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The media and public opinion in Kenya: the impact of print media coverage of the grand coalition government

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate the impact of media coverage of the coalition government and how it influences public opinion. The objectives of the study focused on the role played by the print media in determining how the public views the coalition government, the relationship between media coverage and public opinion was investigated and the impact of media framing on public perception. The study explored the possible impact of this coverage of grand coalition government covering the period starting from December 15 2008 to August 31 2009. As part of the theoretical framework, the study applied the agenda setting theory, decision making theory and information processing theory of communication to underscore how the nature, quality and delivery of information influences public perception. The study was conducted through a survey .200 questionnaires were administered through the help of qualified research assistants to respondents purposively drawn from the middle class people living in Nairobi to ensure they reach those who are exposed to the print media. Out of these, 140 questionnaires were filled and returned 140 respondents. The data gathered was both qualitative and quantitative data to establish the relationship between media coverage and public perception of the government. The data collected was analyzed using Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) technique. The research findings form part of this final research report The study found that the public rely a lot on the media for interpretation of political news and events. This is because the media is the most highly trusted information source. This is because majority of the people believe the news stories are accurate and balanced. Sustained negative coverage has a direct relationship impact public perception since the public base their decisions based on the negative content. Consistent exposure to negative content causes positive public opinion and rating of the government to diminish because there is no alternative information to balance this. The study further established that there has been very little coverage of the achievements of the coalition 'government but too much focus on its failures and mistakes, this has led the public to believe the Coalition government has done little or nothing and rating of government performance in critical areas to be ranked very poorly. The language, labels and frames used by the media to describe the government and political events tends to influence public perception because they provide the lenses through which the public looks at the government ultimately forming pictures in the mind. However, media is not entirely and solely responsible for the current poor rating and negative public perception of the government. Other factors like the current global economic crisis including the harsh weather patterns has increased frustration among Kenyans and the perceived failure of the government to act decisively in mitigating these challenges has left many Kenyans disillusioned by the government.