

The Somaliland Media and the Public Deception

Kamal Ahmed Ali

ABSTRACT

When Somaliland reclaimed its sovereignty in 1991, it took steps to have vibrant media, which took part in state and peace building efforts. A strong and vibrant media sector is seen as an important resource for national development and social demobilization efforts. Indeed, though considerable progress has been achieved in the expansion of media in Somaliland, yet significant challenges to media both state-owned and independent remain to be addressed. In recent years, there has been growing criticisms of the conduct of the mass media in Somaliland. This criticism is multifaceted – economic, political, and ethical – and is grounded mostly in the facts concerning the conduct of the media. In nearly twenty years plus, the media have enjoyed editorial independence; self-censoring, and their first and foremost responsibility remained in avoiding public and private disappointments. But, has never materialized this opportunity in which most African media if not all have never experienced. This failure could be linked to the absence of professional ethics, objective reporting and social responsibility with defined critical thinking principles. The absence of objective reporting and truth are regarded as the most challenging factors on the Somaliland freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, the media people neither have professionalism nor the knowledge to exercise media tasks. The central objective of this study is therefore, to examine the conditions of the Somaliland media and how the media deceive the public by dumping news which are contrary to the interests of the public at large. The study mainly relied on primary and secondary data includes individual interviews and discussions with the media people, politicians, academicians, and the public at large, while relevant literatures from books, journals, policy documents, among others were reviewed. The study suggests the necessity for addressing the challenges facing the media and the need for urgent legal, policy and institutional reforms to improve the level of Somaliland media, thus maintain the trust between the media for one hand, and the state and the public for the other.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the media is the best weapon in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the public. Newscasts play a crucial role in determining the local politics, economy, commercial and financial issues, developmental programs, security, international wars, and foreign policies and in every aspect of the state's important issues, which were once determined behind closed doors of the decision makers' offices. Presently, neither bureaucracies of the political parties, nor the elected representatives and leaders have the power to successfully handle national issues, as usual, without the assistance of the media. The media shape and crystallize public opinion¹, and as such they really deserve to be considered as the Fourth Estate, a term attributed to Edmund Burke.²

¹ L. Bernays, Edward (1961). *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

² Willis, Jim (2007). *The Media Effect: How the News Influences Politics and Government*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers.

The separation of Somaliland from the rest of Somalia in 1991 restored the long-missing basic freedoms and ushered a new era of freedom of the press. The declaration of Somaliland was a precursor of a proliferation of media. Dozens of independent newspapers were authorized to operate. Radio Hargeysa was rehabilitated and private independent television channels aired. But with this, public opinion of Somaliland's media is constantly being debated on the capacity of the media outlets and the professionalism of journalists. This leads to some people arguing about the quality of the media contents. But what is more, is that political discourse in Somaliland is still heavily characterized by rhetoric rumors and innuendo, to which the media often contributes.³

Certainly, media deception is an international phenomenon which is documented in many studies including books, academic journal and newspaper articles. The focus is usually discussing and deeply arguing about the different dimensions of public deception by the media in today's world. Edward L. Bernays, whom the New York Times referred as the "father of public relations and opinion leader in making" is one of the first few people to explore media manipulation and how it affects public opinion.⁴ In his point of view, this is necessary in society, because the true ruling powers of any country are those who manipulate the public opinion, calling them as invisible government, and ruling the whole life of the society. In Somaliland, for the last quarter of a century, dozens of different media outlets were the source of news and information for Somaliland community, who were interestingly following the media, enjoying to exercise their rights of freedom of expression. This came with a feeling of excitement as they have never dreamed of getting the pleasure of freedom before, because of the authoritarian regime which had ruled the country for two decades. The collapse of the Barre Regime in 1991 was followed by a proliferation of the independent media in Somaliland. Beginning with mimeographed newsletters in the major towns, and latter press printers were installed in Hargeisa and Berbera in 1993.⁵

This study attempts to better understand the kind of relationship between the media and those in power, and how they use media as a tool of public deception. As a conclusion, it enlightens how Somaliland media is manipulated by business gurus and politicians, to the extent that those with political power or wealth use the media as a tool of public deception. It explores how the financial challenges faced by Somaliland media might contribute to the economy and politics of domination of the media, and comes up with some recommendations for a better future of Somaliland media. The aim of this, is to promote the public understanding of the role of the media in their political, economic and social aspects of life, and to draw attention to the international concern on media manipulation.

³ Boobe, Y. D. (2005). The Role of the Media In The Political Reconstruction. In W. International, Rebuilding Somaliland (Pp. 123-129). Asmara: The Red Sea Press, Inc.

⁴ New York Times (1995). *Edward Bernays, 'Father of Public Relations' And Leader in Opinion Making, Dies at 103*. Available at <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/16/specials/bernays-obit.html?mcubz=1>. Accessed on September, 2017.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

CONCEPTUAL CLARITY: MEDIA PUBLIC DECEPTION

At first glance, it is important to delineate what exactly do we mean by the term public deception. The term is described as any act, or statement intended to deceive the public for the benefit of a particular individual, group or organization. It is to intentionally misinform or give the truth partially for the purpose of leading the public to a specific perception or understanding, to engineer public opinion or to gain a support for a political issue, party, government or individual. Furthermore, to gain business' achievements, which is to create or increase a market for a special product or company or build reputations. There are some primary factors which motivate public deception; for instance, avoiding to harm a partner, or to help enhance or maintain his/her self-esteem, to enhance or protect their reputation, and limit relationship harm, as well as to avoid conflict.⁶

In understanding the power of the media's deception of the public one may need to know the influence media have on public opinion formation and attention. This leads us to the theory of Agenda-setting coined in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in their study on the quadrennial 1968, United States' Presidential election. McCombs and Shaw studied the relations between what 100 residents of Chapel Hill city believe were the most important issues of the elections and what the media was reporting to be the most important issues. They found that the media determines public opinion.⁷

Given the emphasis on the above argument, Walter Lipmann (1889–1974) American Progressive Journalist, writer and public philosopher, wrote his book on 'Public Opinion' in 1922 in which he presented the journalistic power to shape public opinion. Lipmann argues that people cannot form a truly public opinion by their own means, but always it is the production of a third party, which is the media. Lipmann a veteran journalist said for journalists, news and truth are different, which means that news doesn't necessarily need to be all the truth all the time, but just to discover facts and make a picture of reality.

The hypothesis which seems obvious is that news and truth are not the same thing and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to report an event; the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and to make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at the point, where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincides. That is a comparatively small part of the whole field of human interest.⁸

In this regard, Lippmann argues that the picture in our head is very different from the picture of the outside world and the problem is that we cannot get it, since they are so vastly and complicated to see them as they are. Thus, according to his point of view; the reality is always missed by our mind, because the picture in our mind which makes the public opinion is usually

⁶ Laura Guerrero, Peter Andersen & Walid Afifi. (2007). *Close Encounters: Communication in Relationships*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

⁷ E. McCombs, Maxwell & L. Shaw, Donald (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer, 1972), pp. 176–187.

⁸ Lippmann, Walter (1997). *Public Opinion*. New York: New York Free Press

framed and mapped by the journalists, who do not give us the true picture. “The pictures that are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters”.⁹

It seems obvious that Bovitz, Druckman and Lupia have somehow supported Lippmann’s argument on the difference in the picture in our heads and the one in the outside world. In their research on media guidance on public opinion; they described how media owners may sometimes prefer to publish content, on their own wish. Indeed, reporters and editors may have career concerns – reporters want to be published – and along with the owner of the news organization may also have ideological preferences that differ from those of the public. The media have an influence if a report changes the public’s action, and the media leads public opinion either because of career concerns of reporters and editors or the ideological preferences of the owner.¹⁰ This article argues that the media, mainly practice the power to influence public opinion for the interest of two groups in the community: the business and political classes. This argument supports the view that the media have always shaped and mapped public opinion as discussed in the available and reliable literature.

MEDIA DECEPTION: A SOMALILAND OUTLOOK

Somaliland media editorials and contents are determined by the financial interests of the outlets. The business relations with the companies, which for example advertise their business in the media, or sometimes common interest among the media and the other businesses, control the media contents and pave the way for the business to use media as a public deception tool. J Potter (2010) explained how the economy influences media by stating that the media industries have developed some general economic strategies over the years that make them successful at playing the economic game and achieving their goals. Furthering this argument, Potter presented three major strategies of media outlets, which they put forward and showed that they are business oriented: a) to get the greatest possible profit, b) to construct audiences and to minimize the risk. Almost all mass media are profit-oriented enterprises as a business; and, c) they are run to make as large profit as possible.

One can never downplay the role and interest of the business people to the public at large. Indeed, the business community understands that it necessarily needs to have good relations with the public as a whole, because it considers the public in general as their potential consumers. They also keep in mind that the modern society understands business as a desire of getting good service or competing products from their suppliers. Business struggles to win the market competition, and that compels them to constantly increase their market demands, which on its part will increase the profit, market shares, and sales volume.

Indeed, the media has two main revenue sources: the sales or subscription income and the businesses, which advertise their products and services in the media to strengthen their market. The last is the most important income source for media outlets. The business advertisements

⁹ Curtis, Michael (1998). *Public Opinion: Walter Lippmann*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

¹⁰ L. Bovitz, Gregory, N. Druckman, James & Lupia, Arthur (2002). When can a news organization lead public opinion?: Ideology versus market forces in decisions to make news, *Public Choice* 113: 127–155.

published in media are the major source of income for media outlets so it would not be surprised to see the profit-oriented media biasing their editorials on the benefit of advertisers. And knowing this, large business public relations departments advertise their contents on almost all the media outlets in Somaliland. Hamilton (2011) testifies that media bias their contents to benefit from the advertisement. The failure of news outlets to earn revenues from the value of better voting decisions means that news programs or products that focus on the hard news will be under-produced.¹¹

Having monitored Somaliland media contents and their effects on the public, this article argues that Somaliland government, political parties, and independent politicians, use the media to build their public relations strong, to gain popularity and to get support for political agendas. Somaliland media also release news events about clan politics, the movements of politicians from one party to another, and the minor activities of businessmen. Rather than publish in-depth analysis and reports reading between the lines of these events.

Media support a particular political party or a government program or agenda for achieving special privileges; just like it happened during the confronting arguments, about Somaliland government concession of Berbera Port to Dubai Ports World in 2016. The government used the media in return of money, to create a momentum for this project.¹² Many people, including Somaliland Members of Parliament, considered the concession agreement as impossible to accept. But after a relentless propaganda campaign through the media and bribing some legislators, the government managed to pass the project through the Parliament and to ease the tension of the people against the project.¹³

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 says everyone has the right to receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers. Somaliland press freedom among many other civil and political rights is considered, which contributed much to the democratic processes of the country. To realize this process, the media played a fairly vital role in social and political awareness, raising accountability and good governance, through feeding the public with information about their public interests, and through educating them that their elected government is accountable to them. This is a culture they never practice before, due to the long-serving military government which was critically against the birth of any kind of independent media except the state-run media.

Though the Somaliland media has its own challenges, the media contributed to the accountability of the government and empowered the civic education. It also acts as a medium of communication between the society on one hand, the politicians, the public and the private institutions on the other hand. Analyzing the issue further, the media informs the community, by providing national and international news items, educational articles, social events and enhancing public awareness. Performing this important role, the media in Somaliland gained a

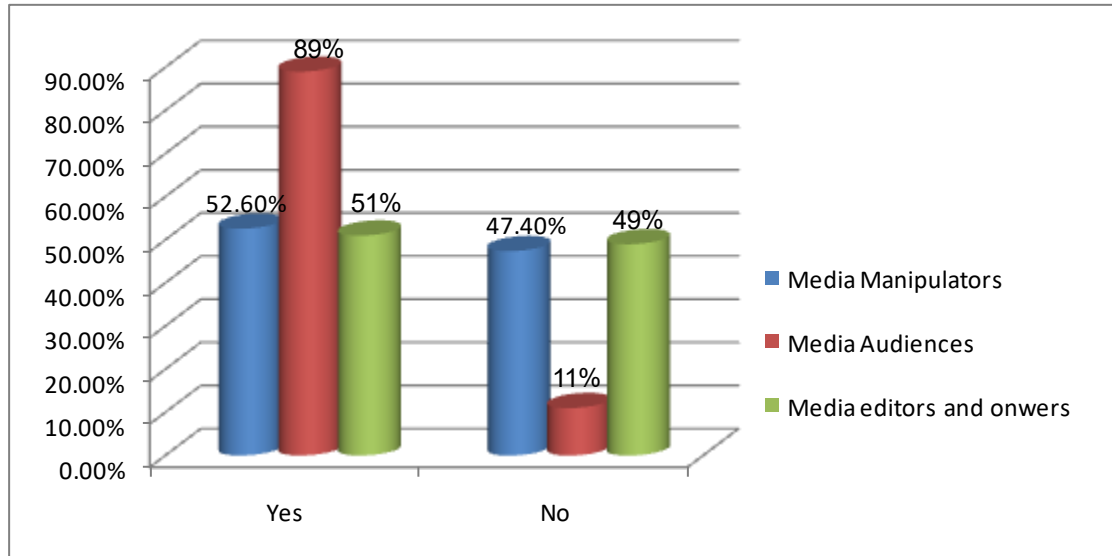
¹¹ Hamilton, T. Hamilton, James (2004). *All The News That's Fit to Sell: How The Market Transforms Information Into News*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹² Somaliland Today Newspaper/news khaddar somaliland Today Newspaper, 2016.

¹³ UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Report (2017). Available at https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/925, accessed on September, 2017.

good reputation and achieved audiences, which gave them the power to influence social and political attitudes. However, the power of the media encouraged the political class and business community, both to influence the media newscasts to the benefit of their public relations and reputation. Indeed, there are factors which contribute their part the vulnerability of the media, these include: financial interests, political privilege, and media incompetence, to name but a few.

Figure 1: Somaliland Media Deception of the Public



Source: Survey conducted by Kamal Ahmed Ali, 2016

CONCLUSION

The Somaliland media has a love-hate relationship with the Somaliland politicians, which led many newspapers to face harassments from those running the state at different times. On the other hand, their contribution both to the state and peace building processes as well as democratization was crucial and deserves appreciation. But, the media itself have never been without challenges both from within the media themselves and from outside. These challenges include: low level of education, lack of professional integrity and discipline as well as institutional weaknesses that emanate at least from two compatible fronts: inadequate training programs and the absence of effective policies that may perhaps regulate the media.

Without doubt, the middle-class businesses and large companies with the two business streams, products or services, know that to cover their deficiency and shortcomings and to protect their reputation, they are compelled to reach the public and influence their perceptions and attitudes. This could only be possible by using the media.

On the other hand, the political class in Somaliland makes a great effort to build relations with the media. Aiming to create an environment which allows them, to use the media as a tool of public deception. They do this by promising advantages for the owners or editors, giving money,

or other political privileges. The politicians successfully manipulate the media and control their newscast, to stop broadcasting or publishing any content, they consider being against their popularity or damages their public relations.

This article reveals that one of the main priorities of any politician or large business in Somaliland is to manipulate the media, because they perceive that, to control what would go into the public, could give them the infinite power to manage and control the national resources or the market respectively. Thus, the study proves that there is a correlation between the media, public deception and the businessmen and politicians.

The related literature found in this field, shows that media deception is a big challenge against good governance and accountability. So this article has every reason to argue that, Somaliland media's avoidance of publishing any newscast, which may be against the interests of the businesses or the politicians they are in relations with, had negatively impacted the public perception. This has also weakened the ability to evaluate the products and services provided by the companies and the public determinations towards politicians and public officers. More coarsely, media deceive the public attitude towards the crucial political issues in Somaliland. By reporting prejudiced newscasts, avoiding publishing facts about it, or not fulfilling.

Their role of investigating or commentating the facts in between the lines is missing or in reality absent. The issues which the study underlines as the least covered or biased reported items are Somaliland–Somalia talks, Somaliland recognition efforts, Somaliland's international diplomatic status, good governance, and transparency. Indeed, lack of resources and skills, made the media vulnerable, as a result they are used (especially journalists) to delude the public. This article highlights the financial interests, political privilege and media incompetence as the three main factors which contribute to this media vulnerability to manipulation.