

**WHAT WAS
THE ROLE OF
THE DEBATE
PROGRAMME SEMA
KENYA IN THE 2013
KENYAN ELECTION?**

What was the role of the debate programme *Sema Kenya* in the 2013 Kenyan election?

This research briefing summarises findings from BBC Media Action's research into that question, which focused on the impact of *Sema Kenya*, our national radio and television debate programme in Kenya. The research also considered the overall role of the Kenyan media in the 2013 election. It draws primarily on in-depth interviews with a panel of 17 experts in governance and media, and 24 audience members, as well as a nationally representative survey of 3,006 Kenyan adults.

Kenya's 2013 general elections resulted in a mostly peaceful, but not unchallenged, handover of power to newly elected and re-elected officials. This was in sharp contrast to the aftermath of the country's 2007 elections, when election-related violence drove an estimated half a million people from their homes and left over 1,000 dead.

Within this context, our research has shown that Kenyans depended on the media for election information in 2013, particularly for explaining election procedures and providing details on candidates. However, coverage was also criticised for lacking depth. The research also reveals that the Kenya election saw a conflict in media responsibilities. This was between promoting peace and acting as a watchdog and guardian of public interest to expose wrong-doings and failures around election time.

Both experts and audiences believed that *Sema Kenya* explored issues in more depth and broached sensitive subjects more readily than other media

sources. By providing a platform for dialogue, in which citizens were visibly empowered to question, the programme also went some way to supporting individuals to hold government officials to account.

In addition, *Sema Kenya* showed diverse groups of listeners and viewers what they had in common by discussing issues of shared interest from locations across the country. This could potentially support greater understanding between people who consider themselves to be different from each other.

Creating a national conversation

Sema Kenya, a panel discussion programme led by questions from a live audience, was launched in 2012 and is moderated by a skilled presenter, Joseph Warungu. Each episode is recorded in Swahili, Kenya's national language, and it is broadcast in collaboration with BBC Swahili service, KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) and a range of other local and national radio stations. In the first season, the television broadcast partner was KTN. Dialogue and discussion between audience members and leaders from different parts of the country ensure the programme is relevant to a wide range of people. Diverse groups and viewpoints are represented and opposing views are discussed.

In its first season, *Sema Kenya* was broadcast weekly from locations in 13 different counties, ending on 31 March 2013 and thus coinciding with the period immediately before and after the 4 March elections. Since it was not strictly an election programme, *Sema Kenya* could tackle local and

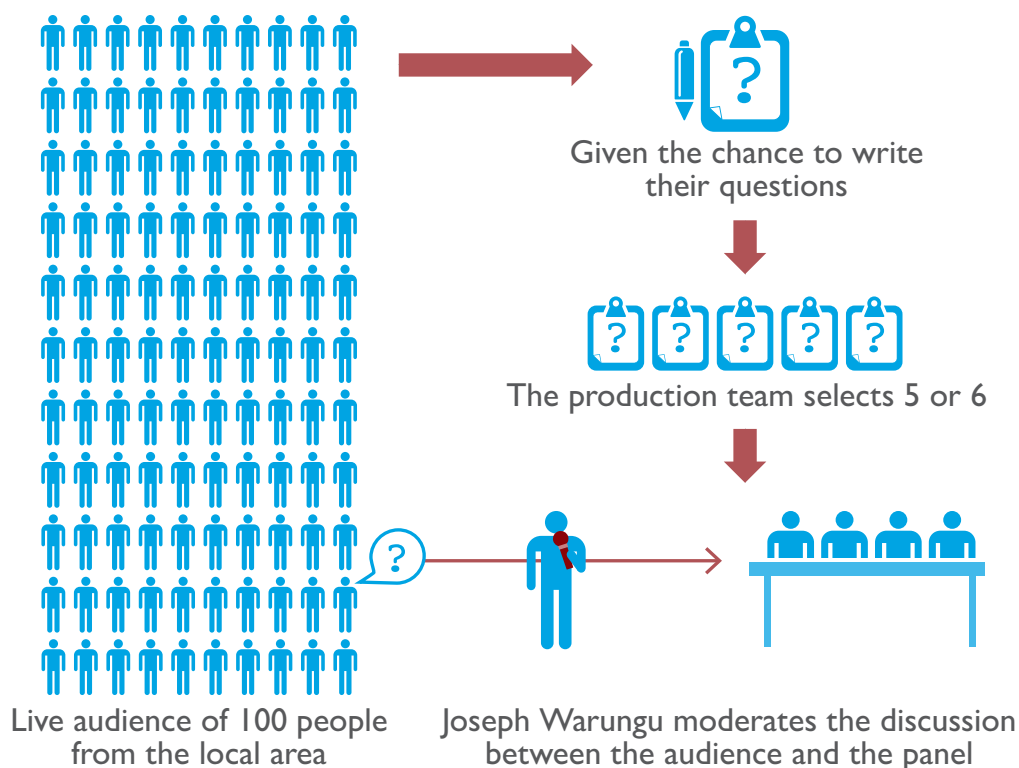
national governance issues and present a diversity of views and dialogue while the rest of Kenya's media stayed narrowly focused on the election. It addressed issues ranging from public security and unemployment to ethnicity, devolution and land reform, and sensitive subjects such as women's rights and alcoholism.

Sema Kenya is based on the premise that media and communication can help societies to negotiate difference. It can do this by creating public platforms for dialogue that can support inclusive political actions, as opposed to violence. Where geography, poverty and lack of infrastructure make face-to-face interaction between disparate communities difficult, media can play a vital role in connecting these groups and in national debates on governance.

Sema Kenya was designed to:

- Create a national conversation to help to rebuild trust in the democratic process in Kenya
- Play an “inform and educate” role, by improving audiences’ access to reliable, trustworthy information and increasing their knowledge on the new constitution, the implications of devolution and the electoral process
- Increase the diversity of views in public debates in ways that inform national and community discourse rather than incite hostility among communities

Sema Kenya's approach to dialogue and debate



Sema Kenya audience members submit questions for the panel to address. The production team then choose a number of people to question the panel, which consists of four local leaders and decision-makers who do not know in advance what they will be asked.

The Kenyan media during the 2013 election

The 2007 Kenya election and its aftermath had a significant impact on the way in which the media approached the 2013 election. Analysis following the 2007 election highlighted the role of some sections of the media in inciting the ensuing violence. One of the four Kenyans indicted before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes during the post-election violence is a media practitioner. In contrast, our research found that in 2013 the media responded to pressure from authorities, from within the media sector itself and from citizens to support a peace agenda, which resulted in considerable self-censorship.

Media and governance experts in our study described the media at this time as “very cautious”, “very restrained”, “careful”, “reticent” or “hesitant”, and some even spoke of “the tyranny of peace” and “the peace lobotomy”. Both the media and governance experts and many audience members we interviewed

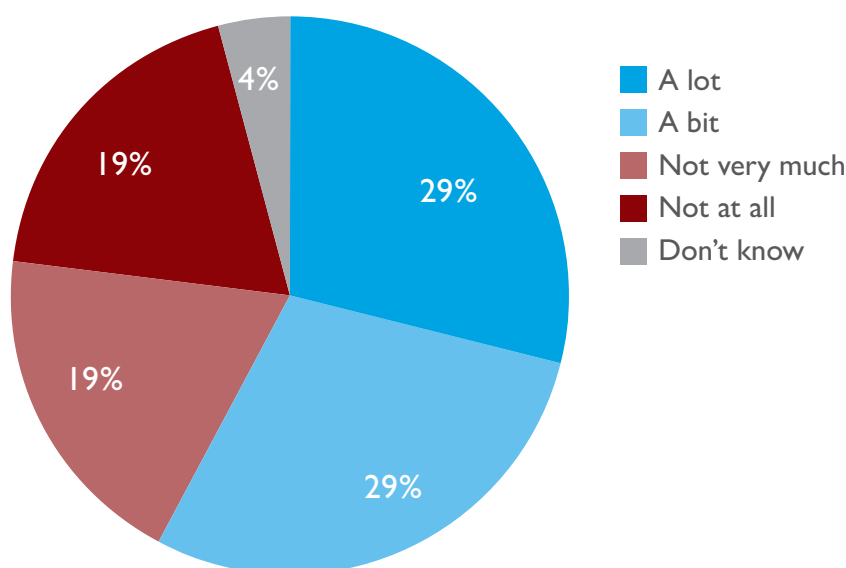
said this resulted in the media’s abdication of its responsibility to interrogate issues fully and challenge leaders. During this period it was accused of failing to expose wrong-doing and neglecting to support citizens to sanction their leaders. This is notable because the Kenyan media has a reputation for being vibrant and assertive in its role as the “fourth estate”, contributing significantly to the introduction of multi-party politics in 1992 and regime change in 2002.

Our research has shown that Kenyans relied on the media for information during the elections in 2013 and it influenced decisions on how to vote. They felt that coverage was helpful, particularly in explaining election procedures and candidates’ positions.

The peace agenda superseded and engulfed anything else that was at play during the electoral season.

Governance expert

Extent to which information and debate in the media influence decisions on whom to vote for



Base: Respondents who voted in the 2013 election (2,349)

The media successfully educated voters but coverage lacked depth

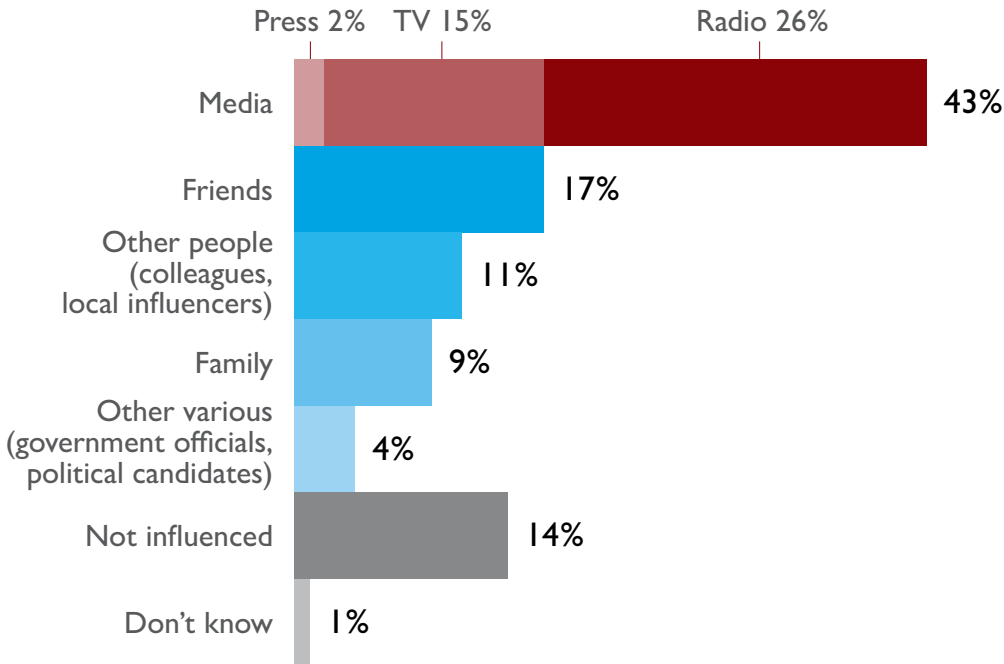
Research also showed that 90% of Kenyan adults agreed, in general, that the media informed and educated people on their rights and responsibilities. In addition, 43% of Kenyans reported that media and communication (radio, TV, press, mobile phones and the internet) was their main source of information when deciding whom to vote for during the 2013 election. Radio came top, with one in four (26%) reporting that this was their main source of information, before friends, family and colleagues. With a vibrant local radio landscape in Kenya, radio provides more coverage than any other type of media.

While experts believed that the media did support the public by providing detailed information on the electoral process and pertinent issues, they also felt that media in general had not dealt with issues in enough depth and that there was over-emphasis on personality politics rather than a critical analysis of issues. Other experts noted media's possible failure to serve all segments of the population and criticised the technical language around the election and constitution used in some TV and radio programmes.

I think Sema Kenya stood on its own because it took the media to the people. It discussed very salient issues that the other media did not.

Governance expert

Main source of information when deciding which candidates or party to vote for during the election



Base: Respondents who voted in the 2013 election (2,349)

Sema Kenya: nearly a quarter of Kenyans watch or listen

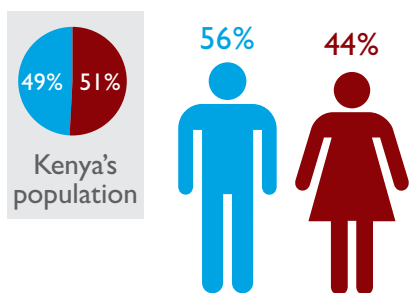
By July 2013, research showed that 23% of Kenyan adults had watched or listened to *Sema Kenya* since its launch in October 2012. This amounts to an estimated 5.7 million people across the country, and more than two million adults reported watching or listening to the programme regularly (at least every other episode). *Sema Kenya's* audience largely reflects the country's population.

There is somebody like me and you ... When you watch, it kind of inspires you to want to be like this other person ... It makes you ask yourself – if this person is participating, why am I not participating? – because most of the time people don't participate because they feel the political process is for the elites.

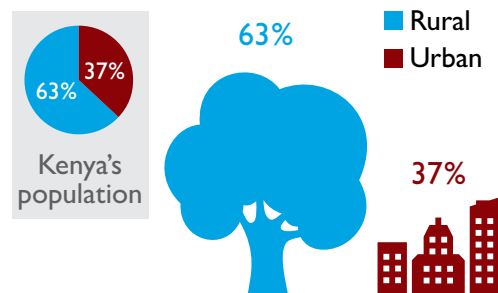
Man, Nairobi

Sema Kenya audience profile

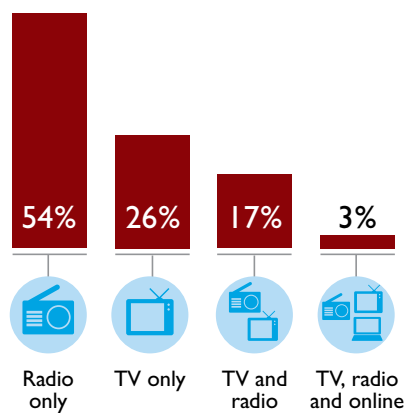
Who watches Sema Kenya?



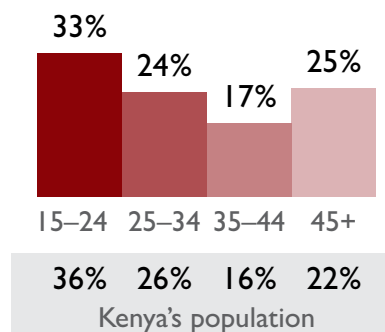
Where audience members live



How people access Sema Kenya



Audience members' ages



Base: Regular *Sema Kenya* viewers and listeners (280) | Profile of all Kenyan adults highlighted in grey (source: 2009 census)

Key findings

Sema Kenya played a distinctive role in informing and educating voters

Both experts and audiences identified *Sema Kenya* as differing from other media in its coverage of sensitive issues. Our findings include:

- Audience involvement may have contributed to people feeling they had more of a stake in the process and a responsibility to fulfil their role in elections
- *Sema Kenya* gained credibility because people discussed the issues that affected them directly – information was seen to be reliable because it was “coming from people’s mouths”
- People noted that very diverse live audiences (in age, gender and ethnicity) were brought together in constructive dialogue, which can support peace and inclusion
- The programme increased awareness of an individual’s right to question and may have increased their confidence to question those in power
- *Sema Kenya*’s audience frequently describe it as “informative” and “educative”, reinforcing the value they placed on its educational content, while experts described the programme’s role as one of “sensitisation”

Supporting accountability

Research participants highlighted two ways in which *Sema Kenya* helped to build understanding of how to take action. First, the programme itself provided a way for Kenyans to question their leaders, underlining the media’s role in helping to facilitate public questioning. Second, it gave citizens the information to help them exercise their right to ask questions. In the words of one woman, “I learned that at least Kenyans can be given a chance to air their views and nothing can be done to them, [it is their] democratic right to talk without fear.”

A number of people said that it helped them to understand how to sanction leaders by not re-electing them. Some also described how *Sema Kenya* can hold leaders to account by putting their promises on record and highlighting when they are not met, as well as by staging discussion about this. Such accountability is vital for good governance, and supporting it is a programme goal.

However, questions remain about how far such a programme can foster accountability and hold to account under-performing leaders. Data explored here focuses on the impact of *Sema Kenya* on individual audience members. As yet, there is little evidence of *Sema Kenya*’s impact beyond this. This will be revisited in subsequent research to understand fully the wider and long-term impact of the programme.

Implications

Not being solely an election programme, *Sema Kenya* could tackle local and national governance issues at a time when the rest of the media maintained a narrow election focus. This made a contribution during the election period, and could have an impact on accountability in the longer term.

No media, including *Sema Kenya*, can follow up on issues as thoroughly as research participants said they would like. To support such follow-up, the programme could encourage audiences to act outside it to demand action from leaders, and work with other partners who can pick up the call for accountability at the local level.

Contributing to the evidence base

BBC Media Action uses our Bridging Theory and Practice series to share our evidence and learning on what works in measuring and understanding media and development interventions. This series is designed for all policy-makers, practitioners and researchers with an interest in evidence-based decision-making. This research briefing was prepared thanks to funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

Media and audience research: a key part of BBC Media Action's work

BBC Media Action, the international development organisation of the BBC, uses the power of media and communication to support people to shape their own lives. Working with broadcasters, governments, other organisations and donors, we provide information and stimulate positive change in the areas of health, governance, resilience and humanitarian response. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) supports us to work with the media in 14 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and we have projects in more than 25 countries overall. This research briefing was prepared thanks to DFID funding.

This project will contribute to state–society relations and support the empowerment of individuals to hold their government to account. Using research, evaluation and learning reviews, it also aims to contribute to the evidence base on the role of media and communication in development.

Acknowledgements

This research briefing summarises the findings of a BBC Media Action research report, What was the role of the debate programme Sema Kenya (Kenya Speaks) in the Kenyan election 2013? It was written by Angela Githitho Muriithi and Georgina Page. To read more, and for information on the technical aspects of this research, please visit: www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publicationsandpress/research.html.

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Registered office: Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA, United Kingdom

