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### Invading the Public Sphere: Media, Private Discourse and the Public Space in Kenya

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## **Abstract**

*Privatization and liberalization of the media, both print and electronic, has revolutionized information processing and dissemination. This has been further aided by continued advances in technology, especially the internet. While this has led to access to more information, and more citizen participation in governance and management of public affairs, which are significant ingredients in development, it has come with other effects. In the current global context, the transformed media is opening the populace to outside influences, and the more it grows the more difficult it becomes to control its content. This paper discusses this phenomenon by analyzing the way recent advances in the media are shaping and changing the conceptualization of the public sphere and its management in Kenya. It further shows the role of the media in redefining the boundaries of the public sphere. It attempts to answer the question of whether the media, through their programmes, are aiding private discourse in its invasion of the public space. To what extent does this fit within the wider cross-border interaction leading to the development of more global public spheres? It also seeks to establish what the new perception of the public sphere portends for Africa, especially the extent to which it can be seized and utilized as a stage for enhancing the democratization and development process for the common good.*

## **Introduction**

The concept of the public sphere has attracted attention from scholars from different fields for a long time. However, it is one that is still highly debated, with several viewpoints being put forward. The public sphere is significant as it provides an avenue for the public to scrutinize the way they are governed, and in some instances, make an input while also making the authority accountable. This article starts with an analysis of the understanding of the public sphere, starting from the Habermasian theory of the public sphere, moving toward a discussion of the emergence of global or transnational public spheres. The distinction between a single and multiple public spheres model is also discussed. It then proceeds to interrogate the role of the media, especially new media and the development of ICTs, in shaping the public sphere, its boundaries and operations. It then concludes by revisiting the public and private sphere dichotomy, before showing how the media in Kenya has spearheaded the invasion of the public sphere by private discourse. It also questions whether the media in Kenya is really using its potential in mobilizing

the people to bring various authorities to account for their policies and actions. Is the media helping in the demand for better governance and the development of democracy?

### **The Public Sphere**

The public sphere has been conceptualized differently over time. Early public sphere theorists like Arendt, Dewey and Habermas conceived it “in a local/national context” (Crack, 2008: 16). Over time, due to the growth of cross-border communication, ably fueled by the developments in the media and ICT, there has evolved a possibility of what has been referred to as transnational public spheres. “State-based public sphere theory has developed on the basis of a direct relationship between a sovereign political authority and the public opinion of the citizenry” (Crack 2008: 17). In this context, those involved share a common identity. In the wider transnational arena, the situation is different. One significant difference being that, whereas the transnational notion of the public sphere operates largely in a virtual space, the territorial nation-state sphere has the advantage of the physical space.

While Crack (2008) posits that Habermasian public sphere theory has many flaws, she admits that the principal authoritative source on the subject is Jurgen Habermas’ seminal work: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1999). Habermas defines public sphere as:

A realm of free and open discussion, oriented toward consensus, where the merit of argument determines outcomes rather than the socioeconomic status of participants (Crack, 2008: 25).

Public spheres are meant to be as inclusive as possible, with anyone being able to join the debate. As such, in a political public sphere, private people come together, and as a public they form a public opinion on issues of governance. The formed opinion is then addressed to the sovereign power.

Habermas (1999) argues that, among the literate bourgeois, the public sphere emerged in the salons and coffeehouses of eighteenth-century Europe. This he described as “a realm of informed and reasoned debate, where government policies were scrutinized and arguments and opinions rationally discussed.” (Crack, 2008:26). Obviously the public sphere is not a preserve of Europe.

Therefore, while that may have been the case in Europe, different scenarios obtained in other societies. Poor rural communities did not have salons and coffeehouses, but they still had a mechanism in which their people discussed the affairs and actions of those in authority. Their public space may as well have been open grounds in the village where they met after work to discuss issues of concern to all of them. In this context, the public sphere developed separate from the state or any other institutions of authority, for example, kingdoms, chiefdoms etc. As such, it was able to give citizens some sort of empowerment.

The emergence of the public sphere was thus preconditioned on the following: separation from authority; ability to communicate, and adherence to the norms of publicity. While the public sphere was noted to have immense emancipatory significance, over time, several organizations with competing interests are trying to outdo each other in manipulating policy making. As a result, public debate has largely been distorted with public opinion being manufactured.

Crack (2008) sees the public sphere as an important arena in which different people can participate in governance, with one of its main advantages being the possibility it creates for equitable involvement of many.

In a public sphere, each participant can air his/her concerns and they are prepared to listen and engage with the concerns of others. The outcome of debate will reflect general concord, rather than the power differentials between participants (Crack 2008: 15).

It has also been acknowledged that in such a scenario, it is the merit of the argument that is supposed to be significant and not the social and economic standing of those involved. It is, however, debatable whether that is often the truth. It would appear that the socio-economic status of those involved still plays a major role in shaping discussions. Nevertheless, it provides an important platform to identify problems, discuss them and offer suggestions on remedial measures.

Habermas' view of the public sphere has come under a lot of criticism. He is accused of idealizing the bourgeois public sphere, which was exclusionist along gender and class lines. He is

also said to have exaggerated the extent of free debate (Crack, 2008). Besides the bourgeois public sphere, others developed, for example the nineteenth-century North American women access to the public sphere when suffrage extended only to men; as well as the nationalist, proletariat and peasant publics. Several people, including Fraser (1992), quoted in Crack (2008:34) have argued that a multiplicity of publics is better than a single one advocated by Habermas. Since, the single public always leads to exclusions, the development of counter publics is necessary to ensure that mainstream discourse does not dominate the minority marginalized groups.

Habermas' distinction of the public and private, with claims that the private need not intrude on the public as sectional interests would distort public opinion has come under a lot of criticism too. This dichotomy has been noted to be a tool for oppressing women by labeling domestic issues, including marital rape and violence as private (Landes, 1998 and McLaughlin, 1993). With regard to the economy, the same dichotomy has silenced the proletariat to the advantage of the bourgeois class (Negt and Kluge, 1993).

It has been argued, and rightly so we think, that recent developments in technology and cross-border communication have rendered Habermas' insistence on the state in discussing the public sphere untenable. With transitional social movements operating globally, the state is no longer that central to public sphere theory. Crack (2008:38) says:

A public sphere describes a mode of discursive engagement in relation to political authority, rather than a bounded geographic space. It is erroneous to assume that a prerequisite for norms of publicity is geographical proximity per se, rather what is required is a correspondence between deliberative spaces and sites of authority.

Crack (2008:40) has discussed Habermas' later writings in which he has revisited his views in light of the criticism that has been directed at his public sphere theory. For one, he acknowledged the critique of the singular sphere model by talking about the "universal public sphere" and the "pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public". His more inclusive definition of the public is one where, "its institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and non-

economic...voluntary associations that anchor the communications structure of the public sphere" (Habermas, 1992b: 366, quoted in Crack, 2008:40).

As a result of the continued development of global governance structures, many scholars have started to take the notion of transnational spheres seriously. Crack (2008) has used the term "extraterritorial public spheres" to refer to the public sphere beyond nation-states. She has also faulted the following definition of "transnational public sphere" offered by Guidry et al. (2000)

A space where residents of distinct places (states or localities) and members of transnational entities (organizations or firms) elaborate discourses and practices whose consumption moves beyond national boundaries (Crack, 2008:51)

However, it is Bohman (1998, cited in Crack 2008) who has gone a step further and challenged the current understanding of the public sphere which is Eurocentric. He suggests a more cosmopolitan one which is cognizance of different historical conditions; one that is generalizable and sensitive to different cultural contexts. Following Bohman and Lynch's views, Crack (2008:65) proposes the following definition of a public sphere: "a transnational public sphere can be understood as a site of deliberation in which non-state actors reach understandings about issues of common concern according to the norms of publicity." One noted advantage of this functional definition is that, unlike Habermas' it lacks historical specificity, and it is generalizable, hence takes into account the diverse experiences of non-western cultures. Crack then proceeds to mention three structural preconditions for the emergence of transnational public spheres: transborder communicative capacity (via new media); transformations in sites of political authority (varied global governance structures acting as the addressee/s of public sphere dialogue), and transnational communities of mutual affinity (as with the domestic counterpart, only the basis for mutual affinity would rest on a foundations other than shared territory or national citizenship).

A discussion of the public sphere invariably leads to a mention of civil society. The two are so closely linked that a clear understanding of how they interact is very helpful in carrying out a proper analysis of either of them. According to Friedman (1987) and Habermas (1989), quoted in Douglas, Ho and Ooi (2008: 4), civil society consists of organizations, often

not controlled by the state or the private economy. They see them as the “third” sector that co-exists with government and markets to form the public domain or public sphere. On the other hand, “a public sphere describes a site of free and open discussion between civil society actors” (Habermas, 1999, quoted in Crack, 2008:15). This in essence means that while the public sphere describes the space within which discussions are carried out, civil society deals more with the groups of people involved in those discussions. Civil society organizations, therefore, serve as the institutional means for citizens to monitor, restrict and direct the uses of state and corporate power (Douglas, Ho and Ooi (2008:4).

Although the main purpose of the public sphere was to act as a forum for grassroots political mobilization, Crack (2008: 17-18) is concerned that a number of scholars seem to have shifted this focus to governing institutions. This, she argues, has the danger of turning the back on how the populace can bring political authorities to account. The extent to which civil society has utilized the public sphere to involve many in an attempt to bring authorities to account differs greatly. Some nations have achieved much more, while others have been continuously suppressed by repressive governments.

In Kenya, for instance, it was in the early 1990s, that a growing number of people became engaged in open agitation for multiparty democracy, and more involvement in the management of public affairs. Over time, Kenya has seen a growth of groups and individuals acting as watchdogs, demanding more participation in many civic issues. They have become more expressive and bold, opening political and other issues to the public. As a result, there is more debate on matters that affect people in their daily lives. Commenting on Pacific Asia, Douglas, Ho and Ooi (2008: 3) state:

...alarmed by a growing civil society, the state has responded in many cases to increasing regulation of public spaces, to prevent popular unrest....

To some extent the same has been witnessed in Kenya. Not all in the present government are in support of more citizens’ empowerment. A few of them have actually been heard saying that Kenyans are enjoying too much freedom and something needs to be done to change the situation. The force that met protesters after the rigged 2007 elections in Kenya, for example, was barbaric,

to say the least. There have also been several cases of state intolerance to organized groups demonstrating against unpopular decisions and actions by those in power, for example the controversial sale of the Grand Regency Hotel to Libyan investors. These are indications that there is need to be vigilant since we could easily slip back to the era of open hostility to civil society.

In line with globalization, the current thinking has been towards a transnational public sphere. This has been defined as a site of deliberation in which non-state actors reach understanding about issues of common concern according to the norms of publicity (Crack, 2008: 18). It has been mentioned that an institutional prerequisite for the emergent transnational public spheres is networks of political activists in diverse locals, interlinked by regular ICT. This is already being witnessed in global groups, for example, the women movement, the network of groups working on HIV/AIDS and several others.

### **The Public and Private Sphere Dichotomy**

The distinction between the public and private sphere is one that has not been debated conclusively. While expounding on Habermas' definition of the public sphere, Crack (2008: 25) says that "private utterances can be distinguished from public statements in that the latter are addressed to an indefinite audience, with the expectation of a response." However, the trend we are discussing with regard to media discourse in Kenya seems to be going against that statement. The kind of discourse aired on some programmes in the Kenyan media, is to a large extent private, but is aimed at an indefinite audience, and often expects and elicits responses. It is, in our view, private discourse that has invaded the public sphere. Examples of such discourse will be discussed later in this paper.

There is not a pre-given boundary that demarcates "private" from "public" matters. Neither is there a neutral way of distinguishing between them (Crack, 2008: 35). She further says that the conventional patriarchal division between issues relating to the "public" and the "private" realm is repressive, exclusionary and therefore invalid (Crack, 2008: 46).

Indeed, Benhabib (1992) and Phillips (1998) are of the view that no subject should be considered taboo, hence excluded from public debate. According to them, issues that are commonly seen as private need to be brought to the public domain. To what extent is that tenable, especially when you take into account cultural considerations? Has the Kenyan media actually already taken their advice on this? These are questions that still require more exploration.

One group of scholars that has long been preoccupied with the private and public dichotomy is that of feminists. As described by Baron and Past (2005), different schools of thought within the feminist movement have different positions on the subject. Liberal feminists, with their emphasis on human rights, urge governments to intervene in the private sphere in order to protect these rights; Independent feminists would like minimal interference since they believe in individual freedoms; Marxist feminists believe that women oppression is a result of both class and gender, and hold that the separation of the private and public has resulted in society undervaluing women's concerns. Eco-feminists see the private and public divide as one that permits the male culture, which is dominant, to neglect female issues and label them as private concerns. Intersectional feminists would like a new look at the private and public division so that the state can intervene in cases of rights' abuses. While there are differences in their conceptualization of the private/public division, it is clear that all of them approach it by looking at what it portends for women's concerns. Baron and Past (2005:9) seem to conclude that the divide has, for very long, "been detrimental to women's rights by excluding women, since ancient Greek times, from the public domain, and public discourse." Obviously a lot has changed and women are more visible in public, but a lot more need to be done to give them even a bigger presence.

The discussion they present in their paper appears to suggest that the personal should be considered private and that the state should regulate the private. Although it is easy to see how the personal can be seen as being private, it is difficult to advocate for the state to regulate the private. At what stage does the state stop? What then becomes of the individual freedoms which we are meant to enjoy without big brother looking down on us? The state should regulate the public sphere and not the private. It should, in fact, put down measure to ensure that the public sphere is not bombarded with the personal and therefore private issues.

## **The Media, Public and Private Spheres**

In the current global world order, power appears to be vested on a few individuals referred to as a ‘transnational elite’ and transnational corporations (TNCs). Crack (2008: 1), quotes Herman and Chomsky (1988) who argue that:

...this hegemony is partly sustained by the “manufacturing of consent” amongst citizens by a handful of global media conglomerates...

According to Crack (2008: 2):

The twin developments of digital convergence and deregulation have facilitated the emergence of an oligopolistic global media, with unprecedented reach, and with negative consequences for diversity of expression.

With liberalization and deregulation, the world has witnessed unprecedented growth in the media. Over time, privatization and commercialization has seen a rise of major media houses, while at the same time signaling the decline of public broadcasting corporations. In the resultant environment, it is only a few big corporations, for example the BBC that will be able to expand in the commercial sector while retaining public broadcasting services at the same time.

These media have become so powerful. They set the trends in many respects. They shape, change and manipulate people’s views and positions on many things. As a result of the prevailing unequal relationship between the developed and the developing world, the global media houses have continued to determine the path that local media in poor countries follow. However, aware of the resentment of international media in certain societies, mainly because of the cultural differences and inappropriateness of some of the content carried, a trend of regionalization and localization of content is being witnessed. This is aimed at suiting the cultural priorities of different audiences. Robertson (1992) has called this phenomenon “glocalization, a term that describes how Northern Media adapt using new media to appeal to local languages, styles, and cultural conventions” (Crack, 2008”73). Perhaps this practice is best exemplified by the use of regional lingua franca like Swahili by international corporations, for example BBC, VOA and DW radio to broadcast in East and Central Africa. Besides opening their own FM stations in

different countries, they also enter into partnerships with local stations that air some of their programmes.

On the media and the public sphere, Habermas was of the opinion that contemporary media would promote political apathy and lead to the decline of the public sphere. However, others have argued the contrary. New media, especially ICT has instead been seen as “an agent of democratization. It can enhance transparency and accountability, and help to recast the power balance between citizens and decision-makers.” (Crack, 2008: 36). In order for media to be able to play that role, a few issues need to be taken into account. Local situations need to be considered, the content of the media carefully selected, and a good blend of the global and local sought.

How does Habermas’ fear play out today in the internet scenario? With the phenomenal growth of the internet as a source of news and other information, especially among the youth, the global media conglomerates have also changed tact. For instance, rather than rely on the traditional newspapers to deliver news, many are having an increased presence online. In fact, it would appear that corporate dominance is already a reality in the internet; something that makes some fear the internet’s public sphere potential may be in jeopardy. This is particularly the case when you consider the effects of commercialization of the internet. With rising “pop-up” adverts and a daily attack of “spam” emails, many are likely to participate less in online discussions. This obviously runs counter to the notion that the development of the media would provide a good platform for increased transnational public sphere discourse. Besides, many of those who are likely to shy away have an even bigger fear hinged on privacy and security concerns. We do not think that this will lead to a decline of the public sphere, but we agree that it may reduce the impact that the internet would otherwise have had on the public sphere.

### **The Kenyan Situation**

Freedom of speech and assembly are among the many rights that citizens expect from their respective governments. Often the media plays a major role in the quest to ensure these rights are enjoyed by the populace. In the Kenyan context, these rights have not been easily enjoyed. For a long time the Kenyan government closely controlled its citizens, often dispersing those

attempting to assemble to discuss issues affecting them. There were several instances of media and government conflicts stemming from what the latter thought were bad media practices.

When the Narc government came to power in 2003, after the end of 24 years of KANU rule under Moi, it established itself as a government that was more tolerant to the media. The media were freer to comment on various aspects of the administration, including open criticism of the state. Indeed Kenyans felt that they got their voices back for it was generally easier to assemble and associate without looking around to see if security forces are on the look out. The nice times were not very long lasting since a few people who were uncomfortable with the vibrant public discussions on many issues became worried and made an attempt to gag the media. A case in point was the raid, by security forces and paid mercenaries, on the *Standard* Newspaper's printing press on the pretext that they were about to role out an article that was a threat to the nation's security. Still, the media are clearly better off in the current political dispensation than they were in the previous regimes.

Douglas (2008: 27) has mentioned the shift from public to private ownership and control as one of the many consequences of the logic of global accumulation. He also laments that the community and cultural spaces have been converted into "simulated 'world city' spaces for global service functions and localized segments of transnational value-added chains." The media sector is one sector in which these are very evident. Most of the media houses are in private ownership. More significant, though, is the fact that global influences are increasingly visible in the local media. The programming is largely foreign; the programmes are largely modeled on international media. With regard to the content, as we shall show shortly, most information is quite divorced from the local cultural systems. The private has become a very ubiquitous feature in the media, especially in the radio stations. The African cultural fabric is greatly threatened as issues which would have otherwise been considered taboo are being aired on radio.

In comparison to her neighbors, especially Uganda, Kenya lagged behind in the liberalization of the airwaves. In fact, the same was the case with regard to the mobile telephone industry. However, once the liberalization bug hit the country, and private players were allowed to invest in radio and television broadcasts, the growth has been rapid. Current estimates put the number of

FM radio stations at 70; with information that several others are at different stages of the application process. This explosion has led to very fierce competition among the players. In such an environment, laxity can't be entertained. Rather, a high degree of innovation and creativity is demanded so as to remain relevant in the sector. The consequence has been an introduction of many programmes in order to ensure that one has a share of the market. Unfortunately, a number of those programmes appear not to take the local cultural set up into consideration. We have ended up with programmes whose main thrust has been borrowed from the west, and which make certain segments of the society very uncomfortable. These are mainly discussion programmes, which in our view, bring to the public things that are largely private and need not be brought to the public. This is an attempt to invade the public with private discourse. Below are examples of such discussions.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, 2008, Easy FM, a popular radio station owned by the Nation Media group had an early morning discussion programme led by Shiko. In this particular programme, a lady is called up and asked why she is mistreating her boyfriend (cheating on him and planning to leave him). In response she says, rather hesitantly, that he has only one testicle, and she is uncomfortable with that fact. The presenter makes a joke of the whole situation and says she too can't sleep with such a man and then invites listeners to contribute and give their views. Somewhere in the discussion, the accused lady says "ana mboror moja" (he has one penis). Obviously this is a clear case of mistaking the two, testicles and penis, but significant for me, is the fact that in the African context, those are body organs which we do not mention as we please in public. The man was called and given an opportunity to defend himself, and he insisted that he has two testicles and is in perfect order. Many listeners called in or sent short text messages to give their views, and an overwhelming 99% castigated the presenter saying she was very wrong to hold that she can't sleep with such a man. It is also worth mentioning that there were some who said those are sensitive issues that need not be discussed openly. Honestly, I did not see the value in discussing such an issue on national radio at 8am in the morning.

On 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2008, I was riding a *matatu* (small and medium sized public transport vehicles in Kenya), when I heard another discussion on Classic 105 FM broadcasting from Nairobi. A lady called in complaining about a boyfriend, who she had since left, stating why that happened

and advising her female friends to be ready to move on when a man in their lives “misbehaves”. In her case, the boyfriend booked a room in a hotel but sneaked out to go have fun with her girlfriend in a different room. Unfortunately for him, he was spotted entering the other lady’s room and his girlfriend was informed. On being confronted with the facts he refused but the girl did accept and ask for forgiveness. As a result, the caller says she has moved on and has resisted the man’s attempts to talk her back to the affair. The lady hosting the show was elated, calling the caller a heroine and an inspiration to other girls. While I am not advocating for cheating on one’s lover or spouse, I wonder what would happen if all jilted lovers were to pour their frustrations and triumphs on radio for all to hear.

While traveling in a *matatu* from Nairobi to Western Kenya on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 2008, I sat in front with the driver and one other passenger. At some point we got into a discussion on radio programmes. This happened since we kept on changing stations, either looking for news, music or other specific programmes. The driver was elderly whereas the other passenger was a young man. Surprisingly, he concurred with me and the driver that some stations have indeed gone too far and are very insensitive culturally. He went ahead to mention that there are certain stations he can’t listen to in the presence of his parents and other older people. Given his age, I would have expected him to argue in favour of such programmes but he clearly felt that it is a foreign concept which has no roots whatsoever in our culture.

Perhaps even more annoying to some are the late- night radio programmes. These are bolder and more direct in their approach. They include *Ithaa Ria kwibanga* (a time to get organized) by Kameme FM and *Hutia Mundu* (touch someone) of Inooro FM. Other stations that are popular for such shows include, Easy FM, Kiss FM, Classic FM, and Radio Citizen. These and similar programmes dwell mainly on relationship issues, offering advice to callers who offer to share their experiences to listeners. They are not entirely negative since they offer good advice. One Nairobi resident was quoted in an article, “Love and lunacy on late-night radio”, published by the *Sunday Standard*, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008 admitting that *Hutia Mundu* has assisted her marriage immensely. However, she cautions that it is best to keep children away because the programmes’s content is very explicit. It is good to note that the presenters always warn listeners to ensure that children are out of the way. The only worry, though, is that children will always

find time when their parents are not around to tune in to such programmes. We feel that 10pm is still too early for such programmes.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2007 in Radio Citizen's *Wasaa wa Gumzo* (Talk time), a lady called and complained about her husband who comes home with lipstick on his clothes, and a smell of perfume. He also receives telephone calls which he responds to in private, away from the wife. She suspects that he is being unfaithful and asks for advice. A caller tells her that is no proof that the husband is going anywhere. She further tells her that is normal and a man who does not do that may be having a problem. A number of short text messages are also sent with different views. She is advised to do likewise since tit for tat is a fair game; to love him more; persevere and pretend nothing is wrong. One message begs her not to mess up her marriage because of hear say. She is also accused of not giving him enough love. The presenter finally says that certain short text messages sent in can not be read on air because of what they contain.

While some people complain about the content of such programmes, the listener who said *Hutia Mundu* has helped her marriage asserts that she sees nothing wrong or immoral in discussing bedroom and other family issues on radio. The other side of the divide is made up of those opposed to the programmes. These mainly include the religious and those who value African culture. Consider this view by someone from the newspaper article mentioned above:

Many late night shows on some of our FM stations are stage-managed. The presenters imaginatively cook relationship problems and then invite callers to participate in addressing the topic as if it was raised by genuine callers. The end result is a confusing show with all manner of participants.

Yet others feel that they are a source of family conflicts because of the bitter exchanges between men and women which are witnessed at times. On extramarital affairs, a rather popular topic, the confessions that people make have been referred to as being "juicy" by some and "disgusting" by others. What is clear is the fact that there are programmes considered to be good and those that are said to be bad. Some are described as being helpful in shaping relationships and assisting people through their troubled periods by learning from others; a number of them are outright annoying. They glorify sex and infidelity. A commentator said that such programmes add no value to family life. Rather, they encourage unfaithfulness and disrespect in relationships.

Consider the following scenario. A caller says he has three girlfriends and can't decide which one to propose to. Three different advices were offered by fellow listeners: marry the most beautiful, marry the one who knows how to love the most, and marry all of them since African customs allow polygamy. In the *Sunday Standard* article referred to above, someone asked whether that is the advice that people should expect from national radio. In conclusion, the article states that "the programmes are sometimes educative, and sometimes sleazy."

In trying to understand why there is so much private discourse in the public space, we may need to take a look at the general management of the public sphere in Kenya. To what extent is the public space available for people to air their feelings and views? While it has been noted that the post KANU government in Kenya opened up civic space more and people were free to engage in public affairs, it is also true that after a short while there was a closer scrutiny from the state on the use of such freedom. We have had several instances of civil society organizations being chased from public places by the police and other security agents while engaged in peaceful assembly to discuss or demonstrate against certain issues. On occasion, excessive force has been utilized and arrests made. This is in line with the warning given by Douglas (2008) that "authoritarian regimes typically control parks and other public spaces in which political rallies are orchestrated by the state." It is his conclusion that both locally and globally, civic spaces are being enclosed and are constantly under surveillance. As such, civic and public life is not as inclusive as it should be. He further laments that consumerism has meant that cultural and social energies are directed towards global name brands, with freedom of expression being the key phrase. Is it, therefore, possible that besides western influences, the Kenyan people are using the media to discuss private issues because they are not free to use the public space to discuss issues of concern to the public?

Lefebvre (1991), quoted in Douglas et. al (2008:5) asserts that all social change requires appropriate spaces for its fruition. Providing and giving sustenance to civic spaces is a basic requirement for the promises of genuine citizen participation in governance. The media are a very good arena that provides the said civic space. Through the media, different civic organizations are able to reach out to the populace as they pursue their agenda. The effect is that a wider

audience becomes engaged in the process, get to know what role they can play, and several actually do take action. This leads to more involvement of the masses in the management of public affairs. Has the Kenyan media taken advantage of that role to harness the Kenyan people for development? I do not think that has been done satisfactorily.

While there is a certain degree of intolerance to the civil society's involvement in public affairs, we can't argue that Kenyans do not have freedom to question their leaders on the management of public affairs. We are left to conclude that it is a choice made by the media to concentrate on such programmes, most likely because of competition for audience. There are many important issues that call for attention, and hence need more airtime for the public good. After the post-election violence that was witnessed in Kenya, we needed to focus our attention more on programmes aimed at healing the nation instead of bedroom matters. We would have expected the media to provide a platform for Kenyans to discuss their role and that of the leaders in the mayhem, tracing the historical ethnic divisions that came to the fore during the fighting, and charting a way forward. Other areas of concern include: the quest for a new constitution; the high level of corruption in government; the ever present scandals like the sell of the Grand Regency Hotel in Nairobi, among others. While the media has not completely forgotten about these issues, we feel that they are not being pursued with the same vigor seen in the discussion programmes mentioned above. In view of the important role of the media in development, there is urgent need to refocus their programmes to be in line with the development agenda of the nation at this time.

Crack (2008: 16) says that the public sphere both recommends minimalist universalism and the safeguarding of diversity. However, in the current dispensation, especially with regard to the media, it would appear that the second part is not given much attention. The media seem determined to go for the western (universal) and are increasingly distancing themselves from the local (any diversity that would give the local much chance.). In fact, even in the wider political and social discourse out of the media, the trend appears more to be one of attaining some sort of universalism.

It is true that there is so much interaction globally, and societies keep influencing each other. However, such interaction does not mean a complete disregard for cultural practices that are still

considered central and helpful in defining us as Africans. We can't afford to throw our culture through the window simply because we want to behave like the west does. The public space should be respected as such and the private issues kept out as much as possible. Those that are brought to the public arena should be those that have value for the public.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the concept of the public sphere, and the way it has been viewed over time. Due to its significance in society, the public sphere has been a subject of a lot of debate. In many states, it has not been allowed to thrive without regulation and interference from the authorities. It is meant, among others, to connect the public opinion with those in authority but more often than not, the latter fear a vibrant public sphere. It has also been shown that the private/public dichotomy is not as clear cut as it sounds. Some, especially those in the feminist movement, see the division as one factor that has led to the continued exclusion of women from the public sphere and relegation to the private. We feel that the division is much more than that, and it is not in any way confined more to the gender relations in society. The role of the media in the use and management of the public sphere is analysed, and it is clear that it has a very big role to play in ensuring that the public sphere's potential is realized as society strives for faster development. However, the Kenyan media stands accused of dwelling more on what is more private, hence likely to contribute little, if anything towards a nation's development. It would be more helpful to the Kenyan people, if the public sphere, aided by the media was utilised more meaningfully.

While privatization of the media has greatly opened up the sector to more players, leading to many employment opportunities, and while we do not advocate for tight government control of the media, it is necessary to have a clearer policy on what is aired on our media. Such a policy seems to be more urgent for the radio sub- industry. If the media houses can't regulate themselves we may have to call for government intervention. Competition in the industry, and the freedom to express oneself should not be an excuse for open disregard of our culture. Radio content should be one that educates, entertains and informs while building society and not one that brings discontent among sections of the populace.

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