

## Cultivating the Democratic Commons: Media Responsibility, Social Cohesion, and the Sustainable Development of Kenya's Electoral Process

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### Abstract

*Sustainable democratic development cannot be achieved without a peaceful and responsible media environment. While scholarly consensus acknowledges media's significant influence in conflict settings globally, substantial theoretical and empirical gaps persist regarding its precise role in either escalating tensions or fostering peace during electoral processes in Kenya. Existing literature reveals a critical disconnect between recognizing media's potential for peacebuilding and understanding the specific mechanisms through which media practices either reinforce ethnic polarization or cultivate social cohesion in volatile political contexts. This study investigates the complex interplay between media responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable electoral development within Kenya's democratization process. Focusing specifically on Kisumu County as a critical case study of recurrent electoral challenges, the research analyzes how media practices during electioneering either undermine or enhance democratic consolidation through their impact on social cohesion. The study adopted a conceptual model which was guided by three main theories: Libertarian theory, Social Responsibility theory and Galtung's theories of structural violence and structural peacebuilding (1969). Key government officials, media practitioners, security officials and journalists were key informants. The sampled respondents were a total of 420 household heads. The data were presented in tables, pie charts and interpreted into meaningful information. The findings reveal that media responsibility, conceptualized through principles of conflict-sensitive reporting, equitable access, and democratic accountability, serves as the crucial linchpin between media freedom and sustainable electoral development. This study ultimately argues that cultivating the democratic commons requires media ecosystems that prioritize social cohesion alongside journalistic independence, thereby contributing to more resilient democratic institutions and sustainable development outcomes in Kenya's evolving political landscape. The study recommended that government and media council to develop a legal and ethical framework that mandates peace-sensitive reporting, especially during elections, as a direct strategy for mitigating conflict and advancing SDG 16 to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms.*

**Keywords:** Media, Electioneering Process, Peace-Building, Democracy, SDG, Conflict, Media Reportage

## Introduction

The contemporary global landscape, particularly in Africa, is predominantly characterized by intra-state conflict, where electoral processes often become a critical arena for both conflict manifestation and management (Rupesinghe et al., 1996; Sandole, 1999; Lund, 2006; Dokken, 2008). As Walter (2009) notes, a significant proportion of these internal conflicts involve ethnic minorities contesting for autonomy against central governments. Within this fragile context, democracy is frequently posited as a system of conflict management, providing a structured, albeit uncertain, arena for political competition (Sisk, 2003). Consequently, many post-war societies have turned to democratic elections as a pathway out of intractable violence, with elections forming a core component of most post-Cold War peace settlements (Brahm, 2005; Lyons, 2009). However, a critical tension exists, as Deng (1996) argues that the Western-style "winner-take-all" electoral model fundamentally contradicts indigenous African principles of power-sharing and conciliation, thereby potentially undermining its efficacy for conflict resolution. This underscores the imperative of cultivating a democratic common that is socially cohesive and sustainable.

Further complicating this picture, scholars caution that elections alone are not a panacea and can be inherently destabilizing. Schake (1997) rightly argues that elections do not constitute democracy in themselves and can even exacerbate disenfranchisement. The critical factor, as observed by Matanga et al. (2012), is not merely the election day itself but the entire pre-electoral environment—the processes, incentives, and opportunities that determine whether political factions transition from violence to politics. This environment is persistently shaped by a milieu of resource scarcity, weak governance, and leadership failures across the continent (Zartman, 1995). The role of the media within this environment is therefore paramount, acting as a double-edged sword that can either cultivate the democratic commons or contribute to its erosion.

The media's powerful and ambivalent influence has been starkly demonstrated globally. The Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa highlighted how social media could mobilize mass action and upheaval (Times Magazine, 2010). Historically, media outlets have both encouraged conflict and promoted peace, from CNN's coverage influencing US troop withdrawal from Somalia to the devastating role of hate radio during the Rwandan genocide (Allen & Stremlau, 2006). Howard (2003) enumerates the myriad ways media can incite conflict, including delaying reports, disseminating hate speech, and creating deliberate misrepresentations.

In Kenya, this dual potential has been acutely evident. The Post-Election Violence (PEV) of 2007/2008 was significantly exacerbated by media practices. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR, 2008) documented how ethnic-based FM radio stations engaged in unethical broadcasting, propagating negative ethnic labels, cultural bigotry, and slander. Furthermore, both local and international media outlets were perceived as predicting a flawed election, thereby shaping public perceptions and potentially inciting violence when results were announced (Twaweza Report, 2008). This demonstrates a profound failure of media responsibility, where instead of fostering social cohesion, media outlets became complicit in fracturing the democratic commons.

While Kenya constitutionally guarantees media freedom—a liberty essential for an informed electorate—the reality is often more complex. When media is controlled by the state or wealthy elites, journalistic standards of consistency, dependability, and impartiality are compromised (Amutabi, 2009). Previous

research has extensively covered the media's role in instigating violence, such as during the 2007/2008 PEV (Makinen & Kuira, 2008; Ogola, 2011; Ismail & Deane, 2008; Lafargue & Katumanga, 2008). However, a significant scholarly gap remains regarding the media's potential as a proactive instrument for peace-building throughout the entire electoral cycle. The media's influence on conflict escalation is far more documented than its capacity to enhance peace-building, despite its influential bearing on public discourse.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by critically investigating the association between media and the conduct of the electioneering process in Kenya, with specific reference to Kisumu County. It moves beyond the predominant focus on negative influence to ask: can media spearhead peace? And what positive influence has the media played in fostering peace and peaceful co-existence? By answering these questions, this research contributes to the broader objective of understanding how to cultivate a resilient democratic common in Kenya, where media responsibility and social cohesion become foundational to the sustainable development of the electoral process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study "Cultivating the Democratic Commons: Media Responsibility, Social Cohesion, and the Sustainable Development of Kenya's Electoral Process" is guided by a tripartite theoretical framework. Each theory provides a distinct lens for analyzing the study's core variables—media responsibility (independent variable), social cohesion (dependent variable), and the overarching goal of sustainable electoral development.

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

Social Responsibility Theory provides the normative foundation for analyzing media responsibility as an independent variable, positing that media freedom must be exercised with an obligation to society through objective, truthful, and transparent reporting (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). This theoretical perspective directly informs the examination of how media practices either reinforce or undermine social cohesion as a dependent variable, particularly through actions such as humanitarian reporting and peace advocacy that contribute to sustainable electoral development by de-escalating tensions and building public trust.

### **Libertarian Theory**

Libertarian Theory offers a critical analysis of the intervening variable of the regulatory and operational environment. This philosophy's emphasis on a free and independent press highlights the perennial tension between press freedom as a democratic necessity and its potential for abuse, a central dilemma in managing the democratic commons. The theory helps to explain the contextual conditions that shape the independent variable of media responsibility. It frames the existence of regulatory bodies like the Communication Commission of Kenya as institutional attempts to safeguard Libertarian principles by preventing the very abuse of freedom that can lead to societal harm. The theory powerfully elucidates how an unregulated or ethically lax application of press freedom—manifested in vernacular radio incitement, social media propaganda, or partisan "gutter press" reports—can act as a destructive intervening force, severely damaging social cohesion. Yet, it also demonstrates the positive potential of this freedom when exercised with responsibility, illustrating how independent editorials calling for mediation and peaceful settlement

can serve as a powerful intervening variable for conflict transformation, thereby underpinning the goal of sustainable electoral development.

### **Galtung's Theories of Structural Violence and Structural Peace-Building (1969)**

Galtung's Theory of Structural and Cultural Violence provide the macro-level analytical perspective necessary for comprehending the deeper contextual forces shaping Kenya's electoral processes. By distinguishing between direct, structural, and cultural violence, Galtung (1969) establishes a theoretical foundation for understanding how media practices can either challenge or reinforce the underlying conditions that enable electoral conflict. This framework is particularly valuable for interpreting social cohesion as not merely the absence of violence but as the positive presence of structural peace-building conditions. When media reporting frames elections through ethnic competition rather than policy discourse, it engages in cultural violence that legitimizes direct conflict and erodes the democratic commons (Galtung, 1990). Conversely, media that emphasizes shared developmental goals and inclusive political participation contributes to structural peace-building and sustainable electoral development by addressing the root causes of electoral violence rather than merely its symptoms.

The integration of these three theoretical perspectives creates a comprehensive analytical framework for examining Kenya's electoral democracy. Social Responsibility Theory defines the ethical parameters of media practice, Libertarian Theory contextualizes the operational environment of press freedom, and Galtung's theory elucidates the profound structural and cultural dimensions within which media responsibility either succeeds or fails in fostering social cohesion. Together, these theories provide the necessary conceptual tools for understanding how responsible media practices can transform Kenya's electoral process from a periodic exercise in conflict management to a sustainable platform for democratic consolidation and national development, ultimately cultivating a resilient democratic commons where media responsibility, social cohesion, and electoral integrity mutually reinforce one another.

### **Research Methodology**

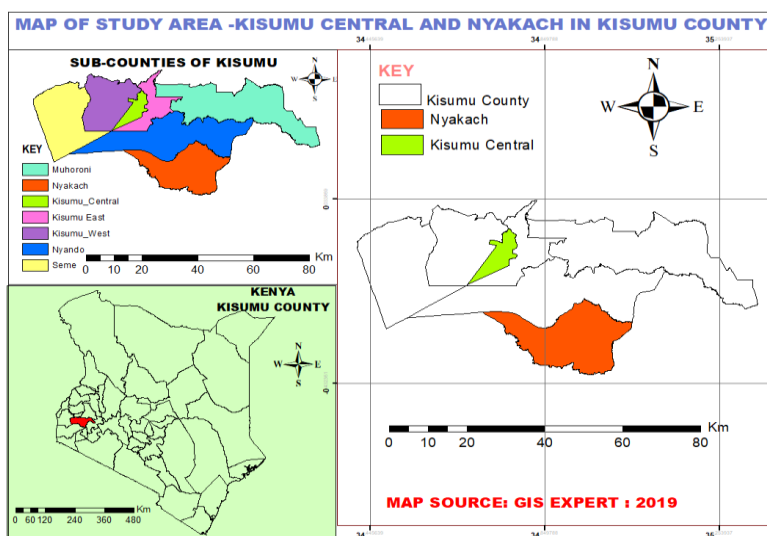
This study adopted both descriptive and exploratory study designs as recommended by Kumar (2011) whose thrust were to assess media influence on the peaceful conduct of electioneering process and how it affects the human factors during conflicts. In that regard, the study design paid exclusive consideration to the canons of descriptive study design, namely; the explanation of what the study is about and the aims of the study. Given that the study examined diverse areas of Kisumu County, exploratory design was applied to get the data. This was primarily since exploratory design is conventionally the most dominant mode for generation of new philosophies and hypotheses, advancement of speculative philosophies and validation on the feasibility of the study for the future (Shaw & Wright 1967; Wesberg *et al.*, 2010:4). Additionally, this study adopted quantitative research methods, to authorize the usage of vigorous statistical techniques to elucidate the results (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Area of Study**

This study was conducted in Kisumu County nicknamed as “*kisumo*”. Kisumu County is one of the 47 Counties of Kenya following the establishment of devolved government. Initially it was known as Port Florence. Kisumu is among the big three cities in Kenya, formerly a district but in 2013 it was reconstituted as a county, on the same boundaries. It covers an area of 2,085.9 km (805.4sq mi). The county is situated

in the central part of the former Nyanza Province in the western region of Kenya. Its neighbors are Siaya County to the West, Vihiga County to the North, Nandi County to the North East and Kericho County to the South East. Its neighbor to the South is Nyamira County and Homa Bay County is to the South West. The county has a shoreline on Lake Victoria, occupying northern, western and a part of the southern shores of the Winam Gulf. For administrative purposes, the county is divided into seven sub-counties and 35 wards. The county lies between latitudes  $0^{\circ}5' 51''$  south of the equator and longitudes  $34^{\circ}45' 16''$  east. The county has a population of 968,879. The Population density is 460 per km<sup>2</sup>.

The county is viewed as the epicenter of 1992, 1997, 2007/08 and 2013 election violence in the former Nyanza Province (KNCHR, 2008b). Kisumu County has experienced heightened political violence since the resuscitation of multi-party system thus it is imperative for this study to analyze this situation. The rationale for choosing Kisumu County and especially the two sub-counties was that those regions have experienced violent conflicts since the resuscitation of multi-party democracy coupled with multi-ethnic groupings. From an academic viewpoint, this area was justified as a study area because hardly any study of such depth and magnitude has been conducted to assess media influence on the peaceful conduct of electioneering process and challenges experienced by the media during this process. Fig 1 shows the map of study area.



*Figure 1: Map of study area*  
Source: Researcher (2019)

## Results

### Age of the respondents in Kisumu County

The respondents were asked to state their age. The objective was to assess the influence of this demographic on the media influence on the conduct of electioneering process. From the findings, 226(57.8%) of the respondents were aged between 36-45 years. Respondents aged between 18-35 years, were 79(20.2%) while those aged 46-55 years were 82(21.0%). Respondents aged above 55 years were 4(1.0%). See Table 1.

*Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on age*

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent
18-35	79	19.8
36-45	226	56.5
46-55	82	20.5
Above 55	13	3.2
400	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2019)

Table 1 shows the responses of Kisumu residents when asked to state their age. The concentration of respondents in the 36-55 age bracket (77% of the sample) reflects what Norris (2000) identifies as the most politically stable and participatory demographic, making their perspectives essential for analyzing how media narratives either strengthen or weaken the democratic commons. This cohort's established media consumption patterns—typically blending traditional and digital sources—offers a unique vantage point for assessing media responsibility across platforms. Their political experience, often spanning multiple electoral cycles, positions them as key interpreters of whether media coverage fosters constructive political engagement or exacerbates social divisions.

The significant underrepresentation of youth (18-35 years) constitutes a critical theoretical gap in understanding the sustainable development of Kenya's electoral process. As Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) demonstrate, younger voters are not only the primary consumers of digital and social media but also the most vulnerable to emerging threats to the democratic commons, including misinformation campaigns and algorithmic polarization. Their limited inclusion means the study cannot fully capture how these newer media ecologies are reshaping political socialization and potentially undermining social cohesion among the next generation of voters. This absence is particularly consequential for assessing long-term electoral sustainability, as youth engagement patterns often forecast future democratic health.

Similarly, the minimal participation of respondents above 55 years (3.2%) limits the study's ability to leverage historical memory as a resource for understanding media evolution. As Ogola (2011) documents, this demographic possesses lived experience with Kenya's transition from state-controlled media to liberalized landscapes, offering invaluable comparative perspectives on how media responsibility has evolved in relation to electoral integrity. Their absence constrains our understanding of how generational media experiences shape expectations of journalistic standards and perceptions of social cohesion across different electoral eras.

Theoretical frameworks of the democratic commons emphasize the necessity of inclusive communicative spaces where all generations can participate equally in political discourse. The skewed age distribution in this sample, while providing robust data on middle-aged perspectives, ultimately reveals structural limitations in capturing the full spectrum of media influence necessary for cultivating a truly sustainable democratic process.



### Gender of the Respondents in Kisumu County

The respondents were asked to state their gender whereby 222(57.5%) were male while 178(44.5%) were female. See Table 2.

*Table 2: Distribution of respondents based on gender*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
	Male	222	55.5	55.5
	Female	178	44.0	44.5
Total		400	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2019)

The results in Table 2 indicate that 222 (55.5%) of respondents were male while 178 (44.5) were females. The study, therefore, reveals that both genders are actively engaged in media issues. With a 15% difference of political involvement between men and women, this was in itself an indication of the central role women are beginning to play in electioneering process in Kenya. The gender equation was considered pertinent, first because in Kenyan context, it has become a legal requirement as provided by Articles 27 and 81 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. This stipulate that male and females have the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social sphere hence their influence during electioneering process. Secondly, the exclusion of either female or male in the study would have brought the issues of biasness towards a particular gender making the findings of the study skewed as a consequence of their exclusion. The findings show that there is no greater gender disparity in Kisumu County with a minimal difference of 11% thus no gender is left behind. The results further show that women have been empowered on issues of electoral positions and politics hence taking up leadership roles.

### Marital Status of the Respondents in Kisumu County

The study sought to establish the marital status of the 400 respondents. The respondents were thus asked to indicate their marital status, and the results are shown in Table 3.

*Table 3: Distribution of respondents in Kisumu County in terms of Marital Status*

	Frequency	Percent
Single	71	17.5
Married	307	79.0
Divorced	22	5.5
Total	400	100

Source: Field Data, 2019

The results in Table 3 show that 71 (17.5%) were single, 307(79.0%) were married and 22(5.5%) were divorced or separated. The findings of the study were corroborating with the KDHS (2014) survey which indicated that 73% of women are married by age of between 19-34 years and 83% of men get married between ages of 25-34 years (KNBS, 2015). The findings of the study, therefore, indicate that most adults above 20 years are married. Since majority of the respondents are married, this indicates that these respondents were mature people and responsible members of the society. They are aware of the media influence and electioneering process and the implications it has had on their political affiliations.

### Educational Level of the Respondents in Kisumu County

The respondents were asked to state their level of education. Findings in Table 4 reveal that 167(41.75%) had college or tertiary qualifications while university recorded 111(27.25%). Respondents who had secondary respondents were 95(23.75%), primary were 17(4.25%) while non formal were 10(2.5%). This shows majority of the respondents who participated had formal knowledge and education thus could be able to understand and reason out their thoughts. This also shows that most of the respondents who participated in the study were enlightened and were able to give valid information on the media influence and electioneering process. Since they could fully understand the questions posed. Thus, information collected from respondents can be considered informed and relevant to the research objective.

*Table 4: Distribution of respondent's educational level*

		Frequency	Percentage
	Non formal	10	2.5
	Primary	17	4.25
	Secondary	95	23.75
	College/Tertiary	167	41.75
	University	111	27.25
Total		400	100.0

Source: Field Data (2019)

The level of education of a person is an indicator of the technical skills and capacity of the person. Education was considered pertinent and variable since in most cases, one's level of education mostly informs one's influence during electioneering process, though admittedly, this may not be necessarily the case especially in the Kenyan elections where largely they are ethnic driven (Oyugi, 1997; Nyabuga, 2011). For example, there is a great difference on the interpretation of politics and electoral issues between a university graduate and a primary school leaver. According to the findings, most Kisumu County residents possess some form of formal education, with majority being university or college graduates. The majority of the respondents who participated in the study were youths as shown in Table 1.

Education has a straightforward consequence on the living of people as well as their ability to be employed which is a factor that can lead to poverty (Agrawal, 2009). Akinyi *et al.* (2011) further argued that most young people having less literacy level were easily swayed to take part in politically initiated violence in trade of hand-outs in terms of 200 shillings. However, the findings of this study contradict the findings of Akinyi *et al.*, (2011). Most of the respondents have formal education, thus it can be deduced that due to high numbers of educated people in the area, many have remained jobless thus can be manipulated and used by politicians during electioneering process. Hence, literacy influences the political position for individuals and thus impact their engagement in electoral conflicts.

### Preferred Sources of Information for Respondents in Kisumu County

The researchers also sought to understand the preferred sources of information and draw conclusion on how these preferred sources influence people's opinions. The results are presented in Table 5.



Table 5: Preferred sources of information

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Internet	115	28.8	28.8	28.8
Television	110	27.5	27.5	56.3
Radio	136	34.0	34.0	90.3
Facebook	25	6.3	6.3	96.5
Newspapers	14	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	400	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2019)

The data revealing radio as the most preferred information source (34.0%), followed closely by internet (28.8%) and television (27.5%), establishes the foundational media landscape through which the democratic commons must be cultivated (Namwaya, 2008). The predominance of radio, particularly vernacular stations like Kass FM, Inooro FM, and Ramogi FM, demonstrates both the opportunity and vulnerability of Kenya's electoral ecosystem. While radio's extensive penetration enables widespread civic engagement, the study's finding that these stations employ low-literate journalists who use mother tongue to escalate violence during broadcasting represents a fundamental breakdown in media responsibility that directly corrodes social cohesion. This aligns with Nyamnjoh's (2005) observation that media stations often become "unconcealed defenders of individual leaders or political parties," thereby undermining the democratic commons through partisan advocacy rather than fostering inclusive political discourse.

The significant preference for internet sources, attributed to their unscrutinized and unregulated nature, further complicates the cultivation of a healthy democratic common. This finding suggests that the very qualities that make internet platforms appealing—their immediacy and lack of monitoring—also make them potent vectors for misinformation and social fragmentation during electoral processes. The documented case of Kass FM encouraging residents of Kibra slums to turn against their opponents (Osborn, 2008) exemplifies how media irresponsibility directly threatens social cohesion by transforming political competition into communal conflict. These findings collectively demonstrate what Kadhi and Rutten (2001) identified as the media's failure to exercise moral and ethical responsibility, where commercial and partisan interests override the watchdog role essential for democratic sustainability.

The convergence of these findings paints a concerning picture for Kenya's electoral development: the most influential media platforms are precisely those most susceptible to ethical breaches that undermine social cohesion. The study's conclusion that vernacular radio stations possess greater influence on opinions, behaviors, and attitudes during electioneering processes underscores the urgent need for media responsibility frameworks that acknowledge the vulnerabilities and potentials of these platforms. Without interventions that specifically address the ethical challenges of vernacular broadcasting and unregulated digital content, efforts to cultivate the democratic commons will remain inadequate. Sustainable development of Kenya's electoral process therefore requires reimagining media responsibility in contextually specific ways that acknowledge the powerful role of vernacular media while establishing mechanisms to ensure these platforms contribute to social cohesion rather than ethnic fragmentation.

## Media Shaping Opinion of Respondents in Kisumu County

The study also went on to investigate if there was influence of media on the opinions of respondents during electioneering process. The findings are as shown in Table 6.

*Table 6: Media shaping opinions during electioneering process*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
	Yes	251	62.8	63.0
	No	149	37.2	37.0
	Total	400	100	100.0
Total		400	100.0	

Source: Field Data (2019)

The findings show that majority of the respondents 251(62.8%) are of the view that media shapes their opinion during electioneering process. Those who disagreed were only 149(37.2%) of the study respondents. This suggests that majority of the respondents believe that people tend to get influenced by the media coverage and reporting. These findings support the findings of the interview with a key informant from security department:

*Media can hype something by keeping on repeating about a particular topic or issues. Once they do that, they influence people's perceptions and opinions. Looking at the voting patterns and trends (Interview with a state security officer, Base Commander at Kondele, Kisumu County, 28/03/2019).*

The study's findings directly illuminate the media's dual role in either cultivating or eroding Kenya's democratic commons. The revelation that media acts as a "voice for the voiceless" (Mutua, 2001), as seen in its international coverage of the 2007/08 PEV, demonstrates its capacity to foster social cohesion and accountability, aligning with the Social Responsibility Theory which obligates media to serve the public good. However, the finding that media shape's public opinion and behavior by selectively reporting on conflicts reveals its power to disrupt the democratic commons. This selective agenda-setting allows conflicting parties to exploit media to push their goals, exacerbating divisions. This aligns with Libertarian Theory's potential downside, where press freedom without ethical commitment can be abused. Ultimately, this media-driven manipulation of conflict perceptions perpetuates the very structural violence Galtung (1969) identified, where media systems themselves can become instruments of exclusion and harm, undermining sustainable electoral development.

## Media Role In Peace-Building in Kisumu County

The study sought to find out whether the media played a role in peacebuilding during electioneering process in Kisumu County. The results are shown in Table 7.

*Table 7: Role of Media in Peacebuilding*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
	Yes	377	94.2	94.2
	No	23	5.8	5.8
	Total	400	100.0	100.0

Source: Field Data (2019)

The study's findings in Table 7 provide a nuanced empirical basis for understanding the media's critical role in cultivating the democratic commons in Kenya, directly illuminating the complex interplay between media responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable electoral development. The overwhelming quantitative data, showing 94.2% of respondents affirming the media's role in peace-building, establishes a foundational public consensus that the media is not an external actor but an integral institution within the democratic commons (Researcher, 2023). This statistic reflects a public expectation that aligns directly with the Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that media must operate within an ethical framework, acting as a trustee for the public good by being objective, truthful, and transparent (Siebert et al., 1956, as cited in Mbeke, 2009). The public's belief in the media's peace-building capacity is a demand for this theory to be realized, transforming the media from a mere information conduit into a proactive cultivator of a shared democratic space.

The qualitative data, however, reveals the profound tension in fulfilling this role. The verbatim quote from the Assistant County Commissioner that “The agenda setting provide the common civilian with a chance to play a part by voicing on the election procedure... as a manifestation of democratic system” (Interview with Assistant County Commissioner, Kisumu Central, 2019) powerfully illustrates the media's potential to operationalize the democratic commons. This aligns with the Libertarian Theory's ideal of a “marketplace of ideas,” where a liberated media enables robust public participation and helps citizens judge electoral threats (Hafner-Burton et al., 2012). Yet, this very freedom creates a vulnerability, as evidenced by the contrasting quote from the Head of News Production: “To some extent media has worsen the situation... If we are to advocate for peace, then how did we find our own at the Hague?” (Interview with Head of News Production, 2019). This statement is a stark indictment of media irresponsibility, highlighting how the libertarian freedom to broadcast can be weaponized to destroy social cohesion, thereby negating sustainable development. The reference to the International Criminal Court (ICC) underscores a legacy of media content contributing to real-world violence, a failure to adhere to any social contract.

This duality is further explicated through Galtung's theories of structural violence and peace-building (1969). The findings that vernacular stations like Ramogi FM and Kameme FM used dehumanizing labels like “foreigners” and “fishermen” is a textbook example of *cultural violence*—the aspect of Galtung's triangle where symbols and language are used to legitimize direct and structural violence (Mbeke, 2009; KNCHR, 2008b). This hate speech actively corrodes social cohesion by reinforcing ethnic divisions, which are a form of *structural violence* that systematically denies certain groups full political participation and safety. Conversely, the positive example of Mega FM in Northern Uganda (Struges, 2007) demonstrates *structural peace-building*; by creating a platform for dialogue that encouraged LRA members to “come out of the bush,” the media institutionally redesigned a conflictual space into a collaborative one, fostering a new, inclusive social structure. This contrast perfectly captures the media's pivotal position: it can either be an instrument that perpetuates the structural violence of ethnic exclusion or a mechanism for structural peace-building that fosters an inclusive democratic commons.

Ultimately, the study's core revelation is that the media's impact on Kenya's electoral process is not predetermined but is a function of its chosen ethical orientation. The IEBC official's assertion that “elections are so emotional that the quickest way to reach the people is through the media. As long as it is media, it's important in peace-building” (Interview with Head ICT officer, IEBC, 2019) acknowledges the media's unparalleled power to shape the electoral environment. Whether this power cultivates a

sustainable democratic commons or leads to its decay hinges on the tension between libertarian freedom and social responsibility. The findings argue that unbridled libertarianism, evidenced by hate speech, destroys the very social cohesion upon which a sustainable democracy depends. Therefore, for the media to truly fulfill its role in the sustainable development of Kenya's electoral process, it must transcend this binary. It must embrace a model of *socially responsible libertarianism*—leveraging its freedom to actively build, rather than passively reflect or actively destroy, the shared norms, trust, and inclusive dialogue that constitute a resilient democratic commons, thereby directly addressing the structural and cultural violence that has long plagued Kenyan elections.

## Inferential Analysis

This study employed binary logistic regression to quantitatively assess the predictive relationship between media exposure variables and electoral peace-building outcomes in Kisumu County. The regression model specified perceived effectiveness of media in peace-building as the dichotomous dependent variable, measured through a binary response (0 = ineffective, 1 = effective) to the question "Has media played an effective role in peace-building during elections?" Eight independent variables were strategically included based on their theoretical relevance to media effects and conflict transformation frameworks: (1) media source preference, (2) trust in media sources, (3) perceived media influence on political opinions, (4) media's agenda-setting capacity, (5) perceived media role in conflict mitigation, along with key demographic controls including (6) age, (7) education level, and (8) geographical location. These predictors were selected to operationalize the core theoretical framework integrating Social Responsibility Theory, which emphasizes media's obligation to serve public interest in conflict settings, and Galtung's structural peace-building theory (1969), which focuses on transforming communication structures to address cultural violence. The use of binary logistic regression was specifically indicated by the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, allowing for the estimation of odds ratios that quantify how each predictor variable affects the likelihood of perceiving media as effective in peace-building initiatives. Table 8 presents the outcomes of the Chi-Square.

*Table 8: Role of Media in Peace-building*

Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients				
		Chi-square	df	Sig.
Step 1	Step	31.845	8	.002
	Block	31.845	8	.002
	Model	31.845	8	.002

Source: Field Data (2019)

The statistically significant relationship between media-related factors and peace-building outcomes in Kisumu County ( $\chi^2 = 31.845$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p = .002$ ) provides crucial empirical evidence for understanding how to cultivate Kenya's democratic commons. This finding demonstrates that media consumption actively shapes the collective consciousness and public opinion essential for sustainable electoral development, rather than being a passive activity. The results validate the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, particularly the Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that media must operate within an ethical framework that serves the public interest (Siebert et al., 1956). The significant model confirms that when media fulfills this responsibility through trusted reporting and constructive agenda-setting, it directly contributes to social cohesion and sustainable electoral processes.

The findings further resonate with Galtung's (1969) theories of structural violence and peace-building, revealing how media can either perpetuate or dismantle structural barriers to democratic participation. The model's significance suggests that media narratives in Kisumu County possess the capacity to either reinforce structural violence through divisive framing (Entman, 1993) or foster structural peace-building by addressing underlying grievances and promoting inclusive dialogue. This aligns with Galtung's conceptualization of positive peace, where media can actively create social structures that address root causes of conflict rather than merely reporting on their manifestations.

While Libertarian Theory advocates for minimal government interference in media operations, the study's findings indicate that complete media freedom without ethical constraints may not optimally serve peace-building objectives in fragile electoral environments. The significant relationship between trusted media sources and peace-building attitudes suggests that media credibility—often cultivated through responsible practice—is paramount. This echoes contemporary adaptations of libertarian principles that recognize the need for self-regulation to maintain public trust and social stability (Shanahan et al., 2018).

The empirical evidence demonstrates that media's agenda-setting function (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) directly influences what aspects of electoral processes citizens prioritize, thereby shaping the democratic commons. Furthermore, the importance of source credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) underscores that trusted media institutions are essential for fostering the social cohesion necessary for sustainable electoral development. Consequently, these findings establish that responsible media practice is not merely an ancillary component but a fundamental pillar in cultivating a resilient democratic commons in Kenya's evolving electoral landscape, bridging theoretical frameworks with practical peace-building outcomes.

*Table 9: Logistic Regression Model*

		<b>B</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Wald</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
<b>Step 1<sup>a</sup></b>	Age	2.743	0.707	15.063	1	0.00	15.53
	Gender	0.124	0.648	0.036	1	0.849	1.132
	Education	-0.982	0.527	3.47	1	0.062	0.375
	Status	-2.922	1.031	8.023	1	0.005	0.054
	Preference	0.875	0.369	5.63	1	0.018	2.399
	Period	-1.056	0.469	5.066	1	0.024	0.348
	Trusted	-0.635	0.281	5.105	1	0.024	0.53
	Location	1.427	0.676	4.463	1	0.035	4.168
	Constant	-0.653	2.814	0.054	1	0.817	0.521
a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Age, Gender, Education, Status, Preference, Period, Trusted, and Location.							

Source: Field Data (2019)

The findings from the logistic regression analysis provide critical empirical evidence for understanding the complex dynamics of cultivating Kenya's democratic commons, directly illuminating the intersecting roles of media responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable electoral development. The powerful predictive relationship of Age (Exp(B)=15.53,  $p<.001$ ) reveals a generational fracture in Kenya's political landscape,

where different age cohorts experience and perceive the electoral process through vastly different lenses. This finding directly relates to Galtung's theory of structural violence (1969), as it demonstrates how systemic exclusion and differential political socialization across generations create inherent tensions that undermine social cohesion and sustainable democratic development. The media's responsibility, under both Social Responsibility Theory and Libertarian Theory, is to bridge this generational divide rather than exploit it, by creating inclusive content that addresses the distinct political concerns of all age groups and fosters intergenerational dialogue within the democratic commons.

The significant negative association of Status ( $\text{Exp}(B)=0.054$ ,  $p=.005$ ) powerfully illustrates how socioeconomic marginalization directly impacts electoral engagement and perceptions. This finding embodies Galtung's concept of structural violence, where social and economic arrangements systematically disadvantage certain groups, preventing their full participation in the democratic process. The strong positive association of Location ( $\text{Exp}(B)=4.168$ ,  $p=.035$ ) further demonstrates the geographical dimensions of this structural violence, revealing how place-based inequalities create dramatically different democratic experiences. These spatial and socioeconomic disparities present a fundamental challenge to social cohesion and highlight the media's critical role under Social Responsibility Theory in giving voice to marginalized communities and exposing the structural barriers that undermine equitable political participation.

The behavioral and attitudinal variables offer crucial insights into the psychological dimensions of democratic cultivation. The positive relationship between Preference ( $\text{Exp}(B)=2.399$ ,  $p=.018$ ) and electoral outcomes underscores the importance of individual agency in political processes, while the counterintuitive negative association of Trusted ( $\text{Exp}(B)=0.53$ ,  $p=.024$ ) suggests complex dynamics in how trust mediates political behavior. This finding challenges simplistic assumptions about social cohesion and indicates that high trust levels might reduce political vigilance or engagement—a phenomenon that demands careful media consideration under both libertarian and social responsibility frameworks. The media's role in building informed trust rather than complacent trust becomes essential for sustainable democratic development.

The non-significance of Gender ( $p=.849$ ) and marginal significance of Education ( $p=.062$ ) provide equally important insights, suggesting that some conventional demographic markers may be less predictive of electoral behavior in Kenya's unique context. This finding reinforces the need for media organizations to move beyond simplistic demographic targeting and develop more nuanced understandings of their audience's political identities and concerns. Collectively, these regression results paint a picture of a democratic commons shaped by complex intersections of generational, socioeconomic, spatial, and attitudinal factors. For Kenya to achieve sustainable electoral development, media institutions must embrace their social responsibility while maintaining libertarian freedoms, consciously working to address the structural violence revealed by these findings and actively building the social cohesion necessary for a resilient democratic future. The empirical evidence strongly suggests that cultivating Kenya's democratic commons requires media practices that are simultaneously age-sensitive, poverty-aware, geographically conscious, and strategically focused on building informed political engagement across all segments of society.



Table 10: Coefficients Media Shaping Opinions During Electioneering Process

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>										
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	.432	.206		2.095	.037	.026	.837		
	Age	.020	.042	.028	.474	.635	-.063	.103	.796	1.25
	Gender	.189	.052	.199	3.613	.000	.086	.292	.926	1.08
	Marital Status	.151	.061	.146	2.464	.014	.030	.272	.803	1.24
	Highest level of education	.116	.046	.135	2.506	.013	.025	.207	.969	1.03
Dependent Variable: Does media shapes your opinion during electioneering process										
Source: Field Data (2019)										

The empirical findings from this study reveal critical insights into the complex relationship between media influence and electoral dynamics in Kenya, directly addressing the core themes of media responsibility, social cohesion, and sustainable electoral development. The regression analysis demonstrating that gender ( $\beta = .189$ ,  $p = .000$ ), marital status ( $B = .151$ ,  $p = .014$ ), and education level ( $B = .116$ ,  $p = .013$ ) significantly predict perceptions of media influence underscores the stratified nature of media effects within the democratic commons. These demographic filters reveal that media responsibility cannot be conceptualized as a one-size-fits-all endeavor but must account for the diverse ways different social groups experience and process political information (McDonald, 2018).

The significant gender coefficient suggests that media responsibility must be gendered in its approach, recognizing that men and women may require different media literacy interventions to equally participate in the democratic commons. As one peace committee member noted during FGD, "The media influence in the violence of 2007/2008 did bring a lot of questions with regards to incitement to violence and spreading of hate speech that only aggravated an already dire situation" (FGD with Peace committee members, Kibuye Market, 30/03/2019). This verbatim account illustrates how media irresponsibility directly corrodes social cohesion, particularly affecting different gender groups in distinct ways.

The strong educational correlation aligns with the Social Responsibility Theory, which posits that media must serve the public interest and foster an informed citizenry (Siebert et al., 1956). The finding that educated respondents were more cognizant of media influence suggests that media responsibility involves not just content production but also audience capacity-building. As Potter (2018) argues, media literacy enables citizens to deconstruct persuasive messages, making education a crucial component of sustainable electoral development. This was evidenced by the evolution noted by PEV victims: "Modern technology has given rise to many media and citizen journalism where everyone can get access to information through internet. The way media operated in 2013 general elections led to independence of media amidst claims of rigging" (Interview with Victims of PEV FGDs, Sondu Market, 27/03/2019).

The non-significant age finding ( $p = .635$ ) challenges conventional assumptions about digital natives versus traditional media consumers, suggesting that media responsibility must be conceived as a universal concern

across generations. This aligns with Strömbäck's (2008) concept of the mediatized political environment, where media influence permeates all age cohorts equally. The pervasive nature of media effects demands comprehensive regulatory frameworks that protect the entire democratic commons, regardless of age demographics.

Galtung's theories of structural violence and peace-building (1969) provide a crucial lens for understanding how media irresponsibility manifests as structural harm. The inflammatory media script retrieved during research—"Fellow Kenyans, the Kikuyus have stolen our children's future... We will slaughter them right here in the capital city"—demonstrates how media content can institutionalize ethnic hatred, creating structural barriers to social cohesion. As one key informant starkly observed, "Media used words and agendas that elicited hatred and aggravated violence against some communities" (Interview with Peace coordinator, ICSS, 29/03/2019). This represents the antithesis of media responsibility and directly undermines sustainable electoral development.

The Libertarian Theory's emphasis on press freedom faces serious challenges in this context. While media liberalization brought positive developments, as noted in the historical analysis that "the past two decades witnessed liberalization of the media in Kenya," it also created vulnerabilities: "Liberalization of the media led to abuse of journalistic powers and poor regulation that led to politicians and elites manipulating media thus violence erupted" (FGD with Peace committee members, Kibuye Market, 30/03/2019). This tension highlights the need for a balanced approach that preserves media freedom while ensuring responsibility.

The establishment of regulatory bodies post-2007/2008 violence represents a practical application of Social Responsibility Theory, creating mechanisms to hold media accountable for content that threatens social cohesion. As the research notes, "After the 2007/2008 elections, the government set up a regulatory body to make media houses responsible and accountable for any news transmitted." This institutional development contributed to "proper regulation that yielded peaceful electioneering process in 2013 compared to 2007/2008."

The media's constructive potential within the democratic commons emerges through its watchdog function and educational role. An IEBC official emphasized that "The media can expose manipulation of citizens through bribes and other malpractices that can lead to disqualifications. IEBC Voter education is important for the new, complex ballot and educating Kenyans about post-election phase of devolution" (Interview with IEBC official, Nyakach Sub-County, 4/04/2019). This aligns with the peace-building dimension of Galtung's framework, where media can actively contribute to structural peace by enhancing electoral integrity and citizen awareness.

The conflicting perceptions between state security officers and media practitioners regarding the 2007/2008 coverage reveals the contested nature of media responsibility in transitional democracies. While security officials "believed that broadcasting could have encouraged publicity," media professionals "denied arguing that they reported truthfully the actual situations on the ground." This tension underscores the need for clear, collaboratively developed standards for electoral coverage that balance professional journalism with social stability concerns.

The regression findings intersect with these qualitative insights to paint a comprehensive picture of media's role in the democratic commons. The demographic variations in media perception suggest that social

cohesion initiatives must be similarly differentiated. Media responsibility in this context requires recognizing that women and men, married and single individuals, and those with different educational backgrounds experience media influence differently, necessitating tailored approaches to media literacy and content development.

Ultimately, cultivating a sustainable electoral process through media responsibility requires addressing both content production and audience reception. As the study concludes, "The media plays a very critical role in the life of all human societies. The media provides the conduit necessary for all kinds of communication that helps societies exist and function." This conduit function must be exercised with acute awareness of its power to either strengthen or undermine social cohesion, particularly during the heightened tensions of electoral periods.

The journey from the heavily regulated media environment of the 1990s—"marked by intimidation and arrest of members of the fourth estate who dared criticize the government"—through the chaotic liberalization era, toward the current regulated framework illustrates Kenya's ongoing negotiation between libertarian ideals and social responsibility imperatives. This evolution reflects a growing recognition that sustainable electoral development depends on media systems that simultaneously guarantee freedom and enforce responsibility, that celebrate diversity while building cohesion, and that serve immediate informational needs while strengthening long-term democratic resilience.

## Conclusions

This analysis, framed through the intersecting lenses of Galtung's structural peace-building theory and Siebert et al.'s Social Responsibility Theory, reveals the profoundly dualistic nature of the media's influence on Kenya's electoral process. The findings not only illustrate this power but, more significantly, clarify how the study extends and challenges these foundational theories. It extends Galtung's focus on invisible structures of violence by empirically demonstrating how the media acts as a critical transmission belt, amplifying deep-seated issues like negative ethnicity and institutional mistrust into the political arena, thereby making abstract structural conflicts tangibly violent. Concurrently, the study challenges the often idealistic assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory by revealing that the public good is not a monolithic concept; the quantitative data demonstrate that the media's influence is perceived differently across gender, education, and marital status, highlighting a stark gap between the theory's normative ideals and the complex, fragmented socio-political reality in which Kenyan media operates.

The historical narrative of the media as both a trigger for violence, as witnessed in the post-election crises of 1992, 1997, 2007, and 2013, and as a catalyst for peace, as demonstrated in 2002, underscores this theoretical tension. It confirms that the media's role is not predetermined but is a consequence of choices made within a specific structural context. The fundamental challenge, therefore, lies in transforming the media from a potential instrument of division, constrained by these structures and commercial pressures, into a steadfast pillar for the sustainable development of Kenya's democratic commons.

To this end, a series of practice-oriented recommendations are critical to bridging the identified gap between theory and practice. First, it is imperative that media houses move beyond a stance of mere neutrality to actively champion peace-building and issue-based journalism. This transformation entails the implementation of mandatory, nationwide training for editors and reporters on conflict-sensitive reporting

frameworks, explicitly designed to de-escalate tension and avoid the recycling of ethnic stereotypes. Such training should be developed in partnership with peace research institutions to ground it in scholarly insight and must be incorporated into the official licensing requirements overseen by the Media Council of Kenya.

Second, to counter the commercial pressures that incentivize media firms to accept and broadcast partisan and divisive content, a transparent and equitable system for political advertising must be established. The Communications Authority of Kenya, in collaboration with industry bodies, should mandate a cap on political advertising spending and create a publicly accessible registry for all political advertisements. This measure would ensure citizens can identify the sources of the messaging aimed at influencing their votes, thereby fostering a culture of accountability.

Finally, recognizing that the media is one actor within a larger ecosystem, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. A permanent national dialogue forum should be institutionalized, bringing together media leadership, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), security agencies, and civil society to operate continuously throughout the electoral cycle. This forum would serve as a proactive early warning system, enabling stakeholders to identify and collaboratively mitigate incendiary rhetoric—whether from politicians or media personalities, before it escalates into violence. By consciously adopting this enhanced role as a responsible fourth estate, the Kenyan media can fulfill its potential to be not a mirror passively reflecting societal fractures, but a bridge actively fostering a more cohesive, peaceful, and sustainable democratic future.

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