagree. 28% agree that devolution content aired is on developments in counties and 72% disagree. 16.8% agree that devolution content is on future financial plans and 83.2% disagree. 86.4% agree that devolution content aired is on scandals and conflict and 10.8% and 13.6% disagree.

**4.2.6 Devolution is good**

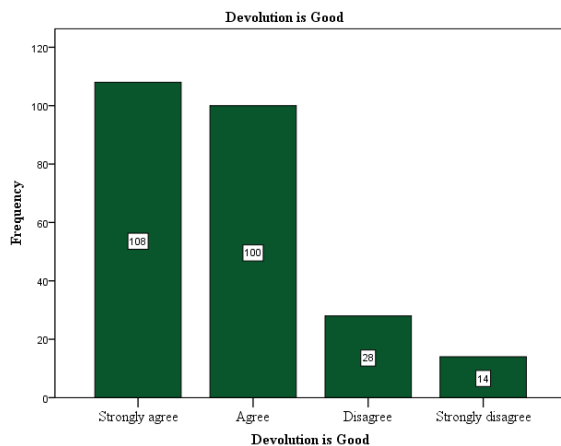


Figure 4.2.6 shows that a majority of the respondents agree (83.2%) that devolution is good. 16.8% strongly disagree that devolution is good.

**Figure 4.2.7 Devolution news on television is always true**

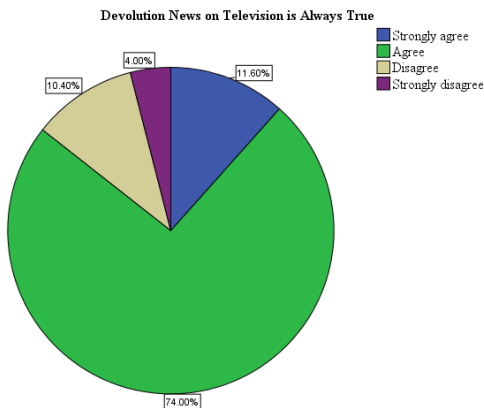


Figure 4.2.7 shows that respondents agree (85.6%) that devolution news is always true and 14.4% disagree that devolution news is always true.

**Figure 4.2.8 Television provides enough devolution news**

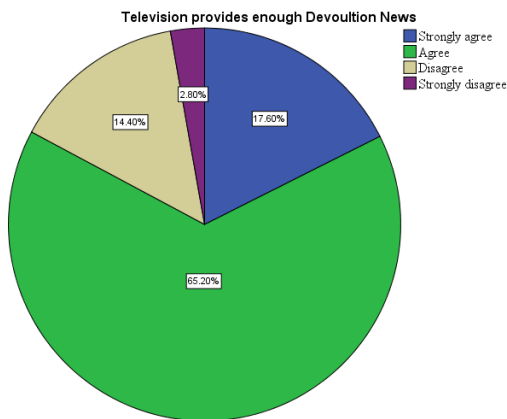


Figure 4.2.8 shows that majority of respondents agree (82.8%) and 17.2 disagree that television provides enough devolution news.

**Figure 4.2.9 Television news influences my opinion on devolution**

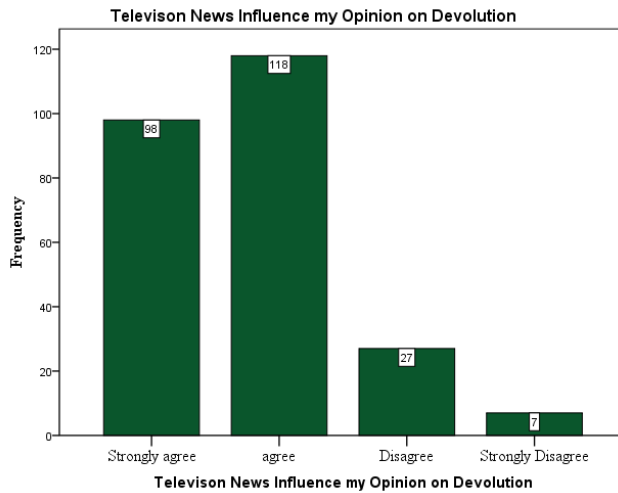


Figure 4.2.9 shows that majority of the respondents agree (86.4%) that television influences their opinion on devolution and 13.6% disagree that television influences their opinion of devolution.

### Summary of findings

This study aimed to investigate how television viewing affects public opinion of devolution. The research objective was to analyze devolution content aired on local television channels. A descriptive research design was followed in which 250 respondents from Nairobi Embakasi South were selected to respond to questionnaires. Data analysis was conducted and results indicate that devolution content aired on local television channels influences public opinion on devolution. This study found that a majority of the respondents preferred local to foreign television channels. A majority of the respondents spent 1-2 hours watching television and understood what devolution was. A majority of the respondents said that local televisions provide devolution news and most devolution news was sensational covering crime, conflicts and scandals. Respondents agreed that television provide enough devolution news. Most respondents agreed that devolution news is always true and said that devolution is good. A majority of the respondents said that television viewing influenced their opinion on devolution. According to Roper (1995) people have named television as not only their primary source of news, but also the news medium with the highest credibility. This study supports this since most respondents agree that devolution news on television is true.

### Conclusions

From the findings in this study, it is evident that the devolution content that is aired on local television channels influences public opinion of devolution. Therefore, there is need to produce devolution content that will foster enactment of devolution. This study suggests that media producers, reporters and editors should have more positive themes and framing of devolution content transmitted on local television channels. Media producers should also have diverse sources of devolution content rather than relying on politicians who have vested interests in news transmitted. There should be media literacy training for television audiences so that they

can be better equipped to judge devolution content transmitted on local television channels. In light of the above discussion, the following recommendations were made for policy, management and further research.

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