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Media Coverage of Rwanda's 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections: A Content Analysis of Kigali Today Newspaper

HAGABIMANA Eugène

*Correspondence: HAGABIMANA Eugène

***Detailed author information and related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.*

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ABSTRACT

Elections are one of the key mechanisms for shaping a country's future. Media plays a vital role in this process by informing the public, influencing opinion, and acting as a watchdog to support democratic participation. This study examined Kigali Today's coverage of Rwanda's July 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, focusing on its online platform. According to agenda-setting theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media's capacity to shape voters' perceptions during elections is highlighted. This study draws on a content analysis approach to examine stories published by Kigali Today during the official campaign period (June 20–July 13, 2024). A sample size of 99 articles were analysed, selected through a systematic sampling method from 133 articles. The results indicate that the ruling party, RPF,¹ and its candidate, Paul Kagame, dominated Kigali Today's coverage, accounting for 76% of the election-related content, far surpassing the coverage of other candidates and campaign themes. These findings highlight the imbalance in media coverage and the need for more equitable media practices to support democratic values, particularly during election rallies.

Keywords: Kigali Today, election, news coverage, Kagame.

1. Introduction

The news media is not limited to focusing public attention on a particular set of issues, but also influences our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news (Coleman, R., McCombs, M., Shaw, D., & Weaver, D., 2009). Thus, during the 1968 presidential election, McCombs & Shaw (1972) found a correlation between the media's agenda of issues and the public's agenda of issues. In

¹ RPF: Rwanda Patriotic Front

addition, authors realised that the more the media pay attention to specific issues, the more it enhances the public perception of their importance. Thus, the mass media significantly impact elections and likely influence voters. According to Schoenbach (1987), the elections are decided on television. This quote, attributed to Roger Ailes, the founder and chairman of Fox News in the US, highlights the mass media's impact on the election campaign and decision on who to vote for. Ultimately, the mass media significantly shape public opinion and political outcomes. However, a democratic election cannot be achieved without a free press (Frère, 2006). During the election period, the mass media can mould public sentiment and sway votes towards a particular candidate or political party (Ocharo, 2024). Kelley (1962) asserts that the media often selectively transmit propaganda, influenced by the time and space purchased by political groups, or that, most of the time, the media transmit propaganda selectively based on the time and space sold to political groups. However, covering elections is never an easy task for journalists, no matter where they are taking place (Frère, 2006).

According to Piechota, G. (2011), all over the world, mass media have always contributed a lot to elections by informing citizens about who the candidates are, their manifestos, and how and where to vote. Piechota (2011) continues by saying that politicians are aware of the importance, influence, and power of the mass media in this process, and that is why they are ready to do whatever they can to gain control of the media. Hence, the mass media is the best way to link voters and politicians during the election campaigns. In US elections and probably in many countries, “Mass media constitute the dominant source of information and the dominant channel of communication between the governors and the governed” (Esser Frank & Stromback Jesper, 2014, p. 166). However, to play its role, the mass media should be financially and editorially independent and work free from any pressure.

In Africa, most of the mass media have small, insufficiently trained staff, limited means of transport, and limited financial means to cover telecommunications costs, which prevent them from providing rigorous and complete coverage of national elections (Frère, 2010). The author conducted a study in six central African countries on media behaviour during elections and concluded that financial and editorial challenges faced by mass media are profitable to politicians who use them in their propaganda. The mass media's fragility makes them vulnerable to pressure from politicians and political parties keen on receiving sufficient mass media coverage.

The situation observed in Central African countries is not far from Rwanda's situation. The gap between professional ideals and actual practice is perceptible. A recent survey reveals alarmingly low perception levels for mass media accountability and responsible journalism in the country (RGB²,

² RGB: Rwanda Governance Board

2021). This lack of professionalism can happen both in an ordinary period and during an election. Candidates take advantage of the media's weakness during the election.

Since 2003, Rwanda has consistently held presidential elections every seven years and parliamentary elections every five years, with the media consistently playing a contributory role to the process. However, in a post genocide context, reporting on elections has not always been easy for the media. Despite the NEC³(2024) election law mandating equal and fair media coverage to provide voters with comprehensive information on all candidates and their policies, Frère (2006) highlights the media's blatant favouritism towards the incumbent president. During the 2024 elections, this law was largely disregarded, with media coverage favouring financially powerful candidates over smaller ones with limited resources.

Over the past twenty years, Rwanda has held three presidential and three parliamentary elections separately. However, the July 2024 elections marked the first instance of combining both elections (NEC, 2024). According to the NEC (2024), the mass media have always been a valuable partner in informing voters and ensuring they have a comprehensive understanding of election policies and guidelines. At a press conference a week before the July 15, 2024, general election, Charles Munyaneza, the Executive Secretary of the Rwanda National Election, assured journalists of full access and security for their coverage. He also urged them to maintain fairness and neutrality throughout the process. Similarly, the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC⁴), an Independent Media Self-Regulatory Commission overseeing media laws and ethics, urged all mass media practitioners to maintain professionalism and impartiality in their coverage (RMC, 2024). However, this guidance is mandatory for public media and, by extension, applies consequently to private as well.

According to Macnamara (2018), media content analysis is a specialised and long-established research method used since the 18th century. Though many studies have been conducted on mass media coverage behaviour during elections (Asghar et al., 2019; Shahzad et al., 2024), little is known about how the media covered Rwanda's 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Moreover, these studies were conducted in other countries with different political situations, media environments, electoral systems, voters' mindsets, history, and cultures. The present research fills this gap. This study quantitatively analyses how "The Kigali Today" e-paper covered Rwanda's 2024 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns. The KT⁵ attracted the researcher's attention as it is among the media houses which covered the 2024 elections countrywide. This study quantitatively analyses how Kigali Today e-newspaper directly covered the different candidates and political parties'

³ NEC: National Electoral Commission

⁴ RMC: Rwanda Media Commission

⁵ KT: Kigali Today

rallies countrywide during the 2024 elections. The study attempts to test the gap in the existing knowledge by analysing how Kigali Today gave time and space to different candidates during its coverage of the 2024 election campaigns.

This study analyses articles published by Kigali Today between June 20 and July 13, 2024, to identify coverage trends and the presentation of presidential candidates' manifestos during the campaign period. In addition to candidates' coverage, the study examines electoral-related issues such as rules, guidelines and observers' perspectives. It also aims to identify factors influencing Kigali Today's framing of news on presidential candidates.

To achieve the objectives of the study, we advance the following questions:

- a) How did Kigali Today cover Rwanda's 2024 electoral campaign?
- b) Which presidential/Parliamentary candidates and political parties received the most coverage?
- c) What were the key campaign topics or electoral messages?

This study is guided by the following specific hypotheses:

- a) The RPF Kagame Paul and its parliamentary candidates dominated Kigali Today's coverage during the campaign for the presidential and parliamentary elections.
- b) Kigali Today coverage of candidates' activities during the electoral campaign was neither fair nor equitable.

2. Methodology

According to Macnamara (2018), content analysis is a widely used research method for identifying concepts, words, and themes in texts. It also aids in analysing media focus and behaviour during events, particularly in elections. Kelley (1962) argues that electoral candidates strive to gain and effectively utilise media access. This study focuses on analysing Kigali Today's coverage during the Rwanda 2024 elections.

Sample

Kigali Today e-paper was selected for the content analysis of the 2024 elections coverage due to its significant influence in Rwanda's media landscape. Created in 2012, Kigali Today Ltd is among Rwanda's biggest mass media companies. As reported by the National Media Consumption Survey Rwanda (2024), Kigali Today is Rwanda's second-biggest media house in Rwanda with a radio station, a YouTube channel and an online newspaper. It owns a Radio station, an online newspaper and a news press agency. With five FM frequencies, Kigali Today Radio is the second-largest radio station in Rwanda, holding 33% of the market share, just behind the government-owned broadcaster, Radio Rwanda. Its online publication is also among the top five e-newspapers in terms of readership,

FOJO Mass Media Institute (2021, p. 19). Charles KANAMUGIRE, the Managing Director of Kigali Today Ltd, reports that the KT e-newspaper has an average of 45,000 daily readers while its YouTube channel has more than one million subscribers.

This study exclusively examines the KT e-newspaper on www.kigalitoday.com, analysing election stories published from June 20, 2024 (campaign kick-off) to July 14, 2024 (the campaign's last day). Kigali Today categorised all 2024 electoral campaign stories under the “elections” column, facilitating daily article identification for researchers. Between June 20 and July 14, 2024, the researcher identified 133 published articles. Using www.calculator.net with a 95% confidence level and a 5 % margin of error, the sample size was determined to be 99 articles.

To ensure the sample size’s representativeness, the researcher also applied the Taro Yamane formula, confirming the sample size remains 99. This validates the sample’s representativeness.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2} \quad 99 = \frac{133}{1+133(5\%)^2}$$

n = stands for sample size

N = Stands for population

e = Stands for error of tolerance (5%=.5)

1= represents a constant value

Coding procedures

Unitising

The title and introduction of each story were reviewed to categorise the coverage. Since the Presidential and Parliamentary campaigns were conducted together, they were treated as a single entity. Categorisation focused on various political parties and independent candidates.

Categorisation

Five coding categories were selected, with some including subcategories based on the story’s focus and content. The first category includes stories about the Rwanda Patriotic Front -RPF (the ruling party), its presidential candidate Paul Kagame, its MP candidates, and allied political parties (these are small parties that chose to support RPF and Kagame instead of campaigning alone). This first category includes four subcategories focused on key campaign topics/messages: a) Kagame’s achievements, b) Kagame’s pledges for the next term, c) articles related to RPF’s allied parties, and d) other RPF campaign activities.

The second category covers the Green Party (GP.⁶), its presidential candidate, Frank Habineza, and its MP candidates. It includes two subcategories: a) Green Party's pledges to voters, and b) Other articles related to Green Party campaigns or activities.

The third category includes articles about independent presidential candidate Mpayimana Philippe. This category has no subcategories, as his manifesto lacked specific topics, and all articles generally discuss governance.

The fourth category includes articles on National Electoral Commission laws, guidance, regulations and election updates. This category has no subcategories.

The fifth category includes articles on elections that do not fall into the previously mentioned categories. It has three subcategories: a) articles on police and election security, b) articles on election observers' observations, and c) articles on experts' perspectives on the ongoing elections.

3. Findings

a. Findings

Krippendorff, K. (1989) described content analysis as the use of mass communications as data for testing scientific hypotheses and for evaluating journalistic practices. Regarding this study, it is guided by two hypotheses, with corresponding variables identified through a coding sheet. All categories, subcategories, frequencies, and percentages were coded and analysed using SPSS Software. The Frequencies and percentages of data from the content analysis provide the supporting evidence. The findings are as follows:

Coding

Categories:

Value Labels:

- 1.00 RPF and Paul Kagame
- 2.00 GP and Frank Habineza
- 3.00 Mpayimana Philippe
- 4.00 NEC news
- 5.00 General information

⁶ GP: Green Party

Subcategories:

Value Labels:

- 1.00 Achievements
- 2.00 Pledges
- 3.00 Allies
- 4.00 Other activities
- 5.00 Security
- 6.00 Observers
- 7.00 Experts' Views
- 8.00 General Manifesto
- 9.00 Rules

The code number identifies an element for analysis within each category and subcategory.

Categories, frequencies, and Percentages: stories about candidates, NEC updates, and general election information.

Categories	Frequency	Percent
RPF and Paul Kagame	75	75.8
GP and Frank Habineza	12	12.1
Mpayimana Philipe	3	3
NEC news	5	5.1
General information	4	4
Total	99	100

Categories, Subcategories, frequencies, Percentage: Stories related to candidates’ slogans, and general information on elections

subcategories	Categories					Total
	RPF and Paul Kagame	GP and Frank Habineza	Mpayimana Philippe	NEC news	General information	
Achievements	31	0	0	0	0	31
Pledges	12	10	0	0	0	22
Allies	6	0	0	0	0	6
Other activities	26	2	0	0	0	28
Security	0	0	0	0	2	2
Observers	0	0	0	0	1	1

Experts' Views	0	0	0	0	1	1
General Manifesto	0	0	3	0	0	3
Rules	0	0	0	5	0	5
Total	75	12	3	5	4	99

b. Results

The results analysis indicates a significant focus on the RPF and its candidate, Paul Kagame, in KT’s coverage. Of the 99 articles analysed, 75 (76%) centred on RPF and Kagame, suggesting highly dominated coverage towards the ruling party and unfair coverage of other candidates. President Kagame, in power for over twenty years, had his achievements and campaign promises prominently featured. Specifically, 31 articles highlighted his accomplishments over 24 years, 12 discussed his future premises, and 26 covered various aspects of the RPF’s campaign. Only 6 articles focused on the RPF allies.

With 12 out of 99 articles, Frank Habineza’s Green Party ranks second in Kigali Today’s electoral campaign coverage, though significantly behind the RPF. Ten articles focus on the party’s pledges for the next term, while only two address other aspects of their manifesto.

The third most prominent category comprises articles on National Electoral Commission laws, guidance, regulations, and reactions to ongoing elections. Kigali Today published five articles on this topic.

The fourth category encompasses articles on general electoral campaigns, divided into three subcategories: a) police and election security, b) observers' observations, and c) experts’ perspectives on the ongoing elections. This category also includes coverage of the independent candidate Philippe Mpayimana, with only three out of 99 articles focusing on his electoral tours.

4. Discussion

Analysis of categories, subcategories, and their frequency and percentage distributions in election coverage supports the first hypothesis that the KT’s coverage disproportionately favoured the ruling party and its candidate, Kagame, resulting in election reporting that lacked equitable representation of all contestants. These disparities in KT's election coverage can be attributed to factors such as the media’s economic challenges, candidate profiles and popularity, editorial positioning, ownership structure, commercial interests, security considerations, and political affiliations. It was expected that Kigali Today’s coverage would largely emphasise RPF and its candidate, Paul Kagame, given his profile and access to state resources as president still in office, and the extensive national presence of the ruling party, whose members occupy many leadership positions within government institutions.

According to Onchiri (2013), the chi-square test measures the discrepancy between observed and expected concept frequencies. Observation and chi-square analysis confirmed the hypothesis, identifying several reasons: a) The RPF and its candidates have been in power for three decades, with nationwide representation and substantial financial and human resources. Prior to the election, the ruling party was well prepared in terms of personnel and budget. Consequently, the RPF's robust communication department allocates funds for media facilitation during major events such as elections and can finance newspaper coverage. The president-candidate's achievements were comprehensively outlined in his manifesto and pledges, reflecting his 24 years in office and highlighting accomplishments intended to persuade voters.

The second hypothesis addressed fairness and equity in KT's election coverage. Providing equal coverage and space is a standard of journalistic professionalism, though it is not mandatory under Rwanda's electoral laws. The existing electoral law does not oblige private media to provide balanced coverage of candidates, a gap that advantages financially strong candidates who can afford greater media exposure. A candidate who can pay the media's cost for his rally will have large coverage. Beyond RPF's economic power, in terms of ownership structure, Kigali Today's management is likely aligned with the RPF's political perspectives, as stated by Esser Frank & Stromback Jesper (2014), media outlets often align with political parties or general political trends. Concerns regarding media ownership are frequently raised (Davis, 2004), and may also be relevant to Kigali Today's shareholders.

Although the RPF campaign rally was held in only 19 out of 30 districts, coverage by KT was predominantly focused on the RPF and Paul Kagame. In contrast, candidates Mpayimana Philippe and Frank Habineza travelled through all the districts but received significantly less media coverage. This disparity can be attributed to limited financial resources for candidates to pay for media coverage, media ownership, and editorial lines. Overall, the KT's coverage of the 2024 Rwanda presidential and parliamentary elections did not provide equal visibility or opportunities for all candidates as recommended by the NEC.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

By analysing Kigali Today's 2024 election coverage, this study contributes to the literature on mass media trends during the 2024 Rwanda presidential and parliamentary election. Despite the NEC recommendation for balanced and equitable coverage of all candidates, this study found a disproportionate emphasis on Paul Kagame and the RPF. This contrasts with established journalistic profession principles, which require the media to uphold impartiality by incorporating diverse viewpoints in their reporting. This research also highlights how strong candidates leverage mass

media to the disadvantage of weaker candidates. To ensure fair and balanced media coverage, the NEC should consider allocating dedicated funding to media outlets for election reporting, thereby reducing reliance on support from contestants and candidates.

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Author details

HAGABIMANA Eugène

Assistant Lecturer at the University of Rwanda, Department of Journalism and Communication, Rwanda.

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