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Electoral Processes and Media Coverage- A Study of the Media's Performance in the Gambia's December 2021 Presidential Elections

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Abstract- The focus of the investigation was The Gambia's media outlets. The study's 30-day timeframe allowed for the content analysis of the media outlets' output. The media's coverage of political rallies, the candidates, and party manifestos, their efforts at voter education and civic engagement, and their ethical use of language were the areas of interest. It was discovered that government-owned media outlets covered the parties and election-related topics in an utterly impartial, nonpartisan, and thorough manner. Most of the private media outlets paid little or no attention to giving voter education or giving presidential candidates a platform on which to engage with the public. It is remarkable, nevertheless, that media companies did not permit unethical language use on their platforms, with a few notable exceptions. The Gambia's media is entering a period of unprecedented freedom of expression, allowing professionals to carry out their civic duties without fear of reprisal. The dormant potentials are starting to manifest. This activity represents a reaffirmation of what the public expects from the media during election season.

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I. Introduction

The intersection of electoral processes and media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping democratic societies. As politicians rely heavily on the media to promote themselves and their political agendas, voters also depend on the media to provide them with sufficient information about political parties and their nominees so that they may make informed decisions. Monitoring media performance is an effective method for facilitating optimal media performance.

According to Kužel (2020), Media monitoring is a crucial tool for assessing the fairness of the election process, evaluating media behavior in the light of compliance with international standards, and measuring the quality of election coverage. It helps determine if candidates have equal access to media and if information is adequate for voters. Monitoring results help identify media shortcomings, allowing for corrective action to improve coverage and protect media rights. Consequently, it should be a continuous endeavor in order to develop the media professionally and ethically.

Given the fact that information disorder during the election process has resulted in violent situations in many nations across the globe, the media has an important role to play in the maintenance of social cohesion at such times.

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With the prevalent degree of information disorder, the media has the responsibility to proactively dispense authentic news content, counter information disorder and offer balanced insights to news consumers on election related issues.

Generally, three main principles should govern media coverage of elections; these are:

the rights of voters: voters have the right to be informed about political alternatives and candidates' platforms in order to be able to make an informed choice;

the rights of contestants: candidates and parties have the right to communicate their platforms and their views. To that end, they have a right of unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis in order to inform the electorate about their policies and opinions on matters of public interest;

the right of the media: the media enjoy the freedom to inform the public about an election campaign and to express their opinions on issues of public interest. In exercising this freedom, they cover all relevant election-related issues and play an active role in informing voters by offering them a diverse range of views, which include those of journalists and political analysts who are free to criticise politicians for their platforms or their performances. More importantly, they inform voters in a correct, accurate, transparent, and balanced manner (Venice Commision, 2009)

The process of media monitoring involves gathering information, analysing it, and presenting the findings of election-related content in print, broadcast, and online media. Besides serving as a regulatory tool, media monitoring offers additional advantages to an election process. Some of these goals include gauging the media's, voters', and candidates' freedom of expression; preventing violence during elections; increasing minority and female participation; and improving the media literacy of both election officials and the general public.(Armenia 2012,OSCE/ODIHR)

There is no gainsaying the fact that the media organizations do not always fulfill their obligations to the society as exemplified in their acts of omission or commission.

Understanding how the media functioned during the December 2021 presidential elections in The Gambia is critical, not only because the public, to some extent, relied on the media for information that ultimately influenced their choices, but also because media activities *had* a *significant* impact on societal

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cohesion. This is why DUBAWA a West African independent verification and fact-checking project, initiated by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development sponsored this media monitoring project.

a) The Political Context of The Gambia

In order to choose a president and a legislature, The Gambia conducts general elections. The president is the head of state and the highest-ranking official in the nation. The president is chosen by the people to a five-year term. The Gambia's unicameral legislature, the National Assembly, has 53 seats filled by direct elections and 5 by appointments. Prior to President Yayah Jammeh's ouster in 2017, the prominent political group known as the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) had 22 years of control. The dictatorship of former military leader Yayah Jammeh, who had been in power for over twenty years, was ended on December 1, 2016, when Adama Barrow was chosen president by the Gambians. The victory of Barrow, who had the backing of several opposition groups, stoked hopes among Gambians for a more democratic government. There was only one political party in the Gambia up until 2016. (Njie & Saine, 2019)

The Gambia's Access to Information Bill was approved by the Barrow administration on July 1, 2021. For years, media professionals and academics had been hindered in their work by the problem of restricted information flow; this legislation finally solved that problem. (MfWA, 2 Nov 2021). For participatory governance to work, citizens must have access to information so that they can make informed contributions to public discussions.

Gambia began getting ready for the upcoming elections at the turn of the 2021 calendar year. The election was different from others in that voters were more vocal about their party affiliation and participated in the campaign. The 22 years that former President Yahya Jammeh spent in office were marked by a restrictive and hostile political atmosphere. The inaugural presidential debate, organised by the Committee for Political Debate, took place on November 20. Although all six candidates were invited, only Halifah Sallah and Essa M Faal showed up.(Foroyaa 21 Nov, 2021).

The National Patriotic Party (NPP), of which President Barrow is a member, and an offshoot of the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Reconstruction (APRC), headed by Yahya Jammeh, the former president, came together to create a coalition. After that, Jammeh made statements at his campaign rallies via phone, disavowing his support for Mama Kandeh's coalition. Reuters, Dec 1, 2021).

Six candidates, representing three separate political parties, ran for president in the 2021 election (IFES, 2021).

The following is their profile:

Name	Party	Position	Slogan
Adama Barrow	National People's Party (NPP)	Incumbent President (2017-present)	"Peace, Progress, and Unity"
Ousainou Darboe	United Democratic Party (UDP)	Former Vice President (2018-2019)	"Justice, Peace, and Progress"
Essa M. Faal	Independent	Chief Prosecutor of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (2018-present)	"One Gambia, One Nation, One People"
Mama Kandeh	Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC)	MP in Pan-African Parliament	"One Gambia one people"
Abdoulie Ebrima Jammeh	National Union Party (NUP)	Former Director General of The Gambia Civil Aviation Authority[28]	"Unity is strength"
Halifa Sallah	People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS)	Special Advisor to the President on Governance (2017), National Assembly Minority Leader (2002-2007)	"Liberty, dignity, and prosperity"

Source: Wikipedia

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b) The Profile of the Political Parties

The National People's Party was founded in December 2019 by the incumbent, President Adama Barrow after a disagreement with his former party, the United Democratic Party.

The United Democratic Party (UDP) was founded in 1996 by 3 political parties, the then-banned PPP, NCP and GPP that choose the human rights lawyer, freedom fighter, ANM Ousainou Darboe as the party leader and Secretary General. Darboe was imprisoned by the dictator Yahya Jammeh during the 2016 elections but was the party's flag bearer in the December 2021 presidential election.

Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC) was founded in 2016 by Mama Kandeh who is a former APRC National Assembly Member. The initial deputy leader, Facuru Sillah, left the party after he had a dispute with Kandeh. Mama Kandeh was the party's flag bearer in the December 2021 presidential election.

The People's Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS) is a socialist political party that was founded in 2005. It was part of Coalition 2016 whose candidate, Adama Barrow, defeated the incumbent, dictator Yahya Jammeh. The PDOIS is the publisher of a prominent newspaper Foroyaa known for its bold opposition of the Yahya Jammeh government. Halifa Sillah was the party's flag bearer in the December 2021 presidential election.

The National Unity Party (NUP) was officially registered as a political party on 5th October, 2020. The party is anchored on the principle that party leaders must not serve more than two terms in opposition. Abdoulie Ebrima Jammeh was the party's flag bearer in the December 2021 presidential election.

Essa Mbye Faal is an international lawyer who served as defence counsel at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and is a former lead counsel at the just concluded Gambia Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC). A new entrant to the political scene, Faal ran as an independent presidential candidate.

Certain patterns were observed in the electioneering campaigns and party affiliation.

According to Nabaneh (2021), many of the political parties in The Gambia are highly ethnicised, not necessarily by design but by default. Due to the absence of well-developed party structures and nationwide institutions, voters usually align with parties led by politicians from their ethnic group. APRC, for instance has more supporters among the Jola because of Yahya Jammeh, UDP among the Mandinka because of Ousainou Darboe, GDC among the Fula because of Mama Kandeh, NPP among the Sarahule and Fula communities due to Adama Barrow, and PDOIS among the Wolof because of Halifa Sallah.

The election period witnessed a high degree of ethnic divisions, circulation of falsehood about contestants and exchange of expletives.

c) Statement of the Research Problem

Under the totalitarian regime of Yahya Jammeh, government owned media agencies gave prominence to the ruling parties to the detriment of opposition parties. This is contrary to the universally recognised responsibility of the media which is to furnish the electorate with accurate information and ensure that all contestants receive fair and balanced coverage. With all the efforts to guaranty press freedom under the Barrow administration, and the December 2021 election being the first since the administration's inception, it is important to investigate the changes, if any, in the Gambia media's coverage of the 2021 elections.

d) Research Questions

The monitoring exercise undertaken sought to provide answers to the following questions:

Did media organisations give balanced and fair coverage to each of the presidential candidates?

Did the media organisations give adequate voter's education to the electorate?

Were media organisations pro-active in debunking fake news content?

e) Goal and Objectives of the Monitoring Project

This monitoring was geared towards providing a professional, comprehensive and objective assessment of political diversity, inclusion and balance in the news and current affairs coverage by the monitored traditional and online media organizations. The monitoring investigated the degree of media organisation's commitment to civic/voter's education in the bid to assist voters to make informed choices and eschew violence; their fair and balanced coverage of all political contestants and their countering of fake news contents that have the potential to inflame the polity.

In general, the exercise aimed to furnish the public with information on the conduct of the media during the elections, to initiate a discussion about the objectivity and quality of the media reporting and to promote media compliance with international standards and best practices regarding freedom of expression and independence.

f) Significance of the Study

This study will enable stakeholders to have accurate information on whether the mass media adequately dispense their duty of presenting the public with a fair and balanced picture of the political parties, the contestants and the Independent Electoral Commission and debunking fake news content while alerting the public about the need to question their sources of information prior to the election. The study will also help raise public awareness as it will enhance

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understanding of the proper role of the media in a democratic and free society.

It will promote the adoption of best practices on the part of media practitioners and media outlet owners in the broadcast and print media as they will be challenged to adhere (in the future) to standards of balanced reporting that focus on important political issues.

II. Review of Literature

a) Conceptual Review

i. *The Media*

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian communication theorist, used the term "media" to refer to communication channels in 1954. By the mid-1960s, the word was widely used in North America and the United Kingdom. Media are the collective communication outlets or tools that store and convey information or data. Print media refers to newspapers, magazines, and books. These mediums rely on the printed word to convey information to the general population. Broadcast media encompasses television and radio. These mediums use electronic signals to broadcast information to a large number of people. Digital media include the internet, social media, and mobile devices. These channels communicate and disseminate information through digital technology. The media plays an important role in society by educating, enlightening, and entertaining people through news, features, and commentary. It also produces documentaries, dramas, current affairs shows, and other radio and television content. The media promotes social change and changes public opinion by exposing important developments and marginalised voices.

ii. *Legal Framework for Coverage of Electoral Processes by the Media*

International laws govern the role of media in elections, focusing on regulating government behavior in relation to media. The principles underpinning the international laws include freedom of expression, information, and participation in government through elections. These principles are derived from Articles 19 and 21 of the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Several regional and UN human rights treaties have now reaffirmed these principles. These principles have been further clarified by decisions made by treaty authorities like the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As a result, they provide a rich and applicable source of legal guidance. Opinions handed down by different forms of international entities also contribute to the body of law governing elections and the media. To illustrate the point, in 1999, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression laid out some ground rules for how the media should behave during elections and what governments should do to ensure media plurality.

b) Theoretical Review

i. *Agenda Setting Theory*

While the degree to which the media influences the society may be a subject for debate among scholars from different fields in the social sciences, the fact that the media impacts the society is indisputable. Earlier in the field of communication studies, the All-powerful media theories were propagated but audience theories have debunked the seemingly unlimited power of the media over message consumers. These theories show that there are intervening factors between the audience and the messages they receive from the media, their social affiliations is one of such factors (McQuail et al, 2013)

The Agenda-Setting Theory in contrast to the All Powerful Media Theory, suggests that media plays a crucial role in shaping public attention to specific issues. It posits that media outlets identify and publicize issues, guiding public opinion and enhancing issue salience. The theory also posits that the media controls reality by filtering and shaping it, and that the more media emphasizes an issue, the more the public perceives it as crucial. Agenda-setting can be categorized into three levels: first-level, where media sets the public agenda, second-level, where salience is transferred from the media agenda to the public agenda, and third-level, where agenda-setting impacts policy agenda building (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

The media may choose to kill an issue by not reporting on it.

ii. *The Spiral of Silence Theory*

The spiral of silence theory explains how the media can influence people's opinion. When an opinion is widely publicised and accepted, people with contrary opinion who are in the minority will be silent about their position for fear of being different. There is social pressure to side with the dominant opinion (Neumann, 1974).

iii. *Symbolic Interactionism Theory*

This theory propounded by George Mead states that human interaction helps to develop self, meaning is not inherent in objects, but is, instead, constructed and modified within different contexts through social interaction. An individual's action towards someone is based on the meaning attributed to that person. People use symbols with shared cultural meanings in the bid to communicate effectively (Hall, 2007; West & Turner, 2017).

The media helps to create and propagate shared symbols and uses cultural symbols to affect an individual's sense of self. This function of the media becomes very important during elections to promote a sense of patriotism and social responsibility in people.

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Although the symbolic interactionism theory has been criticized as being impressionistic, it still has a lot of relevance in the way individuals choose their icons and social affiliations

iv. *The Social Responsibility Theory*

One theory that helps to understand what the role of the media should be in an election period is the social responsibility media theory which stems from libertarian thought. This theory states that the media which should be free but self-regulated have an obligation to the society to be relevant, truthful, accurate, fair and objective. In their operations, they must observe adherence to agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct. (Siebert, Peterson & Schrann, 1956). The theory advocates for the media to utilise their platform to promote public opinion, individual liberties, and critical social interests, while also engaging in discourse to address and resolve issues. Central to social responsibility is the notion that with liberty comes accountability. The press has an obligation to consistently adhere to established ethical principles. individuals rely on journalists to advocate for their optimal interests. As a result, beyond mere news coverage, the media has the responsibility to interpret the news and educate the people.

During election time, the media's relevance is demonstrated by its role in informing voters about political candidates, parties, and programmes, allowing them to make informed decisions.

All these theories underscore the importance of the media and its role in peace democratic transition

c) Empirical Studies

The Electoral Knowledge Network (ACE) presented findings from media monitoring of election processes in four different nations in different years.

In Amenia In 2012, it was found that TV channels often broadcast campaign material from paid political advertising, damaging media credibility and reducing diversity. In Cambodia in 2007, state-owned media cover 93% of political activities, with 82% dedicated to the ruling party, the CPP. This unbalanced coverage made it difficult for other parties to compete. There is minimal coverage of women in politics and no coverage of disabled, youth, or indigenous candidates. In Nicaraguan 2010, the media was reflecting profound polarization and becoming active participants in this polarization. The two main newspapers, La Prensa and El Nuevo Diario, dictate the political agenda.

In Sudan in 2010, hate speech cases and inflammatory language use increased significantly as election day approached and continued after the election, with both political actors and media responsible for creating such hate speech. Defamation of political figures was the most common kind of hate speech in the days leading up to the polls, but when the results were announced, threats of violence and allegations of election fraud became prevalent.

III. Methodology

16 monitors were trained to monitor the media outlets and enter data into different predetermined categories on their spreadsheet.

On the completion of the training, each research assistant was allotted the media outlet to monitor.

The study adopted the content analysis research method to explore the following:

The politics-related themes/concepts in the media content of each media outlet.

The prominence given to the themes/concepts in terms of point of placement among other contents and the frequency of occurrence of such themes/ concepts.

The sampling technique was purposive as only the prominent news media outlets were selected.

a) Scope of the Study

The study covered a period of 30 days from December 19, 2021 to January 18, 2022 and 16 media house were monitored.

b) Study Sample

In this study, all the government owned media outlets were monitored. These are:
Gambia Radio and Television Station (GRTS) Radio
GRTS Television

4 private traditional newspapers in The Gambia were monitored:
The point
Foroyaa (published by one of the presidential candidates)
Standard
The voice

3 online Newspapers:
The Chronicles
Gainako
Malagen

The 2 Active Traditional Private TV stations:
QTV
Paradise TV

3 Online TV:
Eye Africa
Kerr Fatou
Fatou Network

4 Traditional Radio Stations:
West Coast Radio
Star FM
King FM
Q Radio

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The unit of analysis was the story/editorial/ advert/features/ Advertorial for the print media

News report/programmes/adverts/advertorials for the broadcast media

Categories/ themes are as follows:
Key electoral issues
Candidates' policies and manifestoes
Candidates' political rallies
Voter's education
Political debate between candidates
Use of abusive language
Countering of fake news

The categories were investigated applying the following variables:

Length of time/space allocated
Frequency of the theme's re-occurrence
Prominence in terms of placement in print and the broadcast media
Coding was done on a spreadsheet and the result of the analysis was presented in percentages.

IV. Presentation of Findings

a) *Media Coverage of Political Rallies*

Out of the 30 days of monitoring, rallies were held in 17 days because rallies stopped on 3rd December, the day before the election and, naturally, did not continue after the election.

Table 1: Coverage of Rallies in the 15 Days Preceding Election by Radio Stations

	NPP	UDP	PDOIS	GDC	Essa Faal	NUP	Total	Percentage of total broadcast Time for 15 days
GRTS Radio	5 hours 36mins	5.6 hours	5.6 hours	5.6 hours	5.6 hours	5.6 hours	33.6 hours	12.4%
West Coast Radio	18mins	10mins	5mins	8mins	4mins	5 mins	0.53 hours	0.14%
King FM	15mins	15 mins	15mins	15mins	15mins	15 mins	1.5 hours	.0.41%
SEN FM	4 hrs 30mins	4 hrs 30 mins	3 hrs 30 mins	3 hrs 30 mins	2 hrs 30 mins	Nil	18.5 hour	5.13%
Star FM	4 hrs 6mins	3 hrs 36mins	3hrs 6 mins	2 hrs 54 mins	1hr 42 mins	Nil	13.33 hours	3.70%
Q Radio		Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	0	O%

GRTS, owned by the government, gave equal coverage to all political parties. Q Radio gave coverage to only the ruling party because they paid the station. Star FM, also a private Radio station gave fair coverage to all the political parties except NUP.

Table 2: Coverage of Political Rallies in the 15 Days Preceding Election by TV Stations

	NPP	UDP	PDOIS	GDC	Essa Faal	NUP	Total	Percentage of total broadcast Time for 15 days
GRTS TV	5 hours 18 mins	5 hours 18 mins	5 hours 18 mins	5 hours 18 mins	5 hours 18 mins	5 hours 18 mins	31.3 hours	11.5%
Q TV	14hrs 45 mins	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	14.75 hours	4.0%
Paradise TV	39 hrs 40 mins Coverage was paid for	6 hrs 40 mins	5 hrs	5hrs	Nil 0 %	Nil	56.33 hrs	15.64%
Kerr Fatou (Online TV)	28 mins	28 hrs, 1min	27 mins	2 hrs 25 mins	2hrs, 18 mins	Nil	6.2hrs	1.72%
Fatou Network (Online TV)	27 mins	1hour 30 mins	2 hrs 26 mins	25 mins	25 mins	Nil	5.21 hours	1.44%
Eye Africa	17 hrs 54 mins	8.18 mins	4 hrs 11 mins	Nil	Nil	Nil	30.38 hours	8.4%

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Table 3: Hosting Presidential Candidates

	NPP	UDP	GDC	PDOIS	Essal Faal	NUP
GRTS TV	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Paradise TV	Nil	Nil	Nil	Done	Done	Nil
Q TV	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Kerr Fatou	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Eye Africa	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Done	Nil
Fatou Netwok	Done	Nil	Nil	Nil	Done	Nil

Only Paradise TV hosted Essal Faal the independent candidate and Halifa Sallah in a presidential debate. Eye Africa conducted an interview with Essal Faal while Fatou network conducted an interview with Darboe of UDP and Barrow of NPP. The media in The Gambia is not yet taking advantage of the unrestrictive political environment to grill both incumbent and opposition candidates alike on their platforms in the bid to help the electorate to make informed choices and publicise the cadidates' manifestoes as benchmark for future performance evaluation.

Table 4: Monitoring of Newspapers' Coverage of Political Rallies

	NPP	UDP	PDOIS	GDC	Essal Faal	NUP
The Point --- Prominence	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- 3 Front page, 1 P.3	2 out of 17 issues 11.7% --- Front pages	Nil 0% ----------	1 out of 17 issues 5.8% --- Front page	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- All front pages	1 out of 17 issues 5.8% --- Front page
Standard --- Prominence	2 out of 17 Issues 11.7% --- Front page	3 out of 17 5 hours 18mins 17.6% --- Front pages	Nil 0% ----------	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- Front pages	1 out of 17 Issues 5.8% --- Front page	Nil 0% ----------
Foroyaa Prominence	Nil	Nil	2 out of 17 issues 11.7%	Nil	Nil	1 out of 17 issues 5.8%
The Voice --- Prominence	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- Front page	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- Front page	2 out of 17 issues 11.7% --- Front page	5 out of 17 issues 29.4% --- Front page	4 out of 17 issues 23.5% --- Front page	3 out of 17 issues 17.6% --- Front page

The newspapers did not give adequate covering to all the political parties.

Table 5: Online Television's Coverage of Election Issues during the 30 Days' Monitoring Period.

Newspaper	Total number of News items	Total number of News items on election issues	Percentage	
The Chronicles	579	178	30.7%	
Malagen	363	169	46.5%	
Gainakou	70	34	48.5%	

The online newspaper gave better coverage to election issues. This is very significant because in this digitalised age, more people read online news. A recent survey sponsored by Dubawa 2021 on information disorder showed that 10 percent of the respondents spend over 12 hours daily on the social media.

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Table 6: Broadcast Media Coverage of Political Debate

	Presidential Debate	Post-Presidential Debate Analysis	Other Debates
GRTS TV	Nil	Nil	Nil
Paradise TV	Covered	Done	Nil
QTV	Nil	Nil	Nil
Star TV	Nil	Nil	Nil
Q Radio	Nil	Nil	Nil
GRTS Radio	Nil	Done	Nil
King FM	Nil	Nil	Nil
Star FM	Nil	Nil	Nil
SEN FM	Nil	Nil	Nil
West Coast Radio	Nil	Nil	NPP vs UDP Members of parliament

As depicted in Table 5, only Paradise TV covered the presidential debate and post-presidential debate analysis was undertaken by Paradise TV and GRTS Radio. One explanation for this neglect on the part of the media organisations houses is the restrictive nature of the last administration in The Gambia which did not allow for democratic practices like presidential debates.

Voter/Civic Education

Table 7: Civic/Voter's Education by TV Stations

	30 Days of Monitoring	Percentage of total hours
GRTS	23hours	4.8 %
Paradise TV	3 hours 30mins	0.48%
Q TV	Nil	0%
Kerr Fatou	52 mins	0.11%
Fatou Network	25 mins	0.057%
Eye Africa	3	

The time spent on voter/civic education by Television houses was quite limited.

Table 8: Radio Stations' Civic/Voter's Education

Radio Station	Duration	Percentage out of total time
Q Radio	Nil	0%
West Coast Radio	5mins	0.011%
Star FM	4mins	0.009%
SEN FM	7	0.16%
King FM	5mins	0.011%

The time spent on civic/voter education by radio stations was quite inadequate.

Table 9: Newspapers' Civic/Voter's Education

Newspaper	Number of issues of the newspaper	Percentage out of total number of issues analysed
The Point	Nil	%
The Voice	2 issues	6.6%
Standard	3	10%
Foroyaa	2	6.6%

The newspapers too didn't allocate appreciable space to civic/voter education initiated by themselves. In the period of electioneering, it would be expected that every issue of the newspaper would contain some degree of education for the electorate.

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Table10: Offensive use of Language on the Broadcast Media.

Media House	Number of Occurences in the 30 Days Covered	
GRTS Radio	Nil	
West Coast Radio	1	
Star FM	Nil	
King FM	1	
SEN FM	Nil	
Q Radio	Nil	
GRTS TV	Nil	
Q TV	Nil	
Paradise TV	1	
Eye Africa (online)	Nil	
Kerr Fatou (online)	Nil	
Fatou Network (online)	2	

Within, the period of the monitoring, the highest number of occurrences of offensive language used by political actors (2) was found with Fatou Network. The efforts of civil society organisations and international agencies in capacity building for media practitioners on election coverage have proved to be very fruitful.

Table 11: Offensive Language use in the Newspapers

The Point	Nil	
Foroyaa	Nil	
Standard	Nil	
The Voice	2	

This was found only 2 times in The Voice throughout the period covered.

Table 12: Newspaper Editorials on Election Issues

Newspapers	Number out of 30 Issues of the Newspaper
The Point	1
Foroyaa	4
The Voice	11
Standard	1

Only The Voice consistently ran editorials on election issues under the caption, 'Puncturing Gutter Politics.' The editorials could have enlightened the electorate the more about issues surrounding elections.

Table 13: Total Length of Time Devoted to Issues Relating to Each Political Party by the TV Stations

Media House	NPP	UDP	PDOIS	GDC	Essal faal	NUP
GRTS TV	6 hrs 36 mins	6 hrs 36 mins	6 hrs 36 mins	6 hrs 36 mins	6 hrs 36 mins	6 hrs 36 mins
Paradise TV	37hrs 56 mins	22 mins	5hrs 3mins	10 hours 3mins	9 mins	Nil
Q TV	14hours	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Fatou Network	2hrs 42mins	49 mins	3hrs 22mins	25 mins	46 mins	Nil
Eye Africa	18 hrs 30mins	8hrs 21mins	6 hrs	Nil	19 mins	Nil
Kerr Fatou	40mins	44hours25 mins	27mins	2hrs 2 mins	2 hours 4 mins	1hour 30mins

Only GRTS being a public television station gave fair coverage to all the political parties. The private television stations were either paid by the parties they gave more coverage or had political affiliations with them.

b) Countering Fake news in Circulation

In spite of the plethora of lies in circulation on the social media during the period under focus, the media houses were not committed to countering the fake news. Given the harmful effects of fake news circulation on the polity, the media should have paid great attention to that task.

V. Discussion

The monitoring exercise examined the degree to which the media were fair and balanced in their

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coverage of all political contestants, their commitment to civic/voter's education in the bid to assist voters to make informed choices and eschew violence; and their countering of fake news contents that have the potential to inflame the polity.

The government-owned media, GRTS Radio and TV were very balanced and consistent in their coverage of all the political parties but the same cannot be said of the private media houses. Private media being profit-oriented and having different political affiliations gave more coverage to some than the others. A private media house completely shirked its responsibility to the public by giving coverage to only the ruling party because they paid it. This shows total ignorance of what a media house should represent in the society.

In terms of civic/voter's education, all the media houses are adjudged to have performed below expectations. GRTS was strong on peace messaging bringing people from the different language groups in The Gambia and religious leaders to talk about peaceful conduct on the part of all citizens. However political education from the media house did not measure up to standard. Candidates' manifestos were not subjected to analysis. The private media too did not subject manifestos to analysis. The presidential debate was only attended by two candidates and was covered by only one television station. The broadcast and print media also didn't adequately provide the platform to interview the presidential aspirants.

Moreover, the media houses did not give much attention to debunking fake news in spite of the fact that there were a lot of such on social media.

a) Recommendations

It is recommended that the capacity of media practitioners be further developed to understand their responsibility to the society in an election period. The media must also be mandated by the regulatory authority to give a stipulated coverage to political parties as part of their scocial responsibility.

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