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Audience Perceptions of Mwananchi E-Newspapers' Editorial Cartoons as a Communication Medium

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Article Info

Abstract

Editorial cartoons which over the centuries have been published in mass media, such as a newspaper, news magazine, have recently been increasingly published on the Web including on e-newspapers. This articles explores audiences' perceptions of Mwananchi e-newspaper editorial cartoons as a communication medium, focusing on audiences' perceptions of their effectiveness in conveying social, political, and economic matters. The article reveals that the audience perceives editorial cartoons as effective tools for communicating various social, economic and political messages even in this digital age. Additionally, the article highlights the role of the audience's level of understanding and receptiveness, as well as the socioeconomic and political context in which the cartoons are presented. The article also reveals the audience's ability to construct various meanings from the cartoons, demonstrating the diversity in the interpretation of satire, humour, and symbolism employed in the medium. The findings also suggest that Mwananchi e-newspaper editorial cartoons effectively reflect current social, economic, and political matters, providing a valuable platform for communication and engagement with audiences.

Introduction

Editorial cartoons in newspapers seem to have a very long history. According to Stead and Liew (2020) [20], in 1754, Benjamin Franklin created the first editorial cartoon published in an American newspaper. The published cartoon was an illustration of a snake with a detached head. Jackson (2016) [11] added that Franklin's cartoon illustration read "Join, or Die". This cartoon was an important communication medium, as it showed different colonies joining what was to become the United States. Boyagoda (2017) [3] agreed that by the mid-19th century, many magazines employed editorial cartoons on their pages.

Cartoons have historically served as a potent medium for addressing prevalent societal issues, spanning from economic disparities and social injustices to the prevailing political landscape. In democratic societies, cartoons serve as a formidable instrument for shedding light on policy shortcomings, utilizing their unique ability to communicate complex messages more effectively than conventional textual or spoken forms. Through humour, they unveil human frailties, such as arrogance, callousness, and hypocrisy, while also highlighting virtues and vanity. Their impact on global events has been profound, as evidenced by their role in significant events in Denmark (2005), South Africa (2008), and Rwanda (1993). In the case of Rwanda, alongside other media forms, cartoons were identified as contributing to the instigation of the 1994 genocide, underlining their potential to influence both positive and negative societal occurrences worldwide (Mapuwei, 2014) [13].

Ghilzai and Bajwa (2020) [8] assert that editorial cartoons in newspapers are indispensable in regard to providing the public with both information and entertainment. According to Tyumbu (2018) [22], the utilization of editorial cartoons is among the innovative methods of communicating messages to the audience.

Similarly, Guy (2016) [9] stated that editorial cartoons serve as a form of visual news discourse in the media, offering a unique perspective on current events.

Cartoonists use their creativity and rhetorical techniques to provide additional and sometimes alternative viewpoints on news stories, with their illustrations serving as a way of organizing social knowledge and highlighting key issues. Through the use of symbolic imagery, audiences are presented with condensed representations that convey the essential framing of any issue being portrayed.

The term "audience" refers to people who receive communication messages through the media. In the traditional model of mass communication, the audience is seen as a collective group of receivers (Okoro & Onakpa, 2016) [15]. Mass media audiences are characterized by their size, anonymity, diversity, and level of engagement. They are considered large because they are numerous and difficult to quantify. They are anonymous because their identities are generally unknown to the communicator. Additionally, they are dispersed across different locations and come from various demographic backgrounds, such as religion, education, and gender (Asemah, 2011) [1].

In the new media model, the audience is more fragmented and diverse than in traditional media. This is because new media platforms such as social media, blogs, and podcasts allow for more personalized content and cater to specific niches and interests. In addition, the audience in the new media model often plays a more active role in the creation and distribution of content. This is because new media platforms allow for user-generated content, sharing, and commenting, which encourages audience engagement and participation (Napoli, 2008) [14].

Editorial cartoons are published in mass media, such as a newspaper, news magazine, or the Web (OSU, 2020). This is an indication that, despite its origin being a traditional newspaper, editorial cartoons have crossed to the new media formats published on the web, as in the case of e-newspaper. An E-newspaper (electronic newspaper), also known as an online newspaper or electronic news publication, is the online version of a newspaper, either as a stand-alone publication or as the online version of a printed periodical (Tanikawa, 2017) [21].

Many traditional newspapers have transitioned to an e-newspaper format in response to changing consumer habits and the rise of digital media. E-newspapers offer several advantages over their printed counterparts, including instant access to breaking news, the ability to search for specific articles, and the convenience of being able to read the paper from anywhere with an internet connection (Tanikawa, 2017) [21].

Electronic newspapers result from the development of media technology, including the introduction of personal computers, smartphones and the Internet. Personal computers and smartphones allow people to access the internet, communicate with one another, and access a wide range of media content from anywhere at any time. Some e-newspapers are free to access, while others require a subscription or payment. There are also several online news aggregators that offer access to multiple e-newspapers from different publishers in one place (Tanikawa, 2017) [21]. In Tanzania, prominent newspaper publishers have not been left behind, and a company such as The Nation Media Group, which owns Mwananchi Communications Limited and other media outlets, has embraced the change by introducing its own e-newspaper platform known as e-Paper.

Mwananchi e-newspaper
This is an online platform that delivers newspapers to the audience's fingertips. It gives access to readers all over the world to the Nation Media Group's newspapers, including Mwananchi, The Citizen, Mwanaspoti and other publications. The newspapers are presented the same way as they would be seen in their physical format without alteration. This means that the electronic version of the Mwananchi newspaper carries editorial cartoons the same way; hence, this article was intended to investigate the e-newspaper's audiences' perceptions of the editorial cartoons published by the e-newspaper as a communication medium.

Theoretical Framework
This article's framework is guided by the Meaning Construction Theory which is a sociological and communicative theory that investigates how a shared understanding of the world is developed (Galbin, 2014) [6]. The theory stipulates that social and interpersonal influences play a significant role in shaping human life (Gergen, 1985). According to this theory, people operate in relation to their surroundings, creating, adapting, and interpreting the information they encounter as they interact with the world (Hardy, 1997) [10]. An individual's ability to form his or her own understanding of the world is associated with his or her thought process and ability to construct ideas (Hardy, 1997) [10].

Meaning construction theory has provided a useful framework for this article that focuses on the audiences' perceptions of Mwananchi's e-newspaper editorial cartoons as a communication medium. In that context, the theory has been used to suggest that audiences' perceptions of the cartoons depend not only on the content of the cartoons themselves but also on their own experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. In other words, audiences constructed meaning from the cartoons based on their own individual perspectives and the context in which they encountered them.

Literature Reviews
Bucy and Newhagen (2004) [4] conducted a study to understand how individuals interpret political cartoons and how these interpretations are influenced by their preexisting beliefs and attitudes. The main findings of the study indicated that political cartoons have a significant impact on audience interpretations of contested public events. The researchers found that individuals with different preexisting beliefs and attitudes tended to interpret political cartoons in ways that aligned with their existing perspectives. Additionally, certain frames used in political cartoons were more likely to elicit specific interpretations from the audience.

DeSmet, Van Aelst, and Walgrave (2016) [5] also conducted a study to examine how political cartoons can influence public opinion and shape attitudes towards political issues. The study revealed several findings regarding the persuasive effects of political cartoons. First, political cartoons have the potential to influence public opinion by framing issues in a particular way and evoking emotional responses. Second, humour plays a significant role in enhancing the persuasive impact of political cartoons. Cartoons that use satire or irony are more likely to be effective in shaping attitudes. Third, individual characteristics such as prior beliefs and political ideology can moderate the persuasive effects of political cartoons. Finally, contextual factors such as media exposure and cartoon placement can also influence how persuasive a

cartoon is.

Ghilzai and Bajwa (2020) [8] explored how editorial cartoons reflect and shape national interest in Pakistan. The researchers seek to understand the role of editorial cartoons in influencing public opinion, political discourse, and national identity. The researchers found that editorial cartoons play a significant role in shaping public opinion by highlighting social issues, political events, and cultural aspects of national interest. Second, the study identified recurring themes such as corruption, terrorism, democracy, and international relations in the analysed cartoons. Third, the researchers observed that editorial cartoons often use satire and humour to criticize political leaders, institutions, and policies. This satirical approach helps engage the audience while conveying critical messages about national interest.

Similarly, Guy (2016) [9] explored the intersection of art, rhetoric, and metaphor in newspaper editorial cartoons. The study sought to understand how these elements are used to convey political messages and shape public opinion. The main findings of this study reveal that newspaper editorial cartoons serve as a powerful medium for political commentary and social critique. The analysis demonstrates that cartoonists utilize various artistic techniques to visually represent complex ideas and emotions. Moreover, they employ rhetorical strategies such as irony, satire, caricature, and symbolism to convey their messages effectively. The use of metaphors in editorial cartoons allows cartoonists to bridge the gap between abstract concepts and concrete realities.

Barker (2016) [2] conducted a study exploring the intersection of art, rhetoric, and metaphor in newspaper editorial cartoons. The study aimed to analyse how these elements contribute to the representation of reality in editorial cartoons. The main findings of the study revealed that newspaper editorial cartoons are a powerful medium for conveying political messages and shaping public opinion. The analysis showed that cartoonists employ various artistic techniques to create visually engaging and impactful cartoons. These techniques include the exaggeration of physical features through caricature, the use of symbols to represent complex ideas or individuals, and the incorporation of metaphors to convey deeper meanings. The study also found that rhetorical strategies such as irony, satire, and humour are frequently used to criticize political figures or policies. Overall, the research demonstrated that editorial cartoons play a significant role in shaping public discourse by combining artistry, rhetoric, metaphor, and reality.

Li (2020) conducted a study on a brief analysis of the development of new cartoons of China in the new media era. It was revealed that indeed, when used in newspapers, editorial cartoons increase a unique taste to the audience of different age groups. This is the reason why despite advances in photography and animation technologies, cartoons remain unique in newspapers. Therefore, many newspapers continue to use editorial cartoons as their communication medium to the audience.

Furthermore, Omolabi and Abiodun (2020) [16], in a semiotic study of selected political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers, found that using editorial cartoons in newspapers may express the message but, on the other hand, may lead to confusion since interpretation from one person to another may differ. Similarly, the intended meaning can be lost when the interpretation of the cartoon is complicated. The study further revealed that newspapers cartoons enable readers to understand the difference between linguistic and nonlinguistic resources and how they are used together to create meaning. The study concludes that cartoons have become a haven for journalists in unveiling and satirizing delicate political issues.

A study conducted in Romania by Soare (2020) [19] on cartoons in Romanian humorous news pointed out that in terms of political cartoons, the methods of humour are quite intricate, just depending on the image and the text used in the cartoon. On the other hand, cartoons about society are habitually based on the implicitness and exaggeration of the intended message. These cartoons are mostly found in images and symbols. The aim is not so much on the message but rather to make readers laugh and have fun. From this study, it can be understood that cartoons that do not use text have more powerful symbols to make the reader find it easier to make interpretations and finally obtain the message.

Saito and Chiang (2020) [18] examined political cartoons portraying the Musha Uprising in Taiwan under Japanese rule. It was revealed that in politics, there are various issues that are interesting to the community and others that are not interesting. For the public to obtain messages related to politics, cartoons in newspapers are very useful. It was found that the government undoubtedly recognizes the position of cartoons, and it can be the perfect way to ensure that necessary messages are noted. Therefore, the use of editorial cartoons in newspapers as a communication medium cannot be ignored.

Methodology

The article uses data obtained through qualitative techniques which were employed to investigate and expound the topic. Data from 100 respondents who were sampled through purposive sampling considering their readership of Mwananchi e-newspapers as the main criterion were collected. Content analysis on 14 selected editorial cartoons published in the e-newspapers in the period between 10 February and 30 April 2023 was also conducted. The same cartoons were used as points of reference during focus group discussions with the 100 respondents, 20 from each of the five districts of the Dar es Salaam region, Kinondoni, Ilala, Temeke, Ubungo and Kigamboni. Both data from focus group discussions and content analysis were analysed thematically and presented as elaborations.

Findings and Discussion

The content analysis of 14 selected editorial cartoons from the Mwananchi e-newspaper revealed various recurring themes. The cartoons highlighted pervasive issues such as corruption, misuse of power and public resources, and incompetent and unaccountable governance. These themes were depicted through instances of bribery, embezzlement, and political corruption, illustrating how some individuals in power unconstitutionally obtained their positions. Additionally, the cartoons shed light on the moral decay within public institutions, where officials condone corruption and misuse of resources.

Furthermore, the findings uncovered the prevalence of corruption in workplaces, with employers exploiting their authority to demand sexual favours in exchange for job opportunities, a phenomenon known as sextortion. Inadequacies within the legislative system were also highlighted, emphasising how incompetent parliamentarians could draft ineffective laws that fail to address the needs of the public and may even exacerbate existing problems.

The editorial cartoons also addressed social injustices and moral decay in Tanzanian society, focusing on issues such as gender-based violence and human rights violations. The illustrations aimed to elicit empathy and initiate discussions on ways to tackle these challenges. One of the cartoons specifically depicted the concerning trend of intergenerational sexual relationships, which contribute to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and gender-based violence.

Moreover, the cartoons underscored the issue of an inequitable taxation system as a hindrance to economic development, urging conversations on inclusive growth and the fair distribution of resources. Another highlighted economic challenge was the burden of unmanageable loans faced by individuals, indicating the need for effective financial management.

The findings also uncovered the perception of audiences toward editorial cartoons in digital newspapers, highlighting their effectiveness in communicating complex social, political, and economic issues. Several factors were identified as crucial for their effectiveness in the digital age, including the ability of cartoonists to capture attention through visual appeal and humour, convey intricate ideas concisely, the audience's level of understanding and receptiveness, and the socio-political context of the cartoons.

Analysis of data obtained after presenting 14 editorial cartoons to focus groups, revealed that audiences interpreted various meanings from the cartoons. These included the portrayal of the absence of true democracy, the significance of education for women's empowerment, President Samia's commitment to embracing democracy, her determination to lead the country, and the government's efforts to preserve Tanzanian cultural norms. Symbolism and satire were recognized as artistic techniques employed by cartoonists to convey messages about the absence of true democracy and the empowering impact of education for women.

The audience perceived education as a crucial platform for improving women's economic opportunities, leading to better employment prospects and increased financial contributions to their families. Furthermore, some editorial cartoons were interpreted as praising the government, particularly President Samia Suluhu Hassan, for initiatives such as enhancing democracy and preserving cultural norms. One specific cartoon depicting the Minister of Education, Adolf Mkenda, issuing a ban on certain books related to homosexuality was understood as communicating the government's stance on that issue.

Findings also revealed that these editorial cartoons often highlight prevalent social, economic, and political issues such as the misappropriation of public funds, unjust taxation systems, and financial struggles.

The analysis of the editorial cartoons indicated a strong focus on the exposure of corrupt practices by certain authorities, leading to public resentment and hostility towards the institution responsible for uncovering these misdeeds. Additionally, the cartoons depicted a persistent pattern of misuse of public funds, with the perpetrators displaying little inclination to reform but rather resorting to antagonistic behaviour towards those exposing their actions.

Furthermore, the unfair taxation system was a prominent subject within the cartoons, illustrating the challenges faced by various individuals in the business sector, particularly small and medium traders. The cartoons effectively highlighted the burdensome nature of the current financial environment, emphasizing the plight of individuals overwhelmed by debt obligations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article on the audiences' perceptions of Mwananchi e-newspaper's editorial cartoons as a communication medium has established that audiences perceive editorial cartoons published in the e-newspapers as effective media tools that communicate various relevant and cross-cutting social, political and economic matters. Audiences also attribute the effectiveness of editorial cartoons in this digital age to three important factors: the editorial cartoonists' ability to capture the attention of the audience through their visual appeal and humour, the cartoonist's skill in conveying complex ideas in a concise and engaging manner, the audience's level of understanding and receptiveness, and the social, economic and political context in which the cartoons are presented.

In that regard, this article concludes that editorial cartoons are popular features of newspapers, both print and e-newspapers. Since little research has been conducted, especially in developing countries such as Tanzania, on how audiences perceive this medium, this study also concludes that the editorial cartoons published in e-newspapers are perceived as useful by the e-newspaper audience in Tanzania, which can be the case in other developing countries.

This article shows that the audiences of the new form of newspapers (e-newspapers) consider editorial cartoons an effective means of communication in the digital age. In other words, editorial cartoonists have managed to keep up and cope with the massive changes happening in the way media content is created, disseminated and consumed, from print to digital formats.

Recommendations of The Paper

The article recommends continuing to utilise editorial cartoons, given the effectiveness and popularity of editorial cartoons as communication tools. These cartoons have been found to effectively convey relevant social, political, and economic matters and resonate with the audience. It also recommends focusing on visual appeal and humour by highlighting that visual appeal and humour in editorial cartoons play a significant role in capturing the audience's attention. It is recommended to prioritize these aspects when creating new cartoons, ensuring that they are visually engaging and incorporating elements of humour to enhance their effectiveness. The article also recommends emphasising concise and engaging messaging, considering the audience's level of understanding, staying relevant to social, economic, and political issues and optimizing the usage of digital platforms.

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