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GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS OF THE CENTRAL NATIONAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IN KENYA

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the strategic dimensions of the central national government communication in Kenya. The structure of the central national government communication is comprised of Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU), Office of the Government Spokesperson (OGS), and Ministry of information communication technology (ICT).

Methodology: A single-case (embedded) research design was adopted and the target population was all the communication officers at the three government entities (PSCU, OGS, and Ministry of ICT). Data was collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis.

Findings: The study findings indicate that the structure and process of government communicators are decentralized, uncoordinated, and adhoc. Communication is partly strategic and partly political. The professionals are mainly either recruited through political appointments, recommendations or recruited from civil service. Further, government communication is characterized by the pursuit of short/medium-term goals; strong political influence; limited specialized communication units; positioned at the lower level of the government structure; and considered a tactical tool that performs media and publicity functions. The study's findings are an important addition to the emerging field of government communication, especially on African scholarship where there is a serious dearth.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Given the environment under which government communication operates, the findings of this study contribute to the excellence theory of public relations that advocates for excellent communication units. The findings are also helpful to policymakers and researchers since it provides a better understanding of government communication for possible improvement, regulation, and replication.

Keywords: *Government Communication, Strategic Approach, Structures, Practice*

INTRODUCTION

Government communication has become increasingly important over the last couple of decades for several reasons (Canel & Sanders, 2012). One of these reasons is the need for transparency. In this era of increased government scrutiny and mistrust by citizens, government performance is evaluated based on its level of transparency (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Transparency is fundamental in portraying the accurate picture of government operations, it allows the citizen to evaluate the performance of the government, and hold the government accountable (Piotrowski, 2007). This is because “governing involves constant exchanges of information about policies, ideas and decisions between governors and the governed” (Sanders & Canel, 2013, p. 1). The “capacity to communicate effectively is a fundamental function of governance”, that matters to every citizen. (World Bank, Briefs for policymakers, 2010, p.1). However, the World Bank communication for governance and accountability policy brief (2010), confirmed that countries in the developing world demonstrate relatively low capacities for deploying approaches and techniques for two-way communication with citizens on matters of public importance.

In Kenya, government communication has often played in the public space, defined by the political structures, and subjected to public scrutiny in-line with the public interest. As a result, the government struggles with the challenges of availing information of public concern that gives citizens the ability to participate in decision-making and evaluate government performances. Government is yet to realize the importance of communication in influencing public opinion and reputation management. Communication enhances the public perception of accountability and transparency. It is the linkage to government operation, without a concerted effort, “it almost certainly fails in the court of public opinion” (Sanders & Canel, 2013). Whilst the Kenyan government plans, structures and coordinates its communication in a specialized, complicated environment and across numerous departments/agencies, there has been a growing insistence from its citizens for greater engagement and involvement. At the same time, the media and political elites/system that commands and controls information flows, have deterred two-way communication, which has led to questioning the legitimacy and credibility of government communication. This is because the “ability to engage in two-way communication with citizens involves a complex set of interlocking structures, processes, and practices” (World Bank Briefs for Policymakers, p.4).

Communication plays a critical role in government operations such that without a concerted effort to communicate the government’s policies, plans and activities effectively, these operations fail in the court of public opinion. The goal of communication in government is complex since the government is both *a public* and *a political* organization made up of political actors (Horsley & Liu, 2010). On one hand, citizens hold the right to information on how government performs, and therefore, it is the duty of governments to provide that information (Canel & Sanders, 2012). Government is the source and repository of much information that citizens need for them to play their role as citizens (Tanaka, 2007). Subsequently, government communication facilitates citizen engagement and participation in any democracy.

Canel and Sanders (2013) defined government communication as “The role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of a public institution(s), whose

primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that is constituted on the basis of the people's indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will" (p.4). Their definition suggests that government communication should be strategically planned, coherent, and systematically thought out (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2000), since it operates on multi-layered levels, considering diverse stakeholders (Graber, 2003). This study examined the strategic dimension of government communication critical analysis of the strategic dimensions of the central national government communication in Kenya. The analysis focused on the Executive (central national government), which revolves around three agencies: The Presidential Strategic Communications Unit (PSCU), Office of the Government's Spokesperson, and The Ministry of Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT).

Government communication has become increasingly important over the last couple of decades for several reasons (Canel & Sanders, 2012). One of these reasons is the need for transparency. In this era of increased government scrutiny and mistrust by citizens, government performance is evaluated based on its level of transparency (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Transparency is fundamental in portraying the accurate picture of government operations, it allows the citizen to evaluate the performance of the government, and hold the government accountable (Piotrowski, 2007). In Kenya, government communication has often played in the public space, defined by the political structures, and subjected to public scrutiny in-line with the public interest. As a result, the government struggles with the challenges of availing information of public concern that gives citizens the ability to participate in decision-making and evaluate government performances. Government is yet to realize the importance of communication in influencing public perception of accountability and transparency. Whilst the Kenyan government plans, structures and coordinates its communication in a complex environment that is characterized by political interference, there has been a growing insistence from its citizens for greater engagement and involvement. The political actors command and control information flow that deters two-way communication, which has led to questioning the legitimacy and credibility of government communication. This is because effective government communication is not merely management practicality, but a political, albeit moral, obligation that originates from the basic covenant that exists between the government and the people (Viteritti, in Graber, 2003, p. 226). Such complexities in government call for a strategic approach to communication. This study there sought to determine the structures of central national government communication in Kenya; analyze the strategic dimension of the central national government communication, and establish whether government communication is strategically managed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Excellence Theory of Public Relations

This study was premised on the argument that to be effective, government communication should be managed and practiced strategically following principles found in the excellence theory of public relations, which explains the value of public relations (PR) to an organization, and identifies the characteristics of the PR function that increases its value (Grunig, 2006). According to Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002), the excellence theory focuses on how public relations makes organizations more effective; the organization, management, conditions, and environment that

make public relations more effective. Grunig and Grunig (2008) defined excellence as “a set of characteristics of a PR function that were correlated with organizational effectiveness. Effectiveness, on the other hand, is a set of “attributes and practices that help build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. It occurs when an organization achieves goals in consultation with stakeholders. (Grunig, Grunig & Ehling 1992). The theory postulates the principle that public relations executives should be involved in strategic management and decision-making processes since public relations is a management function that coordinates all communication (Grunig et al. 1998).

The theory is also founded on the premise that organizations should scan their environments to identify publics needs and concerns of its publics, and incorporate them into their strategies (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Organizations should communicate symmetrically to cultivate high-quality, mutual relationships with their publics (Grunig, 2006). Grunig and Grunig (2008) identified the elements of excellent public relations and classified them into four categories, each containing several characteristics that can be audited. The four categories include; empowerment of the public relations function; organization of the communication function; relationship to other management functions; and models of public relations. Public relations is a management function, whose role should be strategic and be a part of decision making (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). The excellence theory advocates for communication programs to be developed through environmental scanning, identification of key stakeholders, and building mutual relationships with the publics. An excellent public relations department is one that communicates with stakeholders to bring their voices into the strategic management process (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). In a government setting, this approach suggests that communication should play the role of mediation, provide the necessary channels and means for citizens’ participation, and ensure that their concerns and contributions are included in policymaking. Communication in government should be run by excellent units, communicate with strategic publics, and be strategically managed. Senior government communicators should have a direct reporting relationship with the top management and be involved in the strategy process.

In addition, the roles of government communicators, whether as technicians or managers, should be well defined. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) insisted that senior communicators should be communication managers rather than technicians or administrators. They should have the ability to conceptualize and direct programs, manage budgets, make decisions, and have the critical knowledge of strategic communication. Grunig and Grunig (2008) argued that excellent departments design more of their communication programs based on the two-way symmetrical model and public participation. While the excellence theory incorporates a number of concepts and ideas, the most important for this study is its contribution to the strategic management of the communication function. From this perspective, communication should help government interact with the stakeholders (citizens) to accomplish its democratic and governance missions and to behave in a socially responsible manner. Communication facilitates dialogue with publics which in turn produces mutually-beneficial long-term relationships that are measured and evaluated to determine the long-term effectiveness and value of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

Nature of Government Communication

Government communication has a strategic management function that is crucial to the success of interaction between the organization and citizens (Ledingham, 2011, p. 235). This communication is practiced in public and meant to serve citizens, exists to serve the social well-being of its citizens, its communication is informed by the social purpose rather than by market pressures (Rainey, 2003). This means that stakeholders' loyalty and trust is sought through long-term engagement" (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011, p. 166), therefore, government communication requires a more proactive and strategic approach, than a reactive and technical one (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2011, p. 315). Strömbäck and Kiousis argued that for strategic communication to be effective, their practitioners must be involved when making decisions on strategy, and not confined to the role of technicians carrying out the tactics (2011, p. 15). This strategic approach to government communication suggests that its practitioners should be engaged in government decision-making especially as they relate to effective communication. The conceptualization from strategic communication results in improved government communication practice since the analysis and description of government communication is based on the notion of strategy (Kumar, 2003b & 2008; Kumar & Sullivan, 2003).

According to Canel and Sanders, the strategic approach sets the parameters for the organizational chart, communication tasks, and analyses of public perceptions (Canel & Sanders, 2013, p. 9). Strategic communication is coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives (Cornish, Lindley-French, & Yorke, 2011, p. 3). Strategic communication encompasses different communication specialties and activities such as communication strategists who design strategies; researchers who analyze the interplay between strategy, messaging, and audiences; public relations practitioners who implement the strategy by drafting messages; and journalists who deliver the message (*Ibid*). The nature of government communication is that it is more diverse, uncertain about objectives and less decision-making autonomy, less flexibility in establishing performance incentives, more application of formal regulations and political roles for top managers (Graber 2003, p. 12).

In some countries the uncertain and diverse nature has resulted in the devaluation of the role of communication; and this devaluation has led to the elimination of government communicators' positions, leaving unskilled communicators to fill the void (Garnett, 1994, p.378). The lack of decision-making autonomy has also led to fragmented communication structures, where government communication is uncoordinated, and contradictory (Graber, 2003). The existence of contradicting voices usually is an indication that government communication has been relegated to a technical function rather than a strategic management function (Gower, 2006). Further, government communication is in many places centralized and controlled, such that there are regulations to monitor the dissemination of information (Bekkers, 1998). Central control is put in place to regulate the impact of crisis and risks in communication that may emerge from dilution of accountabilities, inconsistent and uncoordinated communication (Lipsky, 1980).

However, government communication struggles with complexities as a result of the multi-layered and diverse nature of its operation (Puddington, 2009). As a public institution, its communication

serves various publics, diverse needs, and interests. Canel and Sanders (2011) argued that because of its public institutional setting, government communication operations are directed to external audiences and played out partly in the space of appearance with important implications for the operational condition for communication (Fisher & Horsley, 2007, p. 378). This nature of government has therefore led to intense media scrutiny (Fitch, 2004; Lee, 2008); which in turn has increased the need for transparency and accountability.

The strategic dimension of government communication

Strategic communication is a key concern for any organization that aims at accomplishing its mission through the effective use of communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic & Sriramesh, 2007). Depending on its mission, the organization can adopt various forms of communication (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013). The history of the institutionalization of strategic communication in government organizations is rather short but eventful (Salomonsen, Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). In the beginning, strategic communication was primarily institutionalized as an organizational practice due to the need among leaders for advice on political communications. Strategic communication amongst political leaders operated in a complex environment that was characterized by media negativity, blame games, and the imposition of mediatized formats (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014a; Hood, 2011; Peters, 2016; Schillemans & Pierre, 2016). As such, strategic communication was largely informed by a political logic of communication for political principals (Canel & Sanders, 2012). Its introduction in government communication was therefore triggered by the need for politicians and government to engage with the media (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015). Politicians and government functionaries needed to acquire useful tactics on how to deal with the media. This resulted in the introduction or strengthening of positions of political advisers (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010), and consultants within government.

However, despite the association between the two during those early beginnings, and the central role that the media plays, government communication should not be equated with media relations (Kioussis, Popescu & Mitrook, 2007; Tedesco, 2011; Hallahan, 2011; Canel, 2012), but should include other functions and activities that build relationships. Public relations play a key role in strategic management, by building and maintaining these relationships. The government needs to build relationships with the public in a strategic management manner for successful interaction and relationships (Ledingham, 2011, p. 235). In this case, strategic management implies that political actors need to seek to engage in conversation with citizens over a long period of time (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011), which requires a more proactive and strategic approach rather than a reactive and merely technical one (Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2011). The practitioners should be in the position of management so that they are able to make critical decisions concerning the strategic goals. Kelley (1956) insisted that to be of any value, the communicators must sit in on all planning sessions and do their part of selecting issues since public relations in a campaign is worthless unless the practitioner has at least a voice in selecting, determining, and projecting issues (p. 211–212). In addition, Kelley (1956) argued that “To put the public relations man in a policy-making position, is to put him where he can affect some of the basic relationships between the public and its government” (p. 213).

Government communicators are, in some respect, are information brokers; they develop strategic means of providing information in ways that simultaneously satisfy the publics, and maintain organizational control. While citizens demand more access to information and inclusion in the decision-making processes as a means of holding the government accountable to the implicit contract (Salomonsen, Frandsen & Johansen, 2016), it is important that government is transparent, demonstrates openness and accountability. Transparency as a strategic imperative requires the provision of explicit information on the organization, its processes, events, activities, and outcomes (Meijer, 2009; Pitrowski & Borry, 2009). Transparency also calls for the participation of the citizens as stakeholders. Participation is important because its stakeholders can provide input into the decision-making process (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003).

Government communication in Kenya

Traditionally, government communication is organized in line with the bureaucratic nature of government (Yates, 1989; Meijer, 2008). A bureaucratic mode of organization is believed to result in efficiency, effectiveness, and reliability (Olsen, 2006; Perrow, 1986; Weber, 1968). The central national government communication revolves around three agencies: The Presidential Strategic Communications Unit (PSCU), Office of the Government's Spokesperson, and The Ministry of ICT which also hosts the Directorate of Public communication (DPC), Directorate of information (DIS) and Government advertising agency (GAA).

Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU)

This is the communication unit that serves The Presidency, including the Executive Office of the President, Office of the Deputy President, and Office of the First Lady (Executive Office of the President, 2013). It was established in 2013 when President Uhuru Kenyatta came into power and announced his intent to overhaul how government communicates and interacts with citizens (Executive office of the President, 2013). The President not only introduced a new government communication structure, "He established a new communication unit called Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU), that replaced the Presidential Press Service (PPS). In a major departure from tradition, the new communication unit was headed and managed by a Secretary of Communications (Executive Office of the President, 2013). Apart from being the Secretary of Communication and Head of PSCU, Manoah Esipisu doubled up as Statehouse Spokesperson. Manoah Esipisu is a former journalist and Spokesperson/Deputy Director of communication and public affairs at The Commonwealth. In order to guide and implement the President's vision, the office established five Directorates including Digital, New media, and Diaspora; External Communication and Media; Press and Presidential Newsroom; Messaging, Speechwriting and Research; and Events and Branding (Executive Order no. 2 of 2013).

In his second term, the President appointed Kanze Dena as the Statehouse spokesperson and Head of PSCU (Executive Order no. 1 of 2018). Kanze Dena is a former News Anchor with Royal Media Services. In the restructuring of the PSCU, the secretary of communication now works with five deputy directors. The five Directors head different sections including Speech writing and public relation; Research; Messaging and Press relations; Production; and Library services (Executive Office of the President, 2018). The PSCU is comprised of different communication professionals including Reporters, Videographers, Photographers, Editors, Producers, Researchers,

Speechwriters, and Public relations practitioners. President has its own Secretary of Communication and a team of communication professionals (<http://www.president.go.ke/presidency/>).

Office of the Government Spokesperson

The Office of Government Spokesperson (OGS) was established in 2004, with the officeholder being officially referred to as Government Spokesperson and Public Communication secretary. However, in August 2013, when President Kenyatta came into power, the Office was shut down. A statement from the President's office stated that the decision was informed by the need to ensure coherence, clarity, and consistency in government communication (Office of the President, August 8th, 2013). The statement further read, "The office of the Public Communication Secretary and Government Spokesperson does not fit within the new structure of President Kenyatta's administration and has consequently been shut down" (EOP, August 8th, 2013). In 2016, the government re-established the office but this time it was renamed National Government Spokesperson. In a statement, the President's Chief of Staff, Nzioka Waita, stated that "The re-establishment of the Spokesperson office was informed by the need to ensure timely, strategic and coordinated communication on all matters relating to the National Government agenda" (EOP, August, 8th, 2013).

However, since its formation, the OGS is yet to be rightly structured, staffed, and provided the necessary resources. The office has twice been moved to different ministries; until May 2019, the office was domiciled at the ministry of interior and coordination of national government, and in May 2019, the office was moved to the ministry of ICT (Executive Order no. 2 of 2018). In May 2019, the Cabinet Secretary (CS) at the Ministry of ICT made major changes at the OGS. Apart from appointing Colonel (RTD) Cyrus Odhiambo Oguna as the new government spokesperson, the CS moved the OGS office to the Ministry of ICT (Executive Order No 3 of 2019). According to a Press release dated May 7th, 2019, the CS indicated that the officeholder would play an oversight role over the Directorate of Information, Department of Public communication, National Government communication center (NGCC), and the Government Media center. In addition, the officeholder would have a content oversight role over the Kenya News Agency (KNA) and MyGov (Executive Order no. 3 of 2019)

Ministry of Information, Communication, and Telecommunication

The Ministry of Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) was created through Executive Order No. 2 of 2013. The Ministry is tasked with providing Information Communications Technology, Broadcasting, Language management policies, and Public communication (Executive Oder No. 2 of 2013). The creation of the ministry of ICT was a commitment to creating an enabling environment for the public to access information as provided for in Chapter 35 (1) (a) of the Constitution of Kenya (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). The Ministry of ICT has two state departments, namely: State Department for Broadcasting and Telecommunications, and State Department for ICT and Innovation (Executive Order no. 1/2016). On the one hand, the former was charged with the responsibility of developing national communication capacity and infrastructure, policy on automation of government services, and development and e-Government. On the other hand, the latter was charged with gathering,

producing, and disseminating news and information, training mass media personnel, information marketing, advertising, and image building (Ministry of ICT Strategic Pan, 2013 -2017).

The state department of ICT and innovation functions to develop national ICT and innovation policies; promote E-government and automation of government services, and develop national communication capacity and infrastructure. However, of interest to this paper is the state department of Broadcasting and Telecommunications, which is made up of two main directorates: The Directorate of Information and the Directorate of Public communication. According to the Ministry of ICT's strategic plan 2013/2017, the Directorate of Information Services is responsible for the formulation, interpretation, and implementation of information policies, strategies, and programs; conducting information research and provision of appropriate strategies; covering development projects, socio-economics, and cultural activities in line with the Constitution, Vision 2030, and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Ministry of ICT Strategic Pan, 2013 -2017). The Directorate of Public Communication functions to manage public communication; branding, promotion, and maintenance of a positive image of the government; provide appropriate intervention strategies; advise the government on matters of public communication and stakeholders engagement (Ministry of ICT Strategic Pan, 2013 -2017). Today, the department of information services is charged with providing government departments with materials for carrying out specific policies and campaigns such as vaccination or dissemination of anti-subversive propaganda (Ministry of ICT Strategic plan, 2-13/2017). The Strategic Plan 2013-2017 indicates that the Directorate of information services has five separate and distinct units, including Kenya News Agency, Rural Press, Central Media Services, Photographic Services, and Press Centre ((Ministry of ICT Strategic Pan, 2013 -2017).

METHODS

This study used a case study research methodology because it provided an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of government communication in a real Kenyan context. The case study method allowed the researcher to assume that the reality about government communication is constructed inter-subjectively through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially. The method also provided a rich holistic description that illuminates one's understanding of the central national government communication in Kenya. The researcher used interviews to collect data. Purposive sampling was used in selecting all government communication professionals in the three communication units. Purposive sampling is the selection of subjects or elements that have specific characteristics or qualities and eliminates those who fail to meet these criteria (Wimmer & Dominick, 2004). The researcher conducted 20 interviews within the ministry of ICT including the Directorate of Public Communication (PC), Directorate of information services (IS), and Directorate of GAA. The interviews were also conducted at the Office of Government Spokesperson, and, the Presidential Strategic Communication Unit.

RESULTS

Structure of the Central National Government Communication in Kenya

The respondents were asked to rate the structure of government communication in Kenya. According to the first Interviewee, *“Public Communication Officers (PCOs) and information officers report to the Head of Administration or HR Manager at the ministry and are evaluated by the same head of administration. The directors of public communication, information services, and a government advertising agency all report to the Information Secretary, who in turn reports to the Government Spokesperson, who in turn reports to the PS for Broadcasting and Telecommunication. This reporting line has led to poor or inadequate coordination of the public communication function”*. The Government Spokesperson has an oversight role of all Government communication offices and channels including the Directorate of Information (DIS); Directorate of Public Communication (DPC); National Government Communication Centre (NGCC); Media Center, Kenya News Agency (KNA), and MyGov. However, one of the interviewees raised concerns about the structure of the OGS and its operations. The interviewee said *“since the tenure of the first office holder of the OGS, no efforts have been made to institutionalize this role. It remains fractured and ad hoc. Should the office holder report directly to the Permanent Secretary or to the Cabinet Secretary of the Ministry of ICT, just the same way the Head of PSCU reports directly to the President? In any case, these appointments have always been done based on the political lines and interests”*.

When asked about the position of communication in government structure, interviews at the PSCU and OGS claimed that communication is defined on the organization chart but its status keeps changing, while those at the ministry of ICT and other government agencies claimed that communication is not defined. Interviewee five said, *“Communication is defined in the government structure, but its status keeps changing depending on the political regime in power”*. However, another interviewee stated *“government communication is not clearly defined in the government structure. Communication is a unit in transition, we have had the initial structure where we got different small communication units all over the place, some not quite defined and others formal, but all they existed and functioned in various capacities. Because of this, our actions and activities have not had a unified front, we have not performed so well because we do not talk to each other, each unit has been talking to itself. There are so many historical injustices, stagnation, understaffing, and lack of appreciation for communication that have led to the lack of action-oriented and poor performance.”*

In view of the above opinions, one interviewee claimed *“We are working on professionalizing government communication such that they will all be in one place. Recently, we had OGS, NGCC, DPC and DIS, and all other official government communication agencies and channels placed under the ministry of the ICT. Even before this new change, there was yet an attempt to streamline and professionalize the field. I think that’s why I insist that government communication is in transition, therefore we will keep on working on it and modifying it until we get to the right place and have a unified action-oriented force. There is a need to professionalize government communication”*.

This response suggests that the communication structure is fragmented and unplanned, it is linked to the structure of the political organization in government offices. The structure is based on the President's communication as a central figure, and the CS's political interests. Communication is in transition; the government has begun to recognize a need for increased visibility of communication as a management and leadership function.

Strategic Dimensions of the Central National Government Communication

This study found out that government communication activities revolved around media monitoring and information publication. One of the interviewees described it as, *"The coordination of communications within government is done at the ministerial level where the public communication officers (PCOs) are deployed to carry out media monitoring and reporting"*. Further, he said, *"communication seeks to coordinate activities in various sections of government to work as a unit called Government. While the PSCU is the newsroom of the President newsroom, that shares information with the publics"*. However, Interviewee three responded by saying *"The efficiency and effectiveness of government communication function are affected by bureaucracy and the 'red tape"*. He further claimed that *"since independence, subsequent governments have recognized the role of communication differently and thus the importance and prominence of government communication offices changed with the change in government"*. Another interviewee claimed, *"The current government attaches little if any importance to communication. Lack of understanding of communication function has led to poor organization of communication in the government structure and poorly implemented or under-utilized"*.

These findings are an indication that government communication is multilayered and diverse, it wrestles with considerable complexities that may hinder it from operating on long-term goals. The fact that it functions in a political environment, means that political interests, cycles, and culture determine its operations. In such a way that communication professionals may politically be appointed to fulfill the political interest but on short-termism. The short-term functions of communication focus more on publicity and media relations, such as media briefing and information publication, rather than strategic functions such as planning, coordination, reacher, stakeholder mapping, and engagement.

When asked whether government facilitates communication activities, the interview findings confirm that to a large extent government facilitates communication activities. One of the interviewees argued that *"Presidential communication is designed towards achieving specific goals that build and maintain the brand -The President. Therefore, all the communication practices and activities are informed by the tactical and strategic perspectives. We run The President's newsroom that includes messaging and media relations, we plan his events and activities based on research and assessment, which most of the time is informed by traditional and social media. We have a systematically managed communication planning, budget, research, and assessment that is put in place with the help of the EOP."*

However, another interviewee said *"The activities are facilitated because it only involves organizing national events, especially those commemorating national days like Madaraka Day, Mashujaa Day and Jamhuri Day; projection of a positive image about government; research on public opinion; promote stakeholder engagement and public participation; monitoring and*

managing contention websites; publish information communication materials that enhance government image; and media monitoring”. He further claimed that “Inadequate budget, untrained and incapacitated staff, positing of government communication at technical or junior level, misunderstanding and lack of facilitation has led to poor performance of communication.”

The above findings imply that government communication at the presidency is well facilitated and planned, but communication at the ministry of ICT is not well facilitated. Yet, the highest number of communication professionals (Ministry of ICT and OGS) and information needs. The inadequacy to handle the communication demands is an indication of a lack of strategically planned communication that can generate, produce and disseminate the information successfully. Due to the inadequacy of resources and facilitation, there is fragmented, uncoordinated, and poorly planned government communication.

Whether Government Communication is Strategically Managed

When it comes to the roles played by government communicators, one interviewee said *“As much as our work is guided by the owner of the voice, we are there to provide our expert advice, the owner then has a choice regarding the actions. We play the advisory, the executive has a choice to take our advice or not.”* Another interviewee claimed, *“In an ideal situation, the role of communication officers at the ministries should be advisory but due to structural challenges, most communication officers at the ministries (apart from the consultants) report to and are evaluated by, the MDAs who have a poor understanding of the role of communication.”*

On the other hand, interviewee ten said *“The nature and understanding of communication in government are in such a way that communication comes into play only during a crisis and publicity. Even then, they are called upon to play administrative roles of media relations and crisis communication, and not advisory”*. She added that *“The role of communication is poorly understood, and not clearly defined, therefore most communication officers end up doing administrative work, more of personal assistant and publicity clerks. As a result, the PCOS and IOs have been placed in one category – journalists. There is a need to streamline the role of communication in government and improve on job descriptions of the communication professional so that they can work in a structured and standardized manner.”*

The above findings suggest that there is a lack of clear understanding of government communication, its functions, and its importance. Communication enables the government to be impartial, transparent, and accountable, as well as opens ways of engaging and allowing citizens to participate in the governance process. When government communication is considered to have a strategic significance, it will define the long-term goals, structures, coordination, and planning based on research and assessment. Government communication is multilayered and diverse, it wrestles with considerable complexities that may hinder it from operating on long-term goals. The study found out that the fact that it operates in a political environment, means that political interests, cycle, and culture determine its operations. In such a way that communication professionals may politically be appointed to fulfill the political interest but on short-termism.

Further findings showed that government communication is characterized by the pursuit of short/medium-term goals that mostly emanate during crises; strong political influence; limited specialized communication units; positioned at lower organizational levels. Government

communication is considered to be a tactical tool rather than a strategic tool. As a result, the communication is decentralized, fragmented, and uncoordinated. There is a need for professionalization, re-organization, and facilitation. As it stands, communication is not informed by research, because it operates as a tactical function than a strategic function.

DISCUSSIONS

The structure of the central national government communication in Kenya is not designed on the precepts of excellence theory. The political systems, complexities, and dynamics of the stakeholders may not allow the government to have excellent communication departments. This study found out that communication in government is complex and political, it is affected by, and responds to a variety of political issues. A critical examination of the structure of government communication revealed that the structure is clearly linked to the political organization in place, meaning that the government in office defines the structure based on their political interest. As a public institution, its communication serves various publics, diverse needs, and interests, and, as a political institution, its communication serves the interests of the political actors. These findings contradict Grunig and Grunig's (2008) recommendation on defining communication based on the two-way symmetrical model and public participation. The communication units should have a clearly defined structure, well-defined roles, empowered public relations executive, be well equipped, communication that is organized and operates as a management function (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). The organization should empower PR as a critical management function (Grunig, 2008), such that the excellent department are able to communicate with important publics, and make it possible for publics to participate in the decision making (Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

However, the findings of this study revealed that government communication operates on press agency and public information models. The communication is focused on the publicity that is meant to earn citizens' attention for political reasons, it emphasizes the outcome (publicity/media coverage) without regard to the process (methods). In addition, communication is one way (government -citizens) with no regard for feedback. Further, government communication structures are clearly defined at the PSCU, but not clearly defined at the OGS and ministry of ICT. For instance, the structure at the Ministry of ICT does not clearly state the interplay between the OGS, IS, DPC, DIS, and PCOs at the MDAs. Though the roles of the government communicators are well defined, the professionals are not well facilitated and equipped.

The above findings contradict Grunig and Grunig (2008) recommended that public relations executives should be involved in strategic management and have the power to influence key organizational decisions. The PR executives should be able to think strategically to conceptualize and direct PR programs, and have the critical knowledge of strategic communication. Further, excellence theory advocated for the organization to institutionalize communication, such that it is integrated into a single department or agency that provides a mechanism for coordinating all programs managed by the different units or departments. Government is unable to infuse all its communication efforts into a single department/agency due to the complexities and dynamics in the political environment. The study found out that the government operates and functions through several communication units, which tend to overlap and duplicate each other, they include; PSCU, OGS, IS, DPC, DIS, GAA, NGCC, and NCS. Further, the study found out that research does not

play a role in the formation of communication strategy, therefore, communication programs were not informed by research or citizens' needs.

The study also found out that communication programs were not well coordinated and lack a clear strategy to persuade the publics to support government policies and projects. This is because communication does not involve citizens nor does it have adequate and effective channels. It, therefore, lacks clear directions and objectives on how to enhance public knowledge on the operations of government. The central government, as a whole, did not have an overarching communication strategy. It is no wonder that respondents pointed out the lack of coordination as one of the key challenges. These findings are an indication of a lack of a plan of action and understanding of the citizens' needs, poor coordination, ineffectively drafted, and conflicting messages. The failure to plan, coordinate and implement communication had resulted in poorly systematized structures, inadequate and unequal resource allocation, delayed or wrong decision-making, and reactive approaches to communication. Communication requires a more proactive and strategic approach (Kioussis & Stromback, 2011), where organizations identify the publics' needs and incorporate them into their strategy. Further findings revealed that the government had the necessary human resource capacity needed for the strategy-making process, but government somewhat engages the professionals only during the implementation.

Communication professionals at OGS and Ministry of ICT act based on instructions from PSCU or Cabinet Secretaries, and are not involved in the planning and development of the strategies. This was reflected by how communication was formally structured at the Presidency with clearly defined roles, and how unstructured communication is at the OGS and Ministry of ICT, with not well-defined roles. In fragile democracies such as Kenya, where government communication is in transition and driven by political interest, differentiating political communication from government communication may be a challenge as proven by this study's findings. Government communication takes place in a public sector environment; where coordination, implementation, and integration of programs, empowerment of professionals, and distribution of resources, maybe hindered by various factors that are not similar to those in the private sector. In Kenya, government communication operates within a political environment that is driven by political actors and interests, and its functions are dictated by the existing governance structure, which leads to structural changes defined by the political cycle. Such complex and complicated dynamics may limit the operations of communication from functioning as a strategic tool in achieving government agenda.

CONCLUSION

Government communication in Kenya is yet to be professionalized due to the political systems and environment under which it operates. Professionalization advocates for well-managed communication protected from conflicting interests that infiltrate its structure (Negrine, 2007). The number of professions, structures, and resources allocated to communication is the major challenge. It is, therefore, critical to have an efficient and reflective organization of communication, there is a need for a clear distinction between political communication and government communication. In the past, there have been structural changes both at the PSCU, OGS, and the Ministry of ICT, but these changes have been viewed from different perspectives.

While some view it as a natural reflection of the increased information demands, some view it as a timely expansion of capacities from the old ways of communicating, with the sole purpose of maintaining power and influencing political agenda. Either way, government communication needs to shift into an effective, long-lasting, and strategic approach to communication.

Currently, the government communication is organized in decentralized (lacks central management systems), fragmented, and tactical ways. It lacks the overarching strategy that ought to centralize the units for coordinated and unified communication. Each unit operates in an Adhoc and independent way that contradicts and duplicates the roles of the other. The lack of an overarching strategy has also resulted in the fragmentation of audiences, messages, and objectives. In order to coordinate and keep up with the current communication environment, the government should have an overarching communication strategy that holds together the communication units. An overarching strategy that is sensitive to the trends and changes taking place in the environment. Communication is transitional, its structures keep changing depending on the existing political power and governance structure. The structures and processes are defined by political actors/interests; who determine the resources, operations, and professionals that work in those units. This is a demonstration of how politics shape government communication, politics uses communication as a political tool to fulfill their interests. It is, therefore, important that the government puts in place policies and structures that distinguish government communication and political communication.

RECOMMENDATION

The government needs to evaluate the litigious environment that communication operates under, there is a need to improve and empower communication units and professionals. Government communication currently operates in an environment of an informed citizenry, fragmented audiences, increased mistrust towards government, higher demand for accountability and access to information, vibrant and private media, expanded and increased digital space and usage. This study, therefore, recommends a paradigm shift in the structure and organization of government communication. The structures should be standardized, formal, and not easily manipulated by the existing political systems or actors, the structure that strengthens synergies between communication units for a unified and harmonized strategy. The study also recommends the formation of a systematic and standardized structure of training and skill developments for the professionals. The need for retooling, keeping abreast of best practices, and establishing the standards, calls for training, and empowerment of professionals.

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