Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa

Preliminary Findings

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About the research project

This updated working paper (Jan 2023) by Thomas Molony and Robert Macdonald provides preliminary summary findings from the 'Local Perceptions and Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa' research project. It is based at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Through three country case studies – Zambia, The Gambia, and Kenya – the project investigates:

1) Local perceptions of election observation missions

Despite being of great interest to observer groups, the views of citizens in the countries that host election observation missions are generally overlooked in the academic literature on election observation. In addressing this gap, the project develops understandings of how people in host countries evaluate the goals, methods, and performance of election observation initiatives.

2) Media representations of election observation missions

The project develops understandings of how information produced by, and relating to, election observation missions circulates via traditional and social media, as well as the ways in which it can be distorted through this process.

The authors conducted research alongside co-investigators from partner organisations based in the case study countries: Marja Hinfelaar and O'Brien Kaaba at the Southern African Institute for Policy and Research (SAIPAR), Zambia; Sait Matty Jaw at the Center for Research & Policy Development (CRPD), The Gambia; and Racheal Makokha at the Technical University of Kenya.

For details visit our website at: https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/lmeo.

Methodology

The summary findings presented here draw on three main methods of data collection: a series of qualitative interviews with journalists and editors, a media tracker that captures details of media coverage of election observation, and attendance at election observation missions' press conferences.

40 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with journalists and editors who are based in the case study countries. Mostly they are employed by domestic media outlets, but a small number work for international media organisations. Many of the respondents are senior editors and journalists, often with decades of experience at media houses, although a smaller number of more junior reporters were also interviewed. Additionally, we interviewed one consultant and two academics, all of whom formerly worked as senior journalists and now specialise on media across Africa. In all cases, interviews were conducted in English and posed a series of open-ended questions relating to interviewees' working experience of election observation coverage in the media. Social media was included as a defined topic of questioning, but the focus of interviewees' replies was usually on traditional media content, including newspapers and news websites, radio, and television. 14 interviews took place in Zambia in November 2021, led by O'Brien Kaaba. 15 interviews took place in The Gambia in March 2022, led by Thomas Molony with Muhammed S. Bah. 12 Kenya interviews took place between August and December 2022, conducted variously by Robert Macdonald, Racheal Makokha, Thomas Molony and Lavinia Muhoho.

We also tracked instances where election observers were mentioned in media coverage of the three case study elections in a specially created media tracker spreadsheet. Research assistants – Charles Simwanza and Kalonde Mutuna in Zambia, Ya Sally Njie and Lala Touray in The Gambia, and Lavinia Muhoho (working with Racheal Makokha) in Kenya – were tasked with following a range of pre-selected print and broadcast media in the months leading up to each election and in the post-election period. They continued to update the tracker until stories featuring election observers stopped appearing in each country's media. With the project ongoing, we are yet to conduct a detailed analysis of the data collected in our media tracker. However, some preliminary observations derived from it are included below.

The authors also attended citizen, regional, and international election observation missions' press conferences in each case study country. These included pre-election briefings, often given by citizen observer missions, and events at which observation missions launched their preliminary statements, usually two days after election day. At each event, we recorded notes on key dynamics relating to the media, including attendance levels and the questions posed by journalists.

Image 1: Former President of the United Republic of Tanzania, H.E. Jakaya Kikwete, head of the East African Community Election Observation Mission to Kenya, talks to the media at Moi Avenue Primary, Nairobi, 9 August 2022 (Photo credit: Tom Molony.)

Preliminary findings

How the media approaches election observation

In our case study countries, **the media holds a generally positive sentiment towards election observation**, and seldom questions the need for elections to be observed. This is in keeping with a finding documented in our first working paper, 'Local Perceptions of Election Observation in Africa – Preliminary Findings', which shows that ordinary citizens believe that election observation is important. At the same time, very little information about election observation missions' activities and statements reaches the general public. This suggests that **both the missions themselves and the media could be more active in raising the profile of election observation** in the case study countries.

One of the clear findings from our interviews is that **the media makes plans to cover elections, not election observation.** The journalists and editors informed us that their media houses will generally (but not always) have a strategy in place for how they will report on developments during the elections in their countries. However, the coverage of election observation is not part of these plans, and tends not to be viewed as a priority. Rather, **when the media reports on election observation, it is usually on an ad hoc basis.** This coverage is most likely to occur when observation missions initiate contact with the media or invite them to a briefing. As David Makali, a Kenyan media consultant, puts it: "Unless observer missions approach them, the media houses will just do it haphazardly".

We also found that the **reporters who cover election observation often do not have any expertise on the topic.** Editors only have a small pool of reporters to draw from when covering elections, and few of them have experience of

writing about election observation. The best-suited reporters are those who normally specialise in political journalism, but during elections they are often busy covering the candidates and other political developments. This results in a situation where editors will assign reporters who normally cover other topics – examples we were provided include sports and entertainment – to cover parts of the election, including election observers. As an academic with extensive experience as an editor in the Zambian media notes, "this compromises the quality of reporting".

In all case study countries, **junior journalists with less experience of elections demonstrate poor understanding of some aspects of election observation.** These issues were most pronounced in The Gambia, with media personnel in Zambia and Kenya tending to be slightly better informed. One reason for this is that many Gambian reporters only have a few years of experience of operating in relative freedom since the Jammeh era. Muhammed S. Bah, President of the Gambia Press Union, reflects: "Sometimes journalists leave out some of the key details in their reports or just focus on one aspect. I think this is due to the inadequate experience and understanding of the importance of observation reports. We need to build the capacity of journalists to overcome this challenge". Adam Makasuba, senior editor at The Voice newspaper in The Gambia, states that ""Most of the reporters are young people… They have the surface information but not the deep information. The reporters need to be educated on what observers do."

Which election observation-related content the media covers

Across the case study countries, two observation-related topics were more commonly reported on than others. Firstly, there is often reporting on the deployment of observers that generally provides details about a single named mission. Because many missions deploy several weeks in advance of election day, there can be less competition for media coverage when this occurs than there is later in the process. The second common type of story relates to the preliminary statements that most missions issue shortly after election day.

The **journalists and editors generally suggest that they find preliminary statements to be the most interesting aspect of election observation.** Because there is a perception that the international and regional missions are unlikely to give the media a lot of information before their press conferences, our respondents talk about having to wait for the preliminary statements to hear what observers are thinking. Sometimes, the relationship between citizen observers and local journalists is closer, with some of the journalists and editors suggesting citizen observers are more likely to engage with the media.

During the preliminary statements, **what the media want to know and what the observers wish to share are not always aligned.** Observer statements generally consider various components of the election separately, acknowledge the process is still ongoing, and use language that can often be quite diplomatic and technical. What the media want most is an overall verdict on election quality in simple language. For example, Dorothy Ngambi, a news reporter with Namwianga Radio in Zambia explains that "the gist of our reports focus on whether the observers say the election was free and fair or not". The media's desire to hear simple binary judgements is often apparent in the questions that journalists ask during observation missions' press conferences. In all three country case studies, some of the observation missions were either asked why they had not given a binary verdict, or for clarification on how their verdict should be expressed in binary terms. Occasionally, observation missions do not help themselves in this regard, as chief observers can sometimes fall into the language of 'free and fair' when they go off script in the press conferences. Journalists and editors are also more interested in hearing allegations of fraud or malpractice than technical recommendations. As a result, preliminary statements that are more critical of the electoral process are more likely to get coverage.

Our respondents are quite candid in describing the ways in which **complex and nuanced preliminary statements can be mischaracterised in media coverage.** For example, Nelson Manneh, a journalist with Foroyaa newspaper in The Gambia, explains: "You know, in journalism, when you receive a statement or when you attend a press conference, you always have a target and your target is 'what do the public want? What do they want to see?' You must be able to have a story to market your newspaper and one that is simplified for the average person…. Some journalists make a mistake in changing the words to something entirely different while trying to simplify. This can change the whole content."

When the observation missions release their final reports, these are unlikely to gain as much media attention as the preliminary statements. Our respondents explain that this is because **public interest in the election tends to have dissipated before the final reports are published.** For example, Fatima Mawere, a news reporter with UNZA FM in Zambia, argues that "Once results are announced, the mood changes and public attention shifts elsewhere." There is also a perception among the journalists and editors that the final reports, which tend to be more detailed and technical than the preliminary statements, are not as interesting. Hyde Haguta, a former ZNBC Director of Programmes in Zambia, explains "In terms of what journalists report about observers, in my experience it is just two or three lines saying the election was free and fair. Journalists look for lines to sell…. So once elections are over, journalists rarely pay attention to later detailed reports of observers…. Journalists just want to hear whether the election was free and fair, without going into details."

During our interviews, we also asked the journalists and editors about situations in which politicians try to politicise election observation missions. Politicians occasionally attempt to pressure or discredit observation missions before election day, and they will sometimes react to the content of their preliminary statements. The **journalists and editors tend to be cynical about the motivations of the politicians who comment on election observers,** assuming that they are simply trying to advance their own interests. When politicians criticise observers, the respondents often interpreted it as an indication that things were not going well for them. However, although this was quite rare, there are examples of these kinds of comments being reported in the media in our three case study countries. It should be remembered that media houses are often aligned with, or give favourable coverage to, certain political parties; something that is likely to play a role in determining what gets coverage and in which outlets. It is also worth noting that observation did not become a particularly controversial issue during any of our case study elections. These kinds of stories may have become more prominent were this not the case.

Which observer groups get coverage

Next, we will consider which observation groups are most likely to be the focus of media coverage. When asked if there are some observer groups that their outlet pays more attention to than others, the journalists and editors give a wide range of responses. Some of them believe that citizen observers are more credible, while others prefer international observers. When considering how many times various observation missions were named in media coverage, we find that no single observer group was particularly prominent in any of our case study countries. Rather, **a wide range of observer missions receive small amounts of coverage.** In the Kenyan media, domestic observers have little prominence relative to their international and regional counterparts, while in Zambia and The Gambia coverage of international, regional, and domestic missions is more balanced. In the international media's coverage of these three elections, a range of international and regional missions are cited. However, it is rare for media outside the host countries to report on citizen observers.

When looking at coverage of preliminary statements more specifically, some additional dynamics relating to the running order of the missions' press briefings emerge. Most international and regional missions will give their statements on the same day, two days after election day. There is a protocol that determines the order in which they speak, which gives priority to the regional observation missions, with international missions reporting later in the day. **The early statements are more likely to be covered by the media than the later ones.** This is partly due to reporting deadlines that require some journalists to submit their stories before the later statements have even been issued. Now that traditional media houses release stories on their websites and through social media, there is an additional pressure to be first to report on what the observers are saying. This also incentivises reporting on the missions that are earliest in the order.

Some of the journalists and editors also suggest that the media is more likely to report on missions with a high-profile chief observer. For example, Omar Wally, a BBC and Deutsche Welle correspondent in The Gambia, states "We gave more attention to [former] heads of state and former presidents". However, these appointments can also create and environment in the press conferences that is not conducive to media engagement. As Ya Sally Njie, one of our research assistants in The Gambia, explains, "This is an intimidating setting for the young journalists, with heads of state and 'are there any burning questions from the media?' – which doesn't encourage questions. At the domestic [briefing] it was lower-ranked personnel from the missions – they are approachable, and the local observers are not as intimidating to engage."

Journalists and editors' ideas for improving coverage of election observation

Towards the end of our interviews with journalists and editors, we asked them if they had any suggestions for improving media coverage of election observation. In this final section, we present some of their more common suggestions.

As we have mentioned above, election observers that make direct contact with the media are most likely to be covered. However, many of the media personnel we interviewed complain that missions often either do not do this or make first contact just before the elections when the media is exceptionally busy. Several of our respondents think that **missions can create a better working relationship with the media by engaging early,** and that this increases their chances of media coverage. For example, in Kenya, the European Union mission is cited as a positive example of "well-prepared, structured and organised" engagement with the media, and is compared favourably to some regional missions that were unable to engage in a timely fashion. When discussing these less proactive missions, one Kenyan media executive explains: "They are not covered because they don't bring themselves to be covered.... They don't engage the public and the media with who they are and what they are doing." In both Zambia and The Gambia, citizen observers are seen to be more willing to engage with the media. This may reflect the fact that local groups often have pre-existing relationships with the media, and tend to be more willing to offer pre-election statements.

In a related point, **it is obviously important to make sure that journalists are invited to the observation missions' press conferences.** Several of the journalists and editors complain that they were not invited to some of the preliminary statement press conference held by prominent international missions. For example, a few of the journalists we spoke to in The Gambia inform us that they did not attend the press conference of a prominent international mission because they did not know when it was occurring. One reporter suggests that mission press officers should always join local media WhatsApp groups so that they can advertise their events directly to journalists. Ensuring journalists attend the press conferences is particularly significant because editors state that they are far more likely to take an interest in missions' findings if their staff are present at these events than if they have to look for the statements online.

Image 2: Regional and international observers, diplomats and the media at a press briefing delivered by former President of Ethiopia, H.E. Mulatu Teshome, head of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Election Observation Mission to Kenya, Nairobi, 11 August 2022 (Photo credit: Tom Molony.)

Another common suggestion from journalists is that **observation missions should engage with the media using local languages.** Even though all our case study countries can be considered anglophone to some extent, in all three there are large proportions of the population who are not conversant in English, the language that observation missions used to communicate their findings. There are also many media outlets, particularly radio stations that serve rural areas, that operate entirely in languages other than English. As a Zambian journalist puts it, "We need more observers to explain to the media their work and what they do at every stage. Many times they only speak in English, which makes communication

difficult, especially in rural areas". Some of the journalists in Zambia and The Gambia feel that locally recruited staff who work for regional or international observation missions could play a useful role in creating this kind of engagement. Some citizen observer groups already use local languages in some situations. In their press conferences, for example, some of the Gambian observers fielded questions in local languages.

Many of the journalists and editors suggest that **the media would benefit from more knowledge about observation groups' activities and objectives.** They feel that the best way to achieve this is through direct and early engagement, in which observation missions approach the media and set out their role. For instance, Eliud Kibii, Sub-Editor at Kenya's The Star newspaper said: "[W]hat are you here to do? Be clear on your objectives. What is your mandate and what are you expected to do, what should citizens expect?". If media were to better understand the objectives of election observation missions, this would have the advantage of addressing the confusion relating to binary verdicts that is detailed above.

However, **editors do not necessarily feel that external training sessions are a solution to media capacity issues,** as training offered to the media can often be superficial or fail to reach the correct people. Nzau Musau, Intake Editor at The Standard (Nairobi) explains: "it's too rushed. That's my impression of training related to election observation and training in general for the elections…. They're always far away in Diani or Kisumu and I can't go for three days, so I give them to someone, but someone who cannot make a difference - I need my best [journalists] here." Denis Galava, a former managing editor at both The Standard and The Nation (Nairobi), adds that "Everybody is looking for journalists to train. For most it's a session to cash in. As an editor I'll send my worst [journalists], so the best can do the work that has to be done…. The training is really crap…. We don't begrudge the journalists for going – let them harvest at this time". A former journalist in The Gambia suggests that editors in his country may have different motivations: "Sometimes those who need it the most don't go because the higher-ups want the per diem".

In the final group of suggestions, **respondents encourage observers to step out of their comfort zone.** For example, Musau says observers should consider appearing on live morning talk shows. Other interviewees suggest that missions should be open to presenting more about the personnel on their missions, to **make media stories about observation relatable.** As one Zambian broadcaster notes, "it is rare to interview or profile an observer. I have never read or heard of a story like that in Zambia".

Image 3: Ivan Štefanec MEP, Chief Observer of the EU Election Observation Mission in Kenya, presents the mission's final report at a press conference in Nairobi, 27 October 2022 (Photo credit: Stephen Ouma.)

Further Information

The authors can provide a presentation and individual discussion on any of the issues covered in this working paper. Contact Thomas.Molony@ed.ac.uk.

Readers may also be interested in our first working paper, 'Local Perceptions of Election Observation in Africa – Preliminary Findings' by the same authors, available at https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/lmeo.

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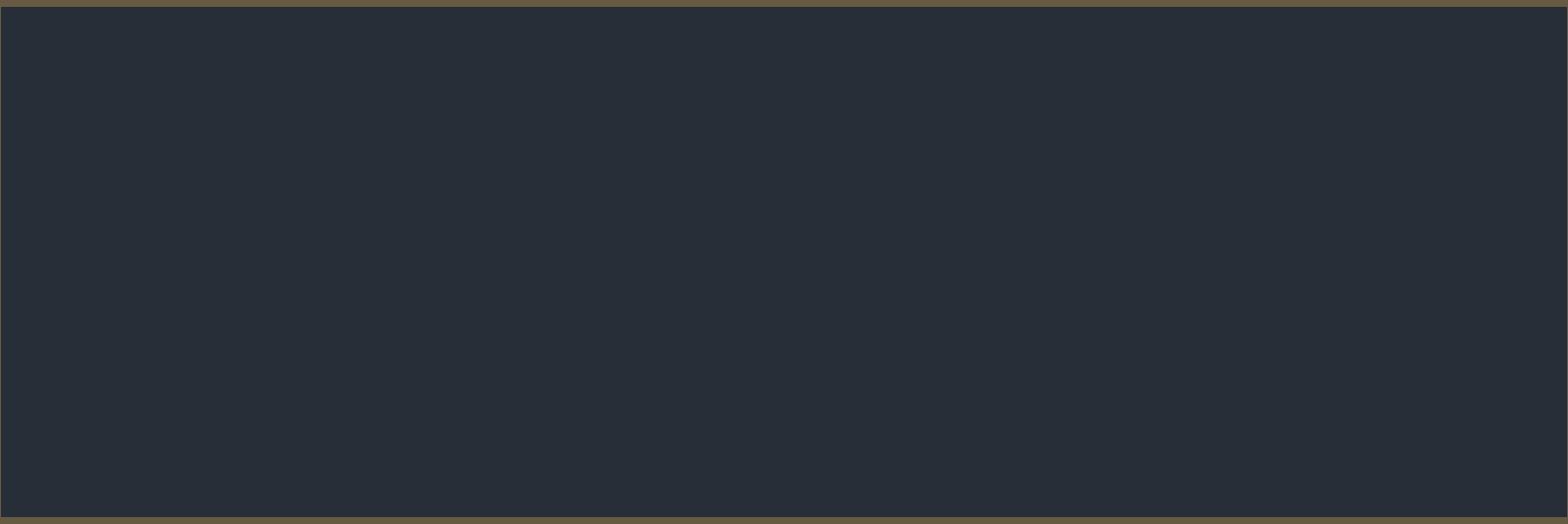
Cover image: Regional and international election observers at a press conference in Nairobi, 11 August 2021. Centre image is former Prime Minister of Jamaica, H.E. Bruce Golding, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group mission. Far right is former President of Sierra Leone, H.E. Ernest Bai Koroma, lead of the AU-COMESA Joint Election Observer Mission to the 2022 Kenya General Elections (Photo credit: Tom Molony, adapted by Adam Cavill.)



A working paper by the Local Perceptions and Media Representations of Election Observation in Africa (LMEO) research project