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**Promoting Kenya's National Interests through Strategic Communication: Challenges
and Opportunities**

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Abstract

Purpose: Throughout history, nations have sought to protect, promote and advance their national interests. Countries use various elements and instruments of national power in pursuit of those national interest. These includes military, diplomatic, economic and information. Like other nations, Kenya employs these instruments in various ways. Strategic communications, forms a key element of the information aspect of national power. Despite the importance of strategic communications in the pursuit of national interests, this paradigm has not been fully acknowledged nor been substantially leveraged on. This study therefore had the key objectives of determining the role of strategic communications in selected case studies in promotion of national interests, examining the role of strategic communications in promoting Kenya's national interests and identifying opportunities and challenges of strategic communications in promoting national interests.

Methodology: This study adopted a pragmatic research methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were adopted. The qualitative research offered the usual narrative information collected through interviews. While information acquired through questionnaires and interviews offered quantitative data necessary data on the role of strategic communication in promoting Kenya's national interests. Being a cross-sectional research study, the researcher used interviews for gathering data, and questionnaires for data collection. This study used purposeful sampling to choose 86 respondents in 'Job Group' 'P' and above from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Internal Security and National Administration and the Ministry of Information Communication Technology and Digital Economy based in Nairobi. The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires was coded, edited, organized, and analyzed with the assistance frequency tables, whereas the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions of the interviews is thematically analyzed in accordance with the research objectives.

Findings: The findings reveal that the Government of Kenya has attempted to institutionalize strategic communications in various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). This study further shows that if well capacitated, coordinated and provided with requisite leadership, these institutions provide opportunities that would be useful in the synchronization of the instruments of national power. The study identified various opportunities as well as challenges encountered in the utilization of strategic communications in promoting Kenya's national interests.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: This study was informed by Institutional and Realism theories. The Institutional theory has been identified as one of the most prominent theoretical perceptions of organizational and management research while Realism is considered a longstanding theory, critical in understanding social phenomena from different perspectives. The study recommended the entrenchment strategic communications in the National Security Council (NSC) by setting up an office of strategic communications and coordination under the NSC. Moreover, there is need to ensure implementation of the National Communication Policy and Strategy while ensuring harmonization through a whole government approach that can lead to policy coherence.

Keywords: *Strategic Communication, National Interests, Instruments of National Power*

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, nations have sought to protect, promote and advance their national interests. All states, regardless of the power they possess continuously pursue their national interests (Trifunović and Ćurčić, 2021) which include the survival of their physical, political, and cultural identities against being eroded by other nations (Morgenthau & Thompson, 2018). As posited by Miyamoto (2012), to pursue and advance their national interests, countries employ all their instruments of national power including elements such as the size of the country, its natural resources, its industrial capability, the quality of its diplomacy, the morale of its people, the size of its population and their national character. It also considers its military and quality of its government (Morgenthau & Thompson 2018).

Various countries have identified instruments of power which they consider crucial in the pursuit of national interests. The United States and the United Kingdom have identified Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (D.I.M.E) as key concepts of national power. Diplomacy allows for interaction and cooperation with other nations, the military allows for use of force to achieve strategic national goals and objectives while the economic instrument serves as an enabler of other elements by providing necessary resources for building strong institutions.

The information element which is composed of concepts like strategic communication, intelligence, and cyber-security among others is utilized in forming and altering perceptions, informing audiences and controlling how information is received and disseminated. Among these concepts, strategic communication as an emerging paradigm has in the recent past gained prominence due to its ability to determine the direction of events, formulate strategies and influence perceptions at the local and global stage and generally aid in the pursuit of national interests.

Strategic communication which is defined as the use of words and actions in a synchronized and purposeful manner to communicate the overall missions of an organization and advance its interests, helps leaders to deliver communication that is synchronized, articulate and supports common understanding (Ministry of Defence, 2012). Leadership with the ability to harness the utility of information has significant advantages over its competitors since as proponents of realism theory posit, countries need to survive in an anarchic international system which demands for nations to be on the lookout for their national interests.

Despite this crucial role played by strategic communication in the pursuit of national interests this concept has not been adequately leveraged upon and has failed to be fully recognized. Kenya like other nations pursues its national interests as set out in various national strategies. Kenya Constitution 2010, the Ministry of Defence 2017 Defence White Paper and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014 Foreign Policy have all set out Kenya's national interests that the country seeks to protect, promote, and project. These include safeguarding of national territorial integrity, improving socioeconomic well-being of the citizenry, protecting national security and promoting national prestige.

Policy makers particularly those in the public sector play a crucial role in the advancement of a state's national interest through the effective use of communication to guide and direct various government authorities as well as influence internal and external publics. Policymakers in Kenya acknowledge the importance of strategic communication in promoting Kenya's national interests. However, there exists challenges that hinder their effective and efficient use. Moreover, there are also opportunities that can be exploited to

ensure that strategic communication plays a more significant role in the promotion of national interests. This paper discusses these opportunities as well as the challenges and offers some recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the realist theory as a basis of explaining the use of strategic communication in promoting Kenya's national interests. Realism emphasizes the centrality of the nation state as well as national interests, power, and security. It posits that though states have different political, economic and ideological inclinations they all strive to protect what they consider are their national interests (Basu, 2012). The consideration of national interests as a concept by realist is said to have been post World War Two after the survival of the state and issues of power were deemed to be the most important national interest. Hans Morgenthau is considered one of chief proponent of this view for having placed national interest and power as core to his theoretical thoughts about states relations (Trifunović and Čurčić, 2021). Realism theory is relevant to this paper on the promotion of Kenya's national interests through strategic communication since it focuses on the state being concerned with the protection of its national interests through the orchestration of various instruments of national power and in this case strategic communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a pragmatic research methodology. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were adopted. The qualitative research offered the usual narrative information collected through interviews. While information acquired through questionnaires and interviews offered quantitative data necessary data on the role of strategic communication in promoting Kenya's national interests. Due to the advancement of technology, large amounts of data that are already collected, collated and in archives is available in various forms and can be easily accessed. Secondary data has been identified as being flexible and can be used in various ways. This has made the utilization of existing data in research become more widespread and therefore is a viable research methodology (Johnston, 2014).

FINDINGS

Strategic Communications and National Interests

The significance of strategic communication in the development and execution of policy that is critical to national interests cannot be gainsaid. Many countries have acknowledged it as an important tool of uniting various government agencies in the pursuit and promotion of national interests in a whole of government approach (Cornish, Lindley-French & Yorke, 2011). Strategic communication, military, diplomacy and economy have been recognized as elements of national power. This element seeks to ensure effective and efficient communication with all the necessary stakeholders. Strategic communication has been identified as focused processes and efforts by a government that seek to engage and understand key publics that lead to the creation, strengthening or preserving conditions that are favorable to the advancement of national interests. This is achieved through utilizing coordinated themes, programs, plans, and actions in synchronization with other instruments of national power (Office, 2006)

Kenya's National Interests

The national interest concept has been argued by many scholars to be complex and without a global definition. However, despite this lack of consensus on its definition, it is widely accepted that all nations are always in pursuit of their national interests notwithstanding the power they command. Scholars and statesmen adapted the use of the concept of national interest since the foundation of the nation states to exemplify the goals and aspirations of sovereign states and their interaction with their external environment (Nuechterlein, 1976). Moreover, national interests are useful in influencing public policy, planning, and giving priority to issues. They also assist in establishing a wide array of security undertakings that are important to ensure the states' survival. National interests aid in opening communication channels with other interested parties in the country, region and internationally (National Defence College, 2021).

The term national interest is mentioned in Kenya Constitution (2010) Chapter 12 article 202 and article 203 on equitable sharing of national revenue which identifies national interest as one of the criteria to be taken into account in determining the equitable shares of national revenue (Kenya Law: The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Article 238 (1) further states that "National security is the protection against internal and external threats to Kenya's territorial integrity and sovereignty, its people, their rights, freedoms, property, peace, stability and prosperity and other national interests" (Kenya Law: The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Kenya's Foreign Policy (2014) set out its mission as being projection, promotion and protection of Kenya's interests (Government of Kenya, 2014).

The 2017 Kenya's Ministry of Defence White Paper identified Kenya's basic national interests as security, political independence, territorial integrity, and the socioeconomic well-being of the people of Kenya. It further, states that Kenya's interests include sovereignty and territorial integrity, national security, economic prosperity, and well-being of Kenyans and national prestige. The Defence White Paper states that Kenya's interests are to be safeguarded by all means necessary. Their protection, advancement and promotion are paramount since they are crucial to the survival of the nation as a stable and strong state. (Ministry of Defence, 2017).

Kenya's Strategic Communication Architecture

Kenya's Strategic Communication Architecture consists of the various entities. Executive Order Number 1 of January 2023, which dwelt on the organizing of the government following the election of President William Ruto, placed the communication docket under the Ministry of Information, Communication, and the Digital Economy. The Ministry's function included among other functions Broadcasting policy, Public Communications and Government spokesperson. (Government of Kenya, 2023). Over the years the government has considered communication an important component of governance.

The government of Kenya in 2009 commissioned a task force to develop a National Communication Policy and Strategy to provide policy guidelines to guide the process of Public Sector Communication. This was the first ever attempt by the government to come up with a comprehensive policy since independence. This process culminated to the proposed National Communication Policy and Strategy of 2012. Following the promulgation of Constitution 2010, the policy was re-drafted in 2015 to consider the provision of the new constitution. Articles 33(1), (2) and (3) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) made provisions

on right to freedom of expression including freedom to seek, receive or impart information or ideas and freedom of artistic creativity and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research. Article 34 guarantees the freedom of the media while Article 35 (1) gives citizens the right of access to information. (Kenya Law: The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). In 2015, the Public Sector Communication Policy was eventually unveiled. This policy had the broad objective of ensuring government was visible, accountable, and accessible. This was to promote public trust in the integrity, impartiality and reliability in the public service.

Challenges of Strategic Communication in Promoting Kenya’ s National Interests

The Public Sector Communication Policy of 2015 though a major attempt by the government to leverage on its communication capabilities was more concerned about informing the public about government services. The policy lacked an important objective that ensured that the government was strategic in its communications to all its publics. The lack of mention of the use of strategic communication to deliver synchronized, focused, coordinated plans, programs, and themes to influence their publics meant that the government was losing out in an essential instrument of national power to achieve national interests. Moreover, as of 2023, there are no indications that the policy was ever adapted and implemented.

Though Kenya, has various entities that are tasked with strategic communication including the Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU), Office of Public Communication (OPC), and Office of Government Spokesperson (OGS). These institutions are nevertheless standalone institutions that don’t seem to synchronize their activities for maximum effect. The use of strategic communication therefore is not effective as each institution has its own view of what needs to be communicated and through which media. The lack of strategic communication in government hinders the successful employment of this instrument of national power to promote Kenya’s national interests domestically and internationally.

This study have shown that the use of strategic communication in promoting Kenya’s national interests though widely acknowledged, has not been fully leveraged on by government. This can be attributed to various factors including the fact that many ministries, departments and agencies lack officers who are skilled on matters of strategic communication. It is also observed that there is no universal agreement among government officer as to what can be considered as Kenya’s national interests. Furthermore, the strategic communication units in ministries or departments are not adequately resourced to enable them play their rightful role of using strategic communication to promote Kenya’s national interests (Mugo,2023).

Owing to the inadequate understanding of Kenya’s national interests and how they can be communicated strategically, senior government officers have cited bureaucracy and the obligation to adhere to the Kenya Official Secret Act CAP 87 (Kenya Law: The Constitution of Kenya, 2010) as a hindrance to their use of strategic communication in promoting Kenya’s national interests. Officers are apprehensive that by discussing national interests they would be in contravention of the law which forbids civil servants from communicating information that would prejudice the interests of the country (Mugo, 2023).

With the rapid developments in information and communication technology, strategic communication has experienced a digital innovation gap. This means there is an existing gap in digital innovation in government to meet evolving strategic communication needs in comparison to the private sector. As a result, government officials encounter bureaucratic delays which make it challenging to quickly switch to innovative practices even when those

practices are essentially for effective strategic communication. The growth of social media and other new generation media necessitates rapid pivoting for those tasked with communicating with various publics. Inability to do so makes it very difficult for government officers to be effective in their delivery of their mandates which includes the promotion of Kenya's national interests.

Opportunities for Strategic Communication in Promoting Kenya's National Interests

Kenya like other nations has its own national interests, which it seeks to secure. (Miyamoto, 2012) The country utilizes available the military, economic, diplomatic and information instruments of national power to promote its interests. However, the country's use of strategic communication has not been effective as it should be owing to the challenges discussed above. Despite these limitations there exists opportunities which the country can leverage on to ensure that this instrument is fully exploited. Of most importance is the existence of government institutions that are dedicated to the information and communication functions. Though these institutions are mainly constituted to inform rather than communicate in a strategic manner, they nevertheless form an important backbone for the performance of strategic communication activities if well constituted and resourced.

The availability of a well-educated human capital resource in the Kenya's public service, makes it easy for the government to re-skill and re-tool its workforce to enable them to appreciate Kenya's national interests as well as perform strategic communication related activities. Moreover, Kenya's civil service has a continuous learning culture which provides its employees the opportunity to undertake various courses and training as a prerequisite for promotion and human resource development. These opportunities can be used to not only sensitize them on national interests but also on how they can use strategic communication in their protection, promotion and projection (Mugo, 2023)

Since as technology keeps improving across the world, it is crucial to stay relevant and flexible to gain the most out of it especially in establishing multiple streams of information dissemination. Opportunities abound in this sector through the government automating and innovating around the various processes that make it difficult for it to orchestrate and coordinate all government agencies to enable them to use strategic communication in the promotion of Kenya's national interests. Innovative communication strategies break away from some bureaucratic processes to achieve timely dissemination of relevant information and feedback.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This paper assesses the challenges and opportunities that strategic communication offers for the promotion of Kenya's national interests. The use of strategic communication as an instrument of national power is crucial for the promotion of national interests. The effective utilization of this instrument in Kenya is however fraught with challenges ranging from lack of a comprehensive national communication policy, lack of skilled manpower and, synchronization of the instruments of national. However, opportunities to improve the use of strategic communication including the up-skilling and re-tooling officials, creation of a National Strategic Communication Council and embedding the Council to the National Security Council are some of the strategies that can be adapted to help in the promotion of Kenya's national interests.

Recommendations

To improve Kenya's strategic communication the government should consider establishing the National Strategic Communication Council to enhance the coordination of all the institution that are currently involved in government communication activities. The Office of Public Communication, also known as the Government spokesperson, The Presidential Communication Unit, the Department of Public Communications and the Department of Information should all be part of the National Strategic Communication Council. This entity should also be mandated with the formulation of strategies, policies, and programs for all strategic communication in the country. The council should initiate appropriate measures to ensure the orchestration of all instruments of national power to deliver on Kenya's national interests.

Article 240 (a) of the Constitution of Kenya which establishes the National Security Council mandates it to "integrate the domestic, foreign and military policies relating to national security in order to enable the national security organs to co-operate and function effectively" (Kenya Law: The Constitution of Kenya, 2010). In this regard there is need for the proposed National Strategic Council to be embedded to the National Security Council (NSC) as a committee to advice on matters of strategic communication particularly as pertains its utilization as an instrument of national power.

The Kenya Defence Forces has a pragmatic and progressive strategic communication department. However, there is no evidence of any collaboration between the military and the other arms of government in the use of its strategic communications assets in the overall promotion of Kenya's national interests. There is need to establish formal collaboration mechanisms between the Ministry of Defence and other government agencies tasked with the strategic communication responsibilities in the promotion of Kenya's national interests.

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