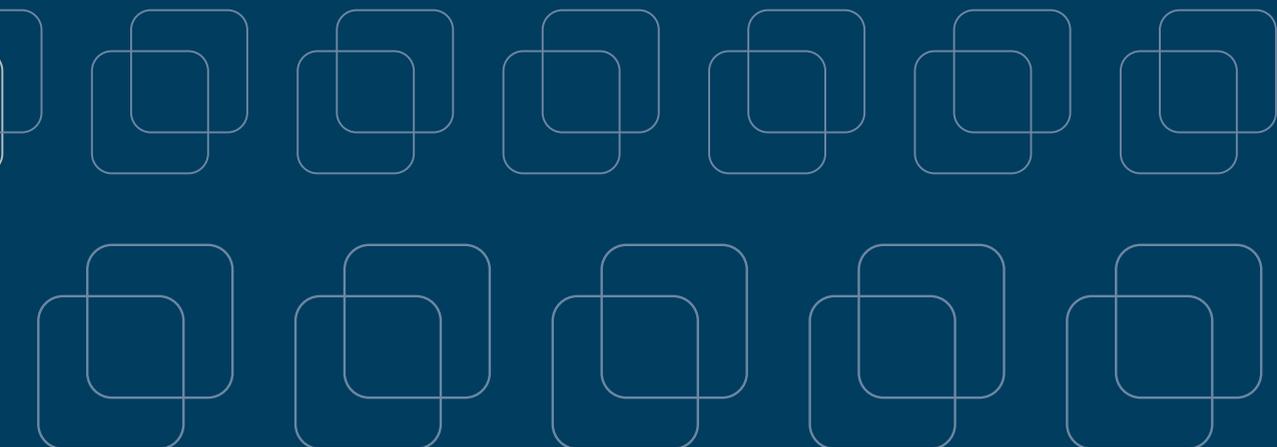


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# World of Media

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**Issue 2, 2020**



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# **LEAD ARTICLE**

# Faceless: The visual representation of overweight people in Flemish and Dutch online newspapers

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## Abstract

We conducted a quantitative visual content analysis to examine how overweight and obese people are portrayed in online newspaper photos in the Netherlands and Flanders compared to non-overweight individuals. Overall, we found that 68% of the obese/overweight people were depicted in a stigmatizing way. Their heads were more likely to be cut out of the image, they were more often dressed sloppily and more frequently portrayed with only their lower body in comparison with non-overweight people. Furthermore, overweight people were more often associated with passive behavior and portrayed as patients in a medical environment. Tabloids were found less likely to publish stigmatizing images than broadsheets as they used more often photos supplied by the subjects themselves.

## Keywords

Content analysis, Dutch-language newspapers, obesity, overweight, stigmatization, visual representation.

## Introduction

The worldwide prevalence of obesity has increased significantly throughout the past decades. According to The World Health Organization obesity-rates tripled between 1975 and 2016 (WHO, 2018). The so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ resulted in a rise of media coverage on the subject as well. In the USA, for example, media attention for obesity has quintupled between 1985 and 2003 (Lawrence, 2004). In Australian newspapers, an even sharper increase in attention was

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observed between 1996 and 2006 (Bonfiglioli et al., 2007). UK newspapers follow the trend, as researched from 1996 to 2010 (Hilton et al., 2012). Statistic data regarding media coverage of obesity in the Netherlands and Flanders are currently lacking.

Previous research shows that media mainly explain obesity in terms of individual responsibility with gaining weight as the result of eating too much and exercising too little (Bonfiglioli et al., 2007; Flint et al., 2016; Kim & Willis, 2007; Lawrence, 2004) while in reality there is a complicated relationship between genetics and (obesogenic) environments that both have an influence on gaining weight (Barsh et al., 2000; Caballero, 2007; Hill et al., 2005; Townshend & Lake, 2009). In virtually all forms of media from commercials, films and drama series over children's television to news reports and newspapers, biological and social factors are often neglected (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). In television comedies (Fouts & Burggraf, 1999), animated cartoons (Klein & Shiffman, 2006) and television shows and movies (Himes & Thompson, 2007) the thin ideal is persistent. The media's primary focus on the thin ideal and its negative stereotypes about overweight is commonly referred to as the 'weight bias of the media'.

Studies on newspaper articles show that there is some progress in media reporting on obesity. The frame of individual responsibility, however, remains dominant. Nathalie Boero (2007), for example, examined 751 *New York Times*' articles between 1990 and 2001. She demonstrates that obesity is mainly explained in line with the prevailing cultural ideas. Therefore, having overweight is described as an individual problem with weight gain the result of a person's own behavioral decisions. Helena Sandberg (2007) drew similar conclusions. She analysed 1925 articles published in four Swedish newspapers and found that overweight individuals were often described as lazy, greedy and irresponsible. Weight stigmatization and portrayal of overweight as a moral digression was found in the British press by Flint et al. (2016). The longitudinal study of Lawrence (2004) shows that though the personal responsibility for one's health remains dominant from 1985 till 2003, a gradual reframing takes place in the past two decades with a growing interest in the environmental factors. A similar finding was made by Hilton et al. (2012) in their study on the UK newspapers from 1996 to 2010. They observed a growing interest in societal (instead of individual) solutions to the problem of obesity. This trend is also recognized in media framing of childhood obesity over time, both in UK (Nimegeer et al., 2019) and – to a lesser degree – in Sweden (van Hooft et al., 2017). Other recent studies confirm that there is room for alternative

explanations. Armentia & Marin (2018) show that the Spanish press is paying attention to structural causal factors and scientific and political solutions to the problem of obesity. Atanasova & Koteyko (2017) detected in the German and British online press counter frames such as ‘acceptation’ and ‘coming-out’ next to the still dominant frame of ‘self-control’.

Media representation is important as it influences the public opinions about social problems such as obesity (Frederick et al., 2016). By explaining the causes, effects and solutions to obesity, the media establish the framework within which the topic is discussed. Several studies have shown that the weight bias of the media contributes to anti-fat attitudes, causing a rise in weight-based discrimination experiences which, in turn, work counterproductive when it comes to successfully losing weight (McClure et al., 2011; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Next to the text, weight stigma can be influenced by the published images as well (Hinman et al., 2015; Johnstone & Grant, 2019; McClure et al., 2011). Stereotypical portrayals of (obese) people can have a stigmatizing effect even if the accompanying text is neutral or positive (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Messaris & Abraham, 2001) as readers are less aware of – and therefore less prepared for – the bias that underlies an image (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). Moreover, readers are more likely to remember the non-verbal meanings as opposed to the openly concrete textual ones (Zillman & Brosius, 2000). McClure et al. (2011) observed that people who read a neutral text with a stigmatizing photograph reported a higher weight bias (‘fat phobia’) score compared to those participants who saw only a text or text with a neutral or positive photograph. Seeing a more flattering photo is linked to lower weight bias scores, bringing Pearl et al. (2012) to the conclusion that positive media portrayals of obese people may help reduce weight stigma and even its associated negative health outcomes. Pearl et al. (2015) confirm this conclusion as they observed a null effect of stigmatizing images on motivation to engage in healthy behavior.

To date, just a handful of studies, mainly situated in the United States, examined the *visual* aspect of news coverage of obesity. On the basis of a visual quantitative content analysis Heuer et al., (2011) came to the conclusion that in the American online news media 72% of overweight people are depicted in a stigmatizing way. The focus is on the excessive weight by focusing on scantily clad buttocks and bellies, even leaving the head out of the photo. Obese people are portrayed with inappropriately fitting clothing, or no clothes at all, in a setting where they eat junk food or display passive behavior (Heuer et al., 2011). Patterson & Hilton (2013) made a similar observation in the British press. In

addition to the American study they noticed a mismatch between the portrayed people and the text. With the use of a figure rating scale they concluded that people in the photos were often bigger/fatter than the reader would expect on the basis of the text. Puhl et al. (2013) analysed video content from five US news websites and found that 65% of overweight adults and 77% of overweight youth were portrayed in a negative, stigmatizing manner. Gollust et al. (2012), on the other hand, found that stigmatization in *Time* and *Newsweek* was relatively rare and that stigmatizing depictions were used less over time (from 1984 to 2009). Varava (2016), who also studied portrayal in television news stories, came to a nuanced finding. Overweight people are often shown as an isolated body part, but their portrayal is not entirely stigmatizing (e.g. shown exercising).

In reviewing the literature on media coverage of obesity, a few observations can be made. First, the visual aspect of news coverage of obesity remains largely neglected. This is all even more surprising since studies show the greater impact of visuals on the public compared to texts. Second, framing studies focus mainly on the Anglo-Saxon countries with less attention to European countries. This study wants to contribute to the ‘knowledge gap’ about the situation in the Dutch-speaking part of Europe by examining online newspaper photos of the Flemish and Dutch press. Research questions are: How are overweight people portrayed in the Dutch and Flemish online newspaper stories on obesity (2016-2017) compared to non-overweight people? Can the portrayal of overweight individuals be considered as stigmatizing, and why? What are the differences between the Dutch-language and the American newspapers with regard to the portrayal of overweight people?

## Methods

### Sample

Three newspapers from the Netherlands (*De Volkskrant*, *Het NRC-Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*) and three newspapers from Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (*De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *Het Nieuwsblad*) were selected for this study. *De Telegraaf* and *Het Nieuwsblad* are considered popular driven newspapers (hereafter referred to as the ‘tabloids’), the remaining four newspapers (*De Volkskrant*, *Het NRC-Handelsblad*, *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*) are mainly information driven (hereafter referred to as the ‘broadsheets’). We used the newspapers’ online databases to search for images that were published with articles about obesity by using keywords such as *obesitas* (obesity), *BMI* (body mass index), *overgewicht* (overweight), *afvallen* (losing weight), *dik* (fat), and

*diabetes*. Only the articles that had obesity as their main topic (that is, more than half of the paragraphs were about obesity, or the word ‘obesity’ was mentioned in the headline) and that were published with a photo of one or more persons on it were selected. We excluded recurring columns as they were systematically published with the writers’ portraits as the only image attached. Both web-only articles and online versions of the actual newspapers were included. The six newspaper websites hardly make any distinctions between the two versions. Moreover, people increasingly read their news on online platforms instead of reading the actual paper. By including both web-only photos and the online published newspaper articles, we were able to examine photos from both the online- and offline newsrooms. We selected publications from the two-year period between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2017. We collected in total 272 articles (*NRC-Handelsblad*: 36, *De Standaard*: 39, *De Volkskrant*: 21, *De Morgen*: 56, *De Telegraaf*: 44, *Het Nieuwsblad*: 76). As some articles had more than one image, this yielded a total of 283 photos with 442 persons depicted (*NRC-Handelsblad*: 44, *De Standaard*: 59, *De Volkskrant*: 31, *De Morgen*: 67, *De Telegraaf*: 75, *Het Nieuwsblad*: 166).

## Measurement

To investigate how overweight people are portrayed in the Dutch and Flemish newspapers we coded all the individuals that were clearly depicted in the photos. By including both overweight and non-overweight persons we were able to make a comparison between the two different size categories. When the size of a person could not be determined, the portrait was excluded for further analysis. The 283 images contained in total 442 individuals. Twelve persons were excluded because we were not able to determine their body size. This brings the total number of examined portraits to 430.

For the codebook we relied on the work of Heuer et al. (2011). In their publication they discussed 23 variables ranging from metadata and demographic characteristics to how the body was portrayed, the clothing style and the main roles of activities. We used this list as a basis for our research. The variables in our codebook included:

1. Date of publication
2. Newspaper
3. Genre (news articles, human-interest, science, economy, culture, opinion, interviews)
4. Image credit (press agency, stock photo, social media, journalist, photographer, supplied by subject)

5. Sex (man, woman)
6. Age (child < 18, adult > 18)
7. Body size (determined by the 'figure rating scale' from Pulvers et al., 2004)
8. How the body was portrayed in the image (full body, head/face only, upper body, lower body)
9. Isolated body parts (focus on belly, buttocks, legs, feet, mouth, etc.)
10. Visibility of the face, or not
11. Whether the person in the image was clothed, or not
12. Fit of clothes (appropriate clothing, too wide, too tight)
13. Clothing style (professional, casual, sporty, sloppy)
14. Food consumption (eating food, cooking food, buying food)
15. Whether the consumed food was healthy, or not
16. Level of activity (passive, neutral, active)
17. Profession (expert, scientist, lawyer, medical staff, politician, etc.)
18. Being portrayed as a patient, or not
19. Being the feature of a weight loss story, or not

We tested intercoder reliability by having two coders independently code all the images from the *NRC-Handelsblad* corpus ( $n = 44$ , or 16 % of the total amount of pictures) and calculate the Cohen's kappa and Krippendorff's Alpha. Initially, three variables did not get the minimum score of 0.66 ('whether the person in the image was clothed', 'profession' and 'isolated body parts'). Before coding the remaining 239 images, the coders resolved the inconsistencies by reconsidering the variables' values after which Krippendorff's Alpha was 0.741 to 1 for all variables.

## Results

### Metadata and demographics

*Table 1* shows the distribution of the depicted figures among the newspapers. From the total of 442 figures, 54.5 % were published on the websites of the two tabloids (*De Telegraaf*, *Het Nieuwsblad*). The four broadsheets (*NRC-Handelsblad*, *De Volkskrant*, *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*) provided the remaining 45,5 %. The Flemish papers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *Het Nieuwsblad*) (66 %) provided more visuals on the topic of obesity than their colleagues from the Netherlands (*NRC-Handelsblad*, *De Volkskrant*, *De Telegraaf*) (34 %).

Table 1

**Distribution of the depicted figures among the newspapers (N = 442)**

Newspaper	Frequency	Percent
NRC-Handelsblad	44	10
De Volkskrant	31	7
De Standaard	59	13.3
De Morgen	67	15.2
De Telegraaf	75	17
Het Nieuwsblad	166	37.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>442</b>	<b>100</b>

Most of the images accompanied news articles (34%), human-interest stories (30%) and science articles (27%). The other genres (opinion, culture and interviews) were together responsible for the remaining 9 percent. Most of the images were credited to press agencies (26%) and social media (24%). Stock photography companies (20%) and photographers (16%) are also for a large part responsible for the published photos. The remaining images were credited to the depicted persons themselves (5%) or were not credited at all.

In this study we did not make a difference between obese and overweight. Both were coded as ‘overweight’. The same goes for being underweight or having a normal weight. They were both coded under the value ‘non-overweight’. 252 (59%) of the 430 coded individuals were overweight. 35 % of the individuals were male, 53 % were female. The vast majority (75%) of the portrayed persons were adults. 19% were clearly younger than 18 years old and therefore coded as ‘child’.

### **Portrayals of overweight individuals**

To observe how overweight individuals are portrayed, we compared them to the non-overweight persons by executing chi-square tests. First, we compared the demographic data with the body size. There is no significant relation between body size and sex ( $\chi^2=0.13$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). However, there is a significant relation between age and size ( $\chi^2=11,67$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Children are 2,6 times more likely to be obese in the images than adults. 76% of the portrayed children are overweight against 55% of the adults.

We found several significant differences between how the bodies were depicted and the body size (see Table 2). This was the case with both ‘how the body was portrayed’ ( $\chi^2=20,14$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and the ‘isolated body parts’ ( $\chi^2=33,9$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Non-overweights (55%) were more likely to be

portrayed with their whole body than overweights (39%). Overweight/obese people were more often portrayed by their abdomens or lower bodies (23% against 16% of the non-overweights). For the obese individuals, their bellies were more often isolated (23% against 6%). Non-overweights were more likely to be portrayed without any isolated body parts (83% versus 62%). We also found a correlation between the visibility of the face and body size ( $\chi^2=8,76$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.003$ ). 44% of the obese people were depicted without their faces. This was the case for 30% of the people without overweight.

Table 2

**Comparison of portrayals for overweight persons versus non-overweight persons in online news reports about obesity (N = 430)**

		Non-overweight (N=178)	Overweight/ obese (N=252)
Body portrayal	Pictured with whole body	55%	39%
	Only abdomen or lower body	16%	23%
	Focus on isolated belly	6%	23%
	No isolated body parts	83%	62%
Head/face	No visible head/face	30%	44%
Clothes	Not fully dressed	21%	33%
	Too tightly dressed	0%	7.4%
	Professional clothes	23%	6%
	Sports clothes	22%	10%
	Sloppy clothes	0%	6%
Activity	Passive/sedentary behavior	3%	11%
	Practicing sports	19%	8%
Profession	Prestigious profession	18%	7%

Overweight individuals are more likely to be scantily dressed ( $\chi^2=6,75$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.009$ ). 33% of them were not fully clothed against 21% of the non-overweights. 7,4% of obese people were depicted in too tight clothes. None of the people with average bodies were depicted that way ( $\chi^2=13,29$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There is also a significant difference between the two size groups with regard to clothing style ( $\chi^2=47,34$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Non overweight people were more often portrayed in professional (23% versus 6%) and sporty (22% versus 10%) clothes. 6% percent of the obese individuals were dressed in shabby clothes. Not-overweights were never portrayed like that.

The original food categories ('eating food', 'cooking food', and 'buying food') were merged into one not consuming food/consuming food category because of

the small percentages. We did not find any relation between body size and food ( $\chi^2=0,39$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) and between body size and whether the food was (un)healthy ( $\chi^2=3,71$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.054$ ). A significant relation has been found, however, between size and the level of activity ( $\chi^2=17,48$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Overweight people are more likely to be showing sedentary behavior (11% against 3%) while non-overweight people were more often practicing sports (19% against 8%). Also, when it came to professions, we observed a significant difference ( $\chi^2=11,92$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Non-overweight people were 2,8 times more likely to be depicted in a prestigious profession such as a doctor, a lawyer or a scientist (18% versus 7%). This could be linked to a healthcare setting where non-overweights are more often portrayed as a health care professional ( $\chi^2=20,22$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) while overweights are more often depicted as patients ( $\chi^2=10,04$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.002$ ). Non-obese individuals have 27,8 percent more chance to be depicted as a doctor or a nurse while obese men and women are 3 times more likely to be portrayed as patients.

### Stigmatizing images

Like Heuer et al. (2011), we used the significant results to conclude whether or not a portrayal can be viewed as stigmatizing. We considered a portrait to be stigmatizing when it met one of the following criteria:

- Depicted with his/her head cut off
- Depicted with an exceptional focus on the belly
- Depicted by only the lower body or abdomen
- Scantily dressed
- Shabby dressed
- Depicted while wearing too tight clothes
- Showing sedentary behavior
- Portrayed as a patient

We merged these variables into the variable 'stigmatizing' with values 'yes' and 'no'. When we compared this new variable with 'body size' we got a significant result ( $\chi^2=15,50$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Overall, 68% of the depictions of overweight people can be considered as stigmatizing because they meet one or more of the eight criteria. For non-overweight people, around 50% of the images was coded as stigmatizing.

Both children (70% against 50% of the adults with  $\chi^2=5,41$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and women (60% against 49% of the men with  $\chi^2=4,02$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.045$ ) have a higher chance to be depicted in a stigmatizing way. In addition, for the image credit we found a significant relation ( $\chi^2=67,06$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Especially

photos from stock photo companies (88%) and press agencies (76%) were found to be stigmatizing. Roughly half of the pictures from photographers (57%) and social media (50%) can be considered that way. Photos that are made by the portrayed peoples themselves were the least likely to be stigmatizing (19%).

### **Tabloids versus broadsheets**

We did not find any relation between the number of stigmatizing portraits and the national background (Belgium or The Netherlands) of the newspapers' websites ( $\chi^2=0,12$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p>0.05$ ). However, we did find a significant difference between the tabloids and the broadsheets ( $\chi^2=31,50$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Broadsheets (75%) are more likely to publish stigmatizing images than tabloids (49%). The newspaper with the highest score is *De Standaard* with 83% of the images considered to be stigmatizing. *Het Nieuwsblad* publishes with 47% the least number of stigmatizing photos. A possible explanation is that tabloids publish significantly more weight loss stories ( $\chi^2=56,33$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) than their more news driven competitors. These personal stories are less likely to be published with stigmatizing images ( $\chi^2=24,02$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). 59% of these articles were published with a non-stigmatizing photo compared to 33% of the other genres (news articles, science, economy, culture, opinion, interviews).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Our results show that 68% of the overweight individuals in the Dutch and Flemish online press are portrayed in a stigmatizing way. This percentage is in line with the relative number of stigmatizing images in the United States (72%) found by Heuer et al. (2011). Compared to non-overweight individuals, overweight ones in the Dutch-language press are more often portrayed scantily or shabby dressed, without their faces and with a focus on lower-abdomens. Furthermore, obese people often show sedentary behavior, are portrayed as a medical patient and/or wear clothes that do not fit. These results are in line with the publications by Heuer et al. (2011) and Patterson & Hilton (2013). However, there are a few differences. In contrast to Heuer et al. (2011), we found a relationship between body size and being portrayed as a patient, and between body size and showing sedentary behavior. In addition, and opposed to Heuer et al. (2011), we did not find a relationship between body size and consuming food. When it came to the demographic data, the results for the Dutch press differed from the American study too. In our study, we found that women in pictures are more often stigmatized than men. This was the other way around in the American study (Heuer et al., 2011). We also concluded that children

are more often stigmatized than adults whereas the American scholars did not find a relationship between stigmatizing portrayals and age. More research on the topic of visual representation of overweight people is needed to give more insight in these demographical aspects.

Broadsheet newspapers publish more stigmatizing images than tabloids. Because broadsheets are more 'information driven' than tabloids, they are more likely to use images that are credited to stock photo bureaus or press agencies. On the other hand, the popular driven tabloids often discuss the topic of obesity in human interest articles and personal weight loss stories. To illustrate these articles, the tabloids make use of pictures from social media or pictures that are supplied by the subjects themselves. Our analysis shows that these two photo sources are less likely to contain stigmatizing images. To our knowledge, there are no other publications that examined the differences between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers when it comes to the visual representation of overweight people. The findings, however, roughly correspond with the differences between tabloids and broadsheets in the UK as found by Flint et al. (2016) in their study of newspaper articles. They observed that broadsheets made more reference to the moralizing of obesity than tabloids and thus were more likely to perceive obese people as morally deficient. Tabloids, in contrast, showed more interest in weight loss stories and in reporting the negative consequences of obesity as experienced by the people themselves.

Besides the stigmatizing aspects of images, we made some observations on the positive portrayals such as showing a healthy lifestyle (doing sports, eating fruits and vegetables), wearing formal clothing or being portrayed in a prestigious profession. We found a relationship between body size and three of these positive aspects. Non-overweights are more likely to be depicted while doing sports, wearing formal clothes and having a prestigious profession. No relationship between consuming healthy food and body size was found. The absence of positive portrayals in connection with overweight people does not help to reduce the prejudices towards overweight people (Heuer et al, 2011).

Our study has a few limitations. We only examined online articles on the topic of obesity. It remains unclear whether or not readers of the actual newspaper copies saw the same photographs. In addition, we did not analyse portrayals of overweight individuals that accompany articles on other topics than obesity. Furthermore, our sample included merely six national newspapers. A bigger sample that also contains other news corporations could provide more information on the demographical aspects. Above all, the textual aspects of the newspaper articles were not included with the exception of personal weight

loss stories. To get a complete picture of the relationship between the visual and textual aspect of news coverage on the topic of obesity, a more integrated study is needed. We also did not examine the reasons or motivations to publish stigmatizing images. Depicting overweight people without their heads could be considered a measure to protect the privacy of the portrayed individuals. But we agree with Heuer et al. (2011) that this does not entirely answer the question because ‘images that place unnecessary emphasis on particular body parts seem to intentionally evoke a sense of disgust, rather than merely portray a obese person with their identity concealed’. It is likely that the consistent publication of stigmatizing images relates to the daily routines of newspaper companies. Bissel (2000a; 2000b), for example, explains that media companies are not democratic spaces where editors consciously strive for an equal representation of races, sexes and ages. It could be that also (latent) prejudices towards body size play a role in the image selection processes. Future research into the routines of image editors can give more insight in this matter.

It is important to consider the results in the broader context of policies regarding the worldwide rise of prevalence of obesity. Media do influence the opinions about and attitudes towards overweight people. In the news, obesity is too often solely described in terms of individual responsibility where gaining weight is a result of a lack of discipline. By visually portraying obese people as lazy and unsuccessful while evoking a sense of disgust, these prejudices are reinforced. Research shows that stigmatization works counterproductive towards successful weight loss because it raises the threshold for seeking professional help. Instead of reinforcing stereotypes in news articles, the media could try to correct the weight bias. In that way, media could play a more positive role in reducing the prevalence of obesity.

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# ARTICLE

# Online media in the languages of Russian ethnic groups: Current state and key trends<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper examines 75 online media outlets, registered in the biggest cities of eight republics of the Russian Federation: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Chechnya, Mordovia, Dagestan, Udmurtia, and Crimea. The choice of the republics among 22 republics of Russia was determined by the size of non-Russian ethnic groups residing in those areas (i.e. the number of people, who consider their native language a language other than Russian, according to the state census of 2010<sup>3</sup>). We supposed that ethno-cultural heterogeneity of these eight republics should be somehow connected with the number of ethnic media registered and issued there: in other words, the bigger the number of ethnic groups in the republics, the bigger the number of ethnic media there. When analyzing online media, we paid attention to the following criteria: the official status of a web-site as media outlet; the choice of languages – Russian language or/and the language of an ethnic group; the owners of media outlets, etc. The research revealed a number of qualitative and quantitative characteristics of online ethnic media registered in the republics under analysis, the challenges they face today, some trends of their development, the role of the state in creating and supporting such media, and much more.

## Keywords

Online media, ethnic media, ethnic groups, web-sites, Russian Federation.

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<sup>3</sup> Available from: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm)

## Introduction

According to the Russian census of 2010, there are over 190 ethnic groups at the territory of the Russian Federation speaking more than 170 languages. Among the biggest ethnic groups, except for ethnic Russians, according to the data of 2010, are the Tatar (3,87%), the Bashkir (1,15%), the Chuvash (1,05%) and the Chechen (1,04%). Out of 142,9 million people living at the territory of Russia, 138 million speak Russian. Other widespread languages are English, Tatar, German, Chechen, Bashkir, Ukrainian, and Chuvash. Oftentimes people speaking these languages, and other ones, which are less frequently used, speak Russian too, thus being bi- or even trilingual (Sociolingvističeskaja situacija v Rossijskoj Federacii (informacionno-analitičeskij doklad Instituta jazykoznanija Rossijskoj akademii nauk) [Sociolinguistic situation in the Russian Federation (informational and analytical report of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences)]), 2015).

Such immense ethno-cultural heterogeneity points to the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Russian society. Ethnic groups residing at the territory of the Russian Federation have their own cultures, traditions, values and beliefs, which need to be protected to ensure the society keeps its multicultural character in modern globalized world. In our view, this issue is particularly important for smaller ethnic groups, which risk losing their unique cultural and language heritage if nothing is done to protect and support them.

It should be noted, though, that the Russian government has undertaken a number of successful steps so far to secure pluralism in multiethnic and multicultural Russian society. These steps include, but are not limited to ratification of Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1998, signing European Charter for Regional or Minorities Languages in 2001, starting a Joint Program of the Council of Europe, the Ministry for Regional Development of the Russian Federation and the European Commission 'Minorities in Russia: Developing Languages, Culture, Media and Civil Society' in 2009, opening various institutions, such as Moscow House of Nationalities, Guild of Interethnic Journalism, Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations in Russia and others (Gladkova, 2013). For sure, such fundamental documents as the Constitution of the Russian Federation, federal laws 'On Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation' and 'On Securing Rights of Small Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation' and others constitute an important part of the state policy aimed at supporting Russian ethnic groups today. Last but definitely not least is the decree signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin

in July 2015<sup>4</sup>, outlining several strategic initiatives, which should be taken by the Russian government to ensure ethnic languages and cultures are fully protected. One of those initiatives focuses on supporting online and print media in indigenous languages of Russian ethnic groups, which proves that Russian officials understand an important role of ethnic media in safeguarding pluralistic media landscape and keeping indigenous languages and cultures alive.

What we consider to be particularly important is the emphasis on the support of communication in ethnic languages (including communication through media channels), oftentimes stressed in aforementioned documents. Federal law ‘On Securing Rights of Small Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation’ signed in 1999, for example, states that ethnic groups have a right to create their own media outlets (article 10). State National Policy of the Russian Federation accepted in 1996 underlines that all Russian citizens regardless their region of living have a right to create federal, regional or local media in a set order (part 5), as well as to receive and distribute information in their native languages. Last but not least, state program ‘Strengthening of the Unity of the Russian Nation and the Ethno-cultural Development of the Peoples of Russia (2014–2020)’ emphasizes an important role of mass media in building intercultural dialogue and communication across nations. The program states that creating new media outlets (print, audiovisual, online) in languages of Russian ethnic groups, and in several languages would allow for better understanding of people sharing different views, traditions and beliefs but living in the same country.

In addition to creating a legal framework for the protection of languages and cultures of Russian ethnic groups through communication in those languages, the government supports ethnic media<sup>5</sup> in both direct and indirect ways, e.g. allocating direct state subsidies for media in languages other than Russian, and educating journalists working for ethnic media to ensure they are able to discuss intercultural issues in an unbiased and objective way. The latter appears to be exceedingly important for Russian multicultural society, where the number of conflicts on ethnic grounds (including but not being limited to mass protests on Manezh Square in Moscow in December 2010, clashes of ethnic groups in Pugachevo in July 2013, disturbances in Western Birulevo in Moscow in October

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<sup>4</sup> Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/49877>

<sup>5</sup> By ‘ethnic media’ we understand, following Blokhin (2008), those print, audiovisual and online media, which serve the interests of particular ethnic groups by airing their views, beliefs and ideas in public, as well as making their cultural heritage known to a broader audience.

2013, etc.) is currently growing<sup>6</sup>. One of the reasons for these conflicts, as researchers (Contini, 2013; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Gladkova, 2013b, 2015; Ivanic et al., 2014; Loennqvist et al., 2014; Min'jar-Belorucheve & Pokrovskaya, 2012; Mishlanova & Sirotkina, 2013; Petrova et al., 2014; Ufkes et al., 2012; Verevkin, 2009) put it, can be non-objective and stereotypical representation of ethnic groups in the media, which in its turn can lead to misunderstanding and even direct confrontation between representatives of different ethnicities.

A quick look at the Russian state policy aimed at supporting ethnic media shows that the state understands an important role mass media can play in interethnic relations today and puts a lot of efforts into making such media available to a broad readership (Tikhonova & Gladkova, 2017; Vartanova, 2018). At the same time, the number of studies analyzing ethnic media in Russia from a so-called practical point of view, i.e. their real numbers, circulations, periodicity, target audience, genres, themes, authors, etc. is quite limited. On the contrary, the majority of studies looking at Russian ethnic media do it from a theoretical point of view, discussing the role of stereotypes in interethnic conflicts and miscommunication across nations (Malkova, 2007; Min'jar-Belorucheve & Pokrovskaya, 2012; Mishlanova & Sirotkina, 2013; Verevkin, 2009), focusing on issues of in-group and out-group trust and the impact of trust and other psychological phenomena upon interethnic relations (Bahry et al., 2005), identifying social prerequisites for interethnic confrontation, such as the degree of diversity in the society (Gladkova, 2013a; Vartanova, 2005, 2012), discussing issues of migration and the lack of sense of belonging among migrants as a potential risk factor in a multiethnic society (Bazhenova et al., 2015; Osin & Konstantinov, 2014); or analyzing the role of language and linguistic means, including hate speech, in affecting attitudes toward ethnic groups (Malkova, 2007; Shulumba, 2013). Let us add that in most cases researchers have focused so far on either print or audiovisual media of ethnic groups, while online media were oftentimes excluded from their analysis<sup>7</sup>.

The aim of the current study is to look at ethnic media, in particular online media, from a more practical angle, which is sometimes missing when

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<sup>6</sup> Grozd'ya gneva. Reyting mezhetnicheskoy napryazhennosti v regionakh Rossii. Osen' 2013-vesna 2014 g [Grapes of hatred. Rating of interethnic tensions in Russian regions. Autumn 2013-spring 2014]. Available from: <http://club-rf.ru/thegrapesofwrath/01/>; Moskva i Peterburg vyshli v lidery rozni [Moscow and St. Petersburg have become leaders in tensions]. Kommersant, 14th April, 2014. Available from: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2452040>

<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions, of course; see, for example, Bal'haeva, 2008; Gladkova, 2015; Kachmazova, 2012; Volodina, 2010; and other studies.

it comes to Russian ethnic studies. The choice of online media for analysis was determined by several factors: namely, the substantial growth of Internet audience in Russia in the last few years<sup>8</sup>, the increase of audience's trust in the Internet as an objective source of information<sup>9</sup>, and the stable decrease of 'digital divide' in Russian regions (Vartanova, 2013). We believe, there might be a correlation between the mentioned factors and the growth of ethnic media in Runet (Russian Internet space): the wider the spread of Internet connection in the country, the bigger the opportunities for ethnicities to participate in online communication, sharing their opinions, views and their cultural heritage with a broader Internet audience.

Therefore the current paper aims first at analyzing online media of Russian ethnic groups as a whole, presenting some basic data, such as the number of such media, their target audience, owners – in other words, some fundamental things, which are paradoxically missing when it comes to a general overview of Russian media landscape – and second at discussing correlation between the number and the diversity of Russian ethnic media with the general development of Internet connection in the country. It should be added that the paper presents some results of a bigger research project, aimed at creating an overview of all types of media in languages of Russian ethnic groups – print, audiovisual and online ones, including both quantitative (numbers, circulations, audience rates, income, etc.) and qualitative (themes, genres, tone, etc.) characteristics of such media. The authors hope that some of their research findings might be used in a broader discussion about specificity of online communication of ethnic communities, and the general level of linguistic and cultural pluralism in Russian cyberspace.

## Methods

The current study is based on the analysis of online media officially registered in the republics of the Russian Federation, where there is at least one more official

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Public Opinion Foundation, the number of Internet users in Russia (meaning by Internet users those who go online at least once per day) grew in summer of 2015 by 53% (62 mln.) of the total population of Russia, which is 6% bigger than in 2014. Available from: <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12369>

<sup>9</sup> The level of audience's trust in the Internet as an objective information source grew by 64% in 2012 (compared to 40% in 2011), while the number of users naming Internet their primary source of information grew by 59%, which in its turn makes Internet the third most popular information source in Russia after television and press. Available from: <http://www.fapmc.ru/rospechat.html>

language besides Russian in public use<sup>10</sup>. Taking into account an unprecedented scale of the territory of Russia and its exceptional linguistic and cultural diversity, we decided to focus for a start on media outlets registered and produced in eight republics with the biggest numbers of indigenous population, according to the Russian census of 2010: Tatarstan (Kazan) – Tatar<sup>11</sup>; Crimea (Simferopol) – Ukrainian; Bashkortostan (Ufa) – Bashkir; Chuvashia (Cheboksary) – Chuvash; Chechnya (Grozny) – Chechen; Mordovia (Saransk) – Mordvin; Dagestan (Makhachkala) – Avar, Azerbaijani, Dargin; Udmurtia (Izhevsk) – Udmurt.

A quick glance at web-sites in aforementioned languages revealed that the number of such web-sites in Runet is quite extensive, even though we did not calculate them in this particular study. However, when we examined these online resources more closely, we found out that in many cases web-sites, which we originally considered media outlets (and which in fact called themselves so in their missions, editorials or general ‘About us’ sections) were not officially registered in Roskomnadzor<sup>12</sup> and therefore did not have a formal status of media outlets. Since our study was focused on the analysis of official online media only, we had to exclude such web-sites from our research scope, which meant that 75 online media outlets were left for further examination.

When analyzing mentioned web-sites, we paid attention to the following criteria:

- *official registration of a web-site as a media outlet.* When selecting web-sites for analysis, we browsed an open database of Russian media outlets<sup>13</sup> searching for online media resources registered in one of the eight republics under examination. Additionally, we double-checked all selected web-sites using an official open database provided by

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<sup>10</sup> Just to clarify it in a few words: Russian Federation includes 85 federal subjects (i.e. constituent units) with different degree of autonomy. 22 out of the 85 federal subjects are national republics within Russia, having besides Russian another official language in public use – the language of the biggest indigenous ethnic groups residing in those republics.

<sup>11</sup> Hereinafter the data is listed in the following order: the name of the republic, the name of the biggest city in the republic, the official language of the republic, used alongside with Russian in different spheres of public life, including communication in cyberspace.

<sup>12</sup> Roskomnadzor stands for The Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications. It is Russian federal executive body responsible for overseeing the media, including the electronic media, and mass communications, information technology and telecommunications.

<sup>13</sup> The one we used in our study is one of the biggest Russian databases of such kind. Available from: <http://public.ru>

Roskomnadzor. This turned out to be the right way to choose web-sites for analysis, since several web-sites we came across looked like online media outlets (i.e. provided a description of their editorial policy, a list of journalists, etc.) and were included into Public.ru database<sup>14</sup>, but were missing in the database of Roskomnadzor<sup>15</sup>. Interestingly, the majority of such ‘fake’ media (i.e. web-sites, which declared themselves as media outlets but which were missing in Roskomnadzor’s list of media) came from Crimea: out of 18 web-sites, which stated their official status as media, only 8 were recognized as such by Roskomnadzor. Let us add that the factual number of web-sites providing information in ethnic languages in Runet is for sure much bigger than 75; however, as the current study showed the majority of them cannot be considered media outlets due to the lack of official registration as such;

- *availability of content in several languages* (language of an ethnic group plus Russian, English or any other languages). Since we did not carry out a content analysis at this stage (which is planned to be conducted later on), we did not go into details analyzing all publications available on web-sites and focused on home pages only. All web-sites were examined with the help of native speakers or by the authors themselves;
- *media owners*. This criterion was selected in order to find out whether online ethnic media in Russia are created and issued primarily by the state, taking into account straightforward governmental politics aimed at supporting such media, which was mentioned earlier, or by some private companies/individuals.

## Results

To start with, we compared the number of all available web-sites in ethnic languages under analysis and the number of officially registered online media in those languages (*Table 1*). One can easily notice that these numbers differ significantly depending on the region: Tatarstan has the biggest number of both web-sites in Tatar language and online media in Tatar registered by Roskomnadzor (22 and 20 correspondingly), while Dagestan has the lowest number in both terms (1 and 1). We believe, there might be two reasons for this phenomenon: first, unequal penetration of Internet connection in Russian

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<sup>14</sup> Available from: <http://public.ru>

<sup>15</sup> Let us add that all Russian media outlets (print, audiovisual, electronic) irrespective of the region they are published in, or their language, must be listed in the database of Roskomnadzor to have the official status of media.

regions<sup>16</sup>, which makes Tatarstan one of the leaders among the republics under discussion in terms of Internet penetration and availability of digital technologies to a broad audience; and second, the size of indigenous ethnic groups residing in those areas, which again makes Tatarstan one of the leaders compared to other Russian republics<sup>17</sup>. An exception in this regard is Mordovia, where there are 4 officially registered online media while the population is relatively small, and Dagestan, where one can notice an opposite situation: there is only one ethnic medium while the population is bigger than in Mordovia.

Table 1

**Online media in the republics: Total number**

	Tatarstan	Crimea	Bashkortostan	Chuvashia	Udmurtia	Chechnya	Dagestan	Mordovia
The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: <a href="http://www.public.ru">www.public.ru</a> )	22	18	13	4	8	5	1	4
The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: Roskomnadzor)	20	8	11	4	8	5	1	4
Population (thousand people) <sup>18</sup>	3779,8	2327,4	4102,9	1313,9	1570,5	1100,3	2584,2	888,7

The study showed that the number of officially registered online media in ethnic languages is noticeably smaller than the one in the Russian language. Let us add that all online media in languages other than Russian, which we came across represent bi – or multilingual resources, being available in several languages (in most cases Russian plus the language of an ethnic group).

<sup>16</sup> Available from: <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12275>

<sup>17</sup> Available from: [http://www.gks.ru/free\\_doc/new\\_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis\\_itogi1612.htm](http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Available from: [http://www.gks.ru/perepis/tab1\\_1.htm](http://www.gks.ru/perepis/tab1_1.htm)

An interesting thing is that we did not find any online media in ethnic languages only, which might be explained by an attempt of media owners/creators to reach out to a broad Russian-speaking audience along with a smaller audience of ethnic communities.

If we look at the number of online media in official languages of the republics under analysis (which, as we noted earlier are the languages of the biggest indigenous ethnic groups represented there) (Table 2), we will notice an obvious trend, namely the prevail of Tatar-language media (11 resources) upon media in other languages, for example Bashkortostan (3 resources) and Chuvashia (1). Several republics (Crimea, Udmurtia, Dagestan, and Mordovia) do not have online media in their official ethnic languages at all, while some of them provide information both in English and in Russian (Crimea, Chuvashia, Chechnya, and Dagestan). Another interesting trend is the ownership of ethnic media: as the current study showed, 100% of online media outlets in ethnic languages belong to the state – for instance, *Tatmedia*, the biggest state media company in Tatarstan, which is the owner of all online media under analysis, as well as 99 print newspapers, 15 magazines, 21 TV channels and 13 radio stations<sup>19</sup>.

Table 2

**Online media in ethnic/non-Russian languages in the republics**

	Tatarstan	Crimea	Bashkortostan	Chuvashia	Udmurtia	Chechnya	Dagestan	Mordovia
<b>The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: Roskomnadzor)</b>	20	8	11	4	8	5	1	4
<b>The number of online media in ethnic/non-Russian languages</b>	11	0 1-English only	3	1	0	2-English only	1-English only	0
<b>The number of web-sites with home pages in ethnic/non-Russian languages</b>	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

As we noted earlier, all officially registered online media under analysis represent bi- or multilingual resources, with language versions being almost identical in design and structure, but providing different content depending on

<sup>19</sup> Available from: <http://tatmedia.ru/aotatmedia/>

the language version. We failed to identify any online media publishing content in languages of ethnic groups in addition to Russian or English within one language version, except for 'About us' section, which is oftentimes available in several languages simultaneously. Therefore online media under discussion represent two or more separate web-sites, which look very much alike but differ in language and in content they provide. The user thus needs to switch between two language versions by pressing a 'Language' button at the top of the screen to get access to publications in different languages. An interesting thing to note here is that in most cases home pages of ethnic media are available in Russian, while the number of media with home pages in other languages is considerably lower (see *Table 2*). Again, we believe this trend can be explained by the media owners/creators' intention to attract first of all Russian-speaking audience, which clearly dominates in Runet.

All in all, we have identified only 15 online media in ethnic languages, which are officially registered in the republics under analysis and recognized by Roskomnadzor as media outlets<sup>20</sup>. It should be noted that among these 15 media only seven can be considered ethnic media in its full sense<sup>21</sup>, since the remaining eight, although providing content in ethnic languages alongside with Russian, are primarily used by the Russian-speaking audience<sup>22</sup>. An important thing is that those seven web-sites have their home pages in ethnic languages, which makes corresponding ethnic groups their primary target audience, while Russian- and/or English-language versions are used as additional ones, and not visa a versa as in other online media under discussion. The importance of having a home page in an ethnic language is stressed by statistical data: in a situation when a home page is available in Russian, only 2-4% of visitors switch to a version in an ethnic language, as our study of web-site visitor data showed. On the contrary, if home page provides content in an ethnic language, 74% of visitors keep browsing through web-site version in that language. Putting it into simple terms, a home page is often used to determine the main target audience of online media, which – as the current research showed – is mostly Russian-speaking one, even when it comes to ethnic media outlets.

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<sup>20</sup> Alekseyevsk.ru, Apastovo.ru, Arskmedia.com, Chuprale-online.ru, Kaibicy.ru, Kukmor-rt.ru, Laishevskiyi.ru, Nashcheremshan.ru, Protatarstan.ru, Rsloboda-rt.ru, tatar-inform.ru, Resbash.ru, bashgazet.ru, bashinform.ru, Irekle.org

<sup>21</sup> Arskmedia.com, Chuprale-online.ru, Kukmor-rt.ru, Laishevskiyi.ru, Nashcheremshan.ru, Rsloboda-rt.ru, bashgazet.ru

<sup>22</sup> This is proved by the fact that only 4% of users switch to a web-site version in an ethnic language if there is a Russian-language version available there (Cherevko, 2016: 244-245).

## Conclusion

The study showed that despite straightforward governmental politics aimed at supporting media in languages of ethnic and cultural communities in Russia, the number of online media in ethnic languages is relatively low today. Saying this, we refer to officially registered online media only (*Table 2*), keeping in mind that the number of web-sites in languages of Russian ethnic groups, i.e. those resources, which do not have an official status of media (*Table 1*), or web-sites containing some information in those languages but not being fully translated into those languages, is for sure quite extensive.

Among all officially registered online media outlets in eight national republics under analysis, though, roughly 10% only provide content in ethnic languages, while the rest use Russian to reach out to a broader Internet audience. The number of online media using ethnic languages as main languages in electronic communication and having their home pages in languages other than Russian is even lower: we managed to identify only seven web-sites of this kind. This shows that only a few resources are oriented upon ethnic groups as their main target audience, while the rest are focused primarily on Russian-speaking Internet users that dominate in Runet. The reason for that might be unprofitability of such web-sites, including for instance challenges with having web-sites in less widespread languages effectively indexed by search engines compared to Russian-language ones (which in its turn makes ethnic media less attractive for advertisers or investors), or salaries for additional staff members, who are fluent in ethnic languages. As the current research showed, this problem can be solved by increasing financial support from the state: all analyzed media outlets belong to the state, while we failed to come across any ethnic media owned by private companies or individuals, presumably because of low profitability of non-Russian media.

The study revealed that the number of ethnic media differs significantly depending on the republic and possibly the audience's access to digital technologies there, as well as the size of indigenous ethnic population and their digital literacy, which might also affect the number of electronic media in languages other than Russian. Tatarstan is thus a leader in terms of the number of online media in ethnic languages, representing the biggest ethnic group in Russia and the area with rapidly growing Internet penetration in recent years<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Internet penetration (12+) in Kazan, the biggest city in Tatarstan, reached 72% in spring 2016, while the average Internet penetration level (12+) in Russia is 68%. Available from: [https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya\\_internet\\_regions\\_2016](https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya_internet_regions_2016)

At the same time, Dagestan and Chechnya, for example, despite being home for numerous ethnic and cultural communities too, have less developed (and more expensive at the same time) Internet connection compared to Tatarstan<sup>24</sup>, which is likely to influence the number of ethnic media produced in those republics: the worse Internet connection, the fewer online media in those areas.

Finally, although we did not carry out comparative content analysis on the particular stage of research, we could not but notice that publications in different language versions of web-sites (most often in one of ethnic languages either in Russian or English) are in most cases identical, meaning primarily reportages and interviews. An exception is newsfeeds, which are usually more detailed and thematically diverse in Russian (provided that a Russian-language version is available on a web-site) and much shorter and less diverse in other languages. Again, this can be a sign of media owners/creators' attempt to attract as many users as possible, which can easier be done in case of Russian-language media content.

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<sup>24</sup> Average monthly price for unlimited Internet access is 365 rubles in Volga Federal District, where Tatarstan is located, while in North Caucasian Federal District (Dagestan and Chechnya) it reaches 500 rubles (spring 2016). Average Internet connection speed is at the same time around 29 Mbit/s in Volga Federal District and 27 Mbit/s in North Caucasian one (spring 2016). Available from: [https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya\\_internet\\_regions\\_2016](https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya_internet_regions_2016)

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# Nexus between women voters' radio exposure and grassroots electoral participation under the new devolved political dispensation in Kenya

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the nexus between women voters' radio exposure and participation in the 2013 Kenyan general election in Kakamega County located in the western part of the country. This research grounded in political mobilization theory and uses and gratifications theory utilized a descriptive quantitative correlational research design. Data was collected from 372 women voters using a survey-interviewer administered questionnaire. Data gathered was analyzed through descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression. Results reveal medium to high radio exposure and limited electoral participation among women voters. Consistent with past findings, the correlation between women voters' radio exposure and electoral participation is positive and statistically significant. This has implications to radio practitioners and political stakeholders' approaches towards promoting gender equality in electoral participation in Kenya. We propose an increase in gender-sensitive political education radio programmes targeting women based on their socio-demographics. This article contributes to knowledge on the relationship between radio exposure and electoral participation in developing democracies in which the legacy medium of radio remains dominant. A nation-wide study on the influence of radio exposure on women voters' electoral participation in Kenya is suggested.

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## Keywords

Electoral participation, Kakamega County, Kenya, media use, radio exposure, women voters.

## Introduction

Political information is an important resource in raising women's political awareness and participation (Uwem & Opeke, 2015). In Kenya, radio is the dominant news medium for accessing such information (Mbeke, 2010; Schulz-Herzenberg et al., 2015). Radio exposure can, therefore, influence women's electoral participation essential to the attainment of gender equality in political participation as envisioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Kenya's 2010 Constitution. This Constitution introduced a new political structure in which resources and power are devolved in 47 counties in the country. As Bouka et al. (2019) acknowledge, women's political participation strengthens democracy and advances their development agenda. Therefore, there is a need to examine women voters' grassroots electoral participation in the 2013 Kenyan polls, the first to be held under the country's new devolved democracy.

Despite women's large voting bloc and affirmative actions towards their political participation, their electoral engagement in Kenya remains low (Federation of Kenya women lawyers – Kenya [FIDA-Kenya], 2013). This raises two fundamental questions. First, why is women voters' electoral participation still low even under the devolved political dispensation in Kenya? Second, what is the contribution (if any) of radio on women voters' electoral participation at the county level in Kenya? These questions can be answered using sociological, psychological and communication approaches to political participation. This article takes a communication approach to examine the nexus between women voters' radio exposure and participation in the 2013 general election in Kakamega County. This is motivated by Mvukiyehe (2017) who argues that providing information through the media is one of the easy-to-address barriers to women's political participation.

This research departs from prior studies which have tended to assess the relationship between media use and voting participation in Kenya among both male and female respondents. Our study focuses on the influence of radio exposure on voting and election campaign participation among women voters under the devolved political system in Kenya. This article seeks to answer three research questions. First, what was the level of women voters' radio exposure during the 2013 general election? Second, what was the extent of women

voters' participation in this election? Finally, what is the relationship between women voters' radio exposure and participation in the 2013 polls in Kakamega County?

## Background

Kenya located in East Africa has a vibrant and diverse broadcasting sector, with radio as the main source for information and news (Nyabuga & Booker, 2013). There are about 194 radio stations in Kenya, with 122 (62.9%) broadcasting in English and Kiswahili and 72 (37.1%) in local languages (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2020). Almost 6.5 million (74%) of the households in the country own radio sets (KNBS, 2010) and 95% of Kenyans regularly listen to the radio (Media Council of Kenya [MCK], 2012). Radio has advantages of pervasiveness, affordability, portability and broadcasting in local languages (Gillwald et al., 2010; Myers, 2009; Nyabuga & Booker, 2013; Simiyu, 2010).

This study was conducted in Kakamega County located in western Kenya. Politically, the county is divided into 12 constituencies each represented by a Member of Parliament (MP). There are 60 County Assembly Wards [CAWs] with each represented by a Member of County Assembly [MCA] (County Government of Kakamega, 2018). With a population of 1,867,579 comprising of 970,406 (52%) females and 897,133 (48%) males, the county is the topmost with more females than males in Kenya (KNBS, 2019). Out of 970,406 females in Kakamega County, 875,526 (90.2%) and 94,880 (9.8%) reside in rural and urban areas respectively. The voting age population (18 years and above) in the county is 924,142, with 496,949 (53.8%) and 427,193 (46.2%) being females and males correspondingly.

Over 90% of the females in Kakamega County have low levels of education [pre-primary to secondary school] (KNBS, 2019). A quarter of the households in the county have electricity connection (KNBS, 2019). The poverty level in the county is 49.2%. (County Government of Kakamega, 2018). These socioeconomic characteristics contribute to the wide use of radio in Kakamega County. Radio ownership in households in the county stands at 77.8% (KNBS, 2010), making it a major source of information for the residents (County Government of Kakamega, 2018). In western Kenya in which Kakamega County is located, residents have a keen interest to tune into their favourite radio programmes (Simiyu, 2010).

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) introduced a devolved system of government consisting of 47 counties. It also provides for affirmative actions

toward women's political participation, citizens' political rights and freedom of the media. The first general election under this new political structure was held on March 4, 2013. This election was the tenth since the country's independence in 1963. The 2010 Constitution provides for six elective posts, with the presidency at the national level. At the county level, there are five elective seats: governor, senator, county woman representative, Member of national assembly and MCAs. Before this, there were three elective posts: president, MP and councillor. A total of 14,388,781 were registered for the 2013 general election with 49.1% of them being females. Kakamega County had 567,460 voters consisting of 287,325 (50.6%) females registered through biometric technology (Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission [IEBC], 2013).

## **Theoretical framework**

This article is anchored on Flanagan's (1996) political mobilization theory and uses and gratifications theory (UGT) advanced by Katz et al. (1974). Political mobilization theory postulates that media use directly influences political knowledge and stimulates political attitudes that subsequently impact on political participation. The theory also assumes that socio-economic status (SES), social networks, sex, age and urbanization influence people's media use. Flanagan (1996) identifies partisanship as a predictor of political knowledge and electoral participation. Partisanship is predicated on political party affiliation (Mbeke, 2010). Building on political mobilization theory, we conceptualized socio-demographic and political disposition characteristics as control variables in this research.

This article uses UGT to explain the consequences of radio consumption through women voters' electoral participation. UGT considers media use as a function of the gratification of social or psychological needs of individuals (Katz et al., 1974). For instance, voters may be motivated to listen to the radio to obtain political information (surveillance gratification) and retain it for use in interpersonal political discussions within their social networks (social utility gratification). Therefore, UGT relates to political mobilization theory which identifies media use as a predictor of political knowledge and attitudes and the role of social networks in influencing electoral participation.

UGT conceives an active audience seeking media sources that best fulfil their gratifications (Katz et al., 1974). For instance, during elections, people are likely to choose media outlets and content that they perceive to be supportive of their

political party identities (Mbeke, 2010). This suggests that exposure to partisan media can deepen voters' partisanship. Political mobilization theory identifies partisanship as a political attitude that predicts political knowledge.

Katz et al. (1974) assert that audience characteristics influence media access. In agreement, Uwem & Opeke (2015) note that socio-demographics influence women's information accessibility. This is in harmony with political mobilization theory which identifies such factors as determinants of media use. UGT further postulates that 'many of the goals of media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves' (Katz et al., 1974). Grounded on this premise, we gathered data based on women voters' self-reported radio exposure and electoral participation.

### **Empirical literature review**

Audience surveys by Gillwald et al. (2010) and Ipsos Synovate (2013) reveal that females in Kenya spend almost 5.3 hours per day and 33 hours per week listening to the radio respectively. After the 2013 general election, Schulz-Herzenberg et al. (2015) conducted a nation-wide survey which shows that 82% of the respondents listened to the radio, with 61% tuned to it daily. Similarly, Yankem's (2015) research in the capital city county of Nairobi indicates that 76% of the participants listened to the radio during the 2013 election. This level of radio listenership and exposure can enhance women voters' access to political information that they need for their electoral participation in Kenya.

Radio informs, educates and mobilizes citizens for electoral participation in Africa (Abdollahyan & Machika, 2017; Edegoh et al., 2015; Yankem, 2015). As Umem & Opeke (2015) acknowledge, access to information builds women's political knowledge and this enhances their electoral participation. Buttressing this, Mvukiyehe's (2017) research on the 2011 general elections in Liberia reveals a positive correlation between radio exposure and women's electoral participation as mediated by political efficacy and group dynamics. Conroy-Krutz (2018) also reports that radio availability is a significant predictor of citizens' political participation in Uganda as it increases their political knowledge. Moreover, studies from Nigeria demonstrate a positive correlation between voters' radio exposure and electoral participation in Enugu, Kano and Anambra states (Abdollahyan & Machika, 2017; Didiugwu et al. 2014; Edegoh et al., 2015).

Large-scale studies in Africa depict a positive correlation between radio exposure and voter turnout in Africa especially in rural areas (Isaksson et

al., 2014; Kuenzi & Lambright, 2005, 2007, 2011). Rural areas are heavily populated with women, have high levels of illiteracy and poverty (Heywood, 2018; Myers, 2009). The current study focuses on women in the predominantly rural Kakamega County with high poverty levels (KNBS, 2019). These socio-demographics contribute to the relevance of radio in Kakamega County. Radio has the advantages of affordability, overcoming illiteracy barriers through local language broadcasts and it blends with oral culture which is dominant in Africa (Heywood, 2018; Myers, 2009).

Past research in Kenya shows that radio exposure predicts voter turnout (Mbeke, 2010; Muriithi & Page, 2013) and through radio, citizens are politically mobilized (Yankem, 2015). Furthermore, Mbeke's (2010) study on political participation among youth in Kenya's Nakuru district (now Nakuru County) shows a positive correlation between radio exposure and participation through voting and financial contribution to campaigns during the 2007 general election.

A few studies present contradictory findings to the foregoing results. Reviewing over six studies in Nigeria, Didiugwu et al. (2014) identify a weak association between women's radio exposure and electoral participation. The researchers argue that political messages on the radio may not be packaged in clear and persuasive ways that facilitate women's electoral participation. Similar shortcomings exist in Kenya as political talk radio shows aired during the 2013 polls are criticized for being poorly researched and lacking pre-editorial guidance (Muriithi & Page, 2013).

Adegbola & Gearhart's (2019) comparative study involving the USA, Kenya and Nigeria indicates that radio exposure does not predict political participation in the two African countries. The study involved 1,775 respondents: the USA (502), Kenya (502) and Nigeria (474). The researchers argue that prior studies in Africa use small case studies and this might be contributing to the positive results between radio exposure and political participation. Our study is county-specific involving 372 respondents compared to 502 from Kenya in the aforementioned research. Another study by Kipkoech (2019) reveals that there is no significant correlation between radio consumption and political participation in Kenya. Kipkoech attributes this finding to political disinterest among the respondents. The researcher adds that listening to the radio is just a theoretical construct that does not influence political behaviours in Kenya.

The present study was motivated by Bouka et al. (2019) as they echo the need to understand women's political participation within the newly created devolved political system in Kenya. Consistent with Mbeke's (2010) observation

of mixed and inconclusive findings on the effects of media use on political participation, our review of the literature reveals similar trends. Overall, there is a dearth of research on the role of radio in women's electoral participation in Africa (Conroy-Krutz, 2018) and political mobilization in Kenya (Yankem, 2015). According to Kasomo (2012), women are marginalized in both politics and academic research in Kenya. Our findings are thus considered useful to a better understanding of the nexus between women voters' radio exposure and electoral participation in Kenya and other developing democracies.

## Methodology

This research adopted a descriptive quantitative correlational survey as it answers the research questions by describing and predicting relationships among the study variables. A survey is cost-effective and time-saving in data collection from a large population such as Kakamega County. The sample size for this study was computed from the targeted population of 287,325 women registered to vote in the 2013 election in Kakamega County using Yamane's (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = desired sample size

N = the finite size of the population

e = margin of error of 5%

1 = a theoretical or statistical constant

$$n = \frac{287,325}{1 + 287,325(0.05)^2} = 400$$

We used a sample size of 400 women voters selected through a five-step multi-stage sampling procedure, involving the selection of:

1. Six constituencies using purposive sampling to ensure those chosen had both rural and urban CAWs. These constituencies are Lugari, Likuyani, Malava, Lurambi, Mumias West and Butere.
2. A rural and urban CAW using purposive and random sampling respectively from each of these six constituencies sampled.
3. Two sub-locations from each of the sampled CAWs using purposive and random sampling methods for rural and urban CAWs respectively.

4. Households at the level of sub-locations by systematic random sampling.
5. Women voters using proportionate stratified sampling based on the number of registered female voters in each CAW. In each household, only one interview was conducted with a participant selected through the Kish grid method.

## Data collection and analysis

Data for this study was collected from women voters using an-interviewer administered questionnaire. The data was analyzed by descriptive statistics and hierarchical multiple regression using SPSS Version 21 and then presented in tables. To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the questionnaire was validated by two media studies lecturers. We pre-tested and piloted the questionnaire on 12 and 48 women voters respectively selected through convenience sampling from CAWs not sampled for this study. The test-retest results yielded a strong Pearson correlation coefficient,  $r = .734$ .

## Operationalization of variables

In this study, the dependent and independent variables are electoral participation and radio exposure respectively. Socio-demographic and political disposition characteristics and use of other media are controlled.

*Electoral participation.* Participants answered 'Yes' (1) or 'No' (0) on whether they engaged in the following during the 2013 general election in Kakamega County: rallying up voters to try to get them to turn out and vote; canvassing for votes; attending political meetings or rallies; political volunteerism in leadership positions or as members in political support groups; distributing campaign literature; wearing or displaying campaign materials; financial assistance to support candidates and political parties; and voting. The eight items were summed up to create an index of electoral participation ranging from 0 to 8 activities.

*Radio exposure.* Respondents were asked to indicate approximate days in a seven-day typical week and hours in a typical 24-hour day that they spent accessing information and news on politics and current affairs on the radio. Responses to these two questions were then used to create a radio exposure index which ranged from 0 to 56 hours.

*Age.* Each respondent was asked to indicate her age which was finally categorized as follows: 1 = 18–35 years; 2 = 36–50 years; and 3 = above 50 years.

*Marital status.* Each participant was asked to indicate her marital status, later characterized as follows: 1 = single; 2 = married; 3 = separated, divorced or widowed.

*Level of education.* A respondent's highest level of formal schooling completed under the following categories: 1 = no formal schooling; 2 = primary school; 3 = secondary school; and 4 = middle-level college and university education.

*Household income status.* Combined monthly income (in Kenya Shillings [Kshs.] for all individuals sharing a household and categorized as: (1) low = Kshs. 20,000 and below, (2) medium = Kshs. 20,001–50,000, and (3) high = above Kshs. 50,000. 1 USD exchanged at between Kshs. 86.4 and 84.9 in January 2013 and April 2013 respectively

*Residential location.* Each participant was asked to state her place of residence either as 1 = rural or 2 = urban.

*Political affiliation.* A respondent's indication of a particular political party that she supported in Kenya during the 2013 polls.

*Partisanship.* A woman voters' strength of loyalty to a political party supported in Kenya during the 2013 polls based on a three-point scale ranging from 1 (not so strong) to 3 (very strong).

*Use of other media.* The same approach used for operationalizing radio exposure was adopted to measure time spent on TV, reading newspapers, surfing the Internet and using mobile phones.

## **Results and discussion**

Out of 400 copies of questionnaires administered, 372 (93%) were completed, returned and used for data analysis, reflecting a very high response rate. *Table 1* indicates that 72% of the participants were aged 18–50 years, 74.8% were married, separated, divorced and widowed. Slightly over four-fifths (81.8%) of the respondents were those with low levels of education ranging from no formal education up to secondary school. Fifty-three per cent of the respondents were from low-income households, 58.3 % were residing in urban areas, 58.4% were affiliated to ODM (44.4%) and UDF Party (14%). Not so strong to strong partisanship was reported by 72.4% of the politically-affiliated respondents.

Table 1

**Profile of participants**

Characteristics	Frequency	%
<b>Age</b>		
18-35	162	43.5
36-50	106	28.5
51+	104	28.0
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	92	24.7
Married	222	59.7
Separated, divorced and widowed	56	15.1
No Response (NR)	2	0.5
<b>Education</b>		
No formal schooling	72	19.4
Primary school	161	43.3
Secondary school	71	19.1
Middle-level college and university	66	17.7
NR	2	0.5
<b>Household income status</b>		
Low	197	53.0
Medium	130	34.9
High	22	5.9
Don't Know [DK] & NR	23	6.2
<b>Residential location</b>		
Rural	155	41.7
Urban	217	58.3
<b>Political party affiliation</b>		
None	96	25.8
Orange Democratic Party (ODM)	165	44.4
United Democratic Forum Party (UDF) Party	52	14.0
Others	51	13.7
DK/NR	8	2.2
<b>Partisanship</b>		
Not so strong	126	47.0
Strong	68	25.4
Very strong	58	21.6
DK & NR	16	6.0

**Level of radio exposure**

Table 2 shows that almost three-fifths (58.6%) of the participants' level of radio exposure ranged from medium to high ( $M = 16.44$ ,  $SD = 13.46$ ). This is in line with earlier findings that established radio as an important source of voter information during the 2013 election (Muriithi & Page, 2013; Schulz-Herzenberg et al., 2015; Yankem, 2015). Our results can be linked to high radio ownership in the respondents' households (86.8%), low educational and household incomes for the majority of the participants.

Table 2

**Level of weekly radio exposure**

Radio exposure	Frequency	%
None	54	14.5
Low	81	21.8
Medium	113	30.4
High	105	28.2
DK& NR	19	5.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Extent of electoral participation**

Table 3 reveals that 52.4% of the respondents' level of electoral participation ranged from none to low ( $M = 3.53, SD = 2.34$ ). This is consistent with past research which shows limited women's electoral participation in Kenya (FIDA-Kenya, 2013; Kasomo, 2012; Mbeke, 2010). This can be linked to among others, socio-demographics which as espoused in political mobilization theory impact on both media use and electoral participation (Flanagan, 1996). In this study, majority of the respondents' marital status suggests family responsibilities. Most participants reported low levels of education and household income.

Table 3

**Level of electoral participation**

Level of participation	Frequency	%
None	28	7.5
Low	167	44.9
Medium	128	34.4
High	49	13.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Relationship between radio exposure and electoral participation**

In the four-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Table 4), radio exposure and electoral participation were the predictor and outcome variables respectively. Socio-demographic and political disposition characteristics and use of other media were controlled. The assumptions of linearity, normality and homoscedasticity were examined and met. Model 4 is the most important for reporting our regression results.

Table 4

Regression predicting electoral participation from radio exposure

Models	$\beta$	t	Sig
<b>1: Socio-demographics</b>			
Age	-.503	-7.507	.000**
Marital status	-.042	-.634	.527
Education	-.034	-.599	.550
Household income status	.017	.297	.767
Residential location	.162	2.832	.005***
R <sup>2</sup>	.310		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.294		
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.310		
<b>2: Political disposition</b>			
Political affiliation	.119	2.030	.044**
Partisanship	.053	.900	.369
R <sup>2</sup>	.325		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.302		
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.014		
<b>3: Use of other media</b>			
TV	.144	2.100	.037**
Newspapers	.027	.404	.686
Internet	-.154	-2.302	.022**
Mobile phones	-.010	-.167	.868
R <sup>2</sup>	.355		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.320		
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.030		
<b>4: Radio exposure</b>			
Age	-.261	-3.832	.000*
Marital status	-.008	-.143	.887
Education	.036	.711	.478
Household income status	.093	1.826	.069
Residential location	.113	2.017	.045**
Party affiliation	.109	2.145	.033**
Partisanship	.010	.181	.857
TV	.031	.508	.612
Newspapers	.014	.239	.811
Internet	-.106	-1.794	.074
Mobile phones	-.024	-.460	.646
Radio exposure	.498	7.964	.000**
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.508		
Final adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.479		
Total R <sup>2</sup> Change	.153*		

Notes. \* = p < .001; \*\* = p < .005; \*\*\* = p = .005.

Model 4 in *Table 4* accounted for 50.8% of the explained variance in electoral participation,  $R^2 = .508$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .479$ ,  $F(1, 204) = 17.532$ ,  $p < .001$ . Total  $R^2$  change is .153 and statistically significant, thus radio exposure accounts for 15.3% variance in women voters' electoral participation. The final adjusted  $R^2$  shows that 47.9% of the explained change in women voters' electoral participation is accounted for by the combined 12 predictors in Model 4.

The beta ( $\beta$ ) coefficients for the significant predictors of women voters' electoral participation in Model 4 are: age ( $\beta = -.261$ ,  $t = -3.832$ ,  $p < .001$ ); residential location ( $\beta = .113$ ,  $t = 2.017$ ,  $p = .045$ ); party affiliation ( $\beta = .109$ ,  $t = 2.145$ ,  $p = .033$ ); and radio exposure ( $\beta = .498$ ,  $t = 7.964$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Radio exposure had the highest predictive power on electoral participation ( $\beta = .498$ ), suggesting that an increase of one hour per week in listening to the radio increases women voters' electoral participation by .498.

Our results are in harmony with those that demonstrate a positive correlation between radio exposure and engagement in various forms of electoral participation in Kenya (Mbeke, 2010; Yankem, 2015). The findings correspond to those of large-scale studies in Africa which reveal a positive correlation between radio exposure and electoral participation (Isaksson et al., 2014; Kuenzi & Lambright, 2005, 2007, 2011). Through listening to the radio, individuals are exposed to political information which can enrich their political knowledge, shape their political attitudes and mobilize them for electoral participation (Abdollahyan & Machika, 2017; Flanagan, 1996). Information seeking and social utility gratifications advanced in UGT (Katz et al., 1974; McQuail, 2010) also contribute to political knowledge and interpersonal political discussions that facilitate electoral participation.

## Conclusion

This study examined the nexus between women voters' radio exposure and participation in the 2013 general election in Kakamega County. Results reveal a positive and statistically significant correlation between women voters' radio exposure and electoral participation, with 15.3% variance to their political engagement attributed to radio consumption. This conforms to the findings of a direct effect of radio exposure on electoral participation established in prior studies in Africa. Radio exposure, thus, contributed to women voters' participation in the 2013 Kakamega County.

We focused on the direct effects of radio exposure on women voters' electoral participation, yet these effects may be mediated by political knowledge, attitudes and discussions. Additionally, correlational research

design adopted in this study does not consider causal relationships between variables. Despite these limitations, this article contributes to knowledge on the role of radio in political communication during elections in developing democracies in which radio dominates in the legacy media system. Our results, therefore, have implications to radio practitioners and political stakeholders' efforts in promoting gender equality in political participation as advanced in SDGs and the 2010 Constitution of Kenya. We propose increased gender-sensitive political education radio programmes targeting women based on demographic audience segmentation. A nation-wide study on the direct and indirect effects of radio exposure on women's electoral participation in Kenya is suggested.

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