

# A biographical approach to analysis of the relationship between Public Broadcasting and Politics: The case of a Ugandan Veteran Journalist

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**Abstract:** This study explores how stories of lived experiences are applied to establishing the link between politics and public broadcasting. In this study, power as a value important to both politics and public broadcasting via influence is considered in relation to its weight (the degree of participation in the making of decisions); its scope (the values whose shaping and enjoyment are controlled) and its domain (persons over whom power is exercised). There has been much research on how politicians receive the media, think about the media or interact with the media, but their media experiences, their media socialization and their media biographies are seldom analyzed (Birkner and Kramer, 2016). There is therefore a research gap with regard to politicians and their media work. Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko provided the primary data which was supported by input from some others involved in the spectrum of public broadcasting activity. Hajji's radio programmes were also listened to, and data from the internet and some magazines was also analyzed. A close interconnection between politics and public broadcasting was revealed by the findings. The findings of the study are envisaged to benefit researchers and policy makers in areas of biography, politics and public broadcasting.

**Keywords:** Public broadcasting, politics, biography, narratives, life history, journalism.

## 1.0 Introduction

This is a qualitative, single-subject historical and biographical study and Hajji Abdul Nsereko was the subject of this research. He was selected as the subject for this research because he has been a journalist in public broadcasting since he left high school in 1979; he has held a number of political posts while executing his journalism duties. For example, he was the speaker of Kampala district; Resident District Commissioner of Kyenjojo district, and he was appointed by President Yoweri Museveni as the director of political programmes in 2008; he was given an award as one of the best serving people in Uganda's public service. It is therefore believed by the researchers that Hajji Abdul Nsereko's life is deserving of biography and will prove to be interesting and worth telling. It is also believed that an account of the public broadcasting situation in Uganda, over the years will be highlighted by the study. The study was engaged with analyzing the relationship between politics and public broadcasting; because public broadcasters are the most highly structured sort of media organization and at the same time most political (Hanretty, 2011).

During the development of biographical methods, both the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism played an important role. Biographies were mostly a means of researching selected phenomena. Through this method development and under the influence of phenomenology and feminist studies, biography became the object of research (Licen and Ciuha, 2012). The main purpose of narrative studies is to understand an individual's identity, life flow and identity formation, and to accept and interpret experiences and their wording.

The term 'narrative' research is commonly used for a huge area of diverse research approaches and strategies. It could be used as a generic term of all approaches interested in narrations (Lieblich et al, 1998). Under this general umbrella biographical research is situated. Often people who are already famous and have many biographies dedicated to them attract more scholarly attention than individuals who have been treated marginally in historiography.

## 1.2 Research objectives

The main objective of the study was to explore the uniqueness of Hajji Abdul Nsereko in light of his public broadcasting and politics roles in Uganda as a way of relating these two areas. The following exploratory and descriptive research questions were applied to the study so as to emphasize the subjective reality of the individual, the process and change, as well as the totality of the person (Plummer, 1983).

1. To trace the professional involvement of Hajji Abdul Nsereko in Uganda's public broadcasting and politics.
2. To determine his personal philosophy both from a public broadcasting, and political angle.
3. To establish his personal competence evidenced during his career.
4. To assess his specific contributions to broadcasting and politics in Uganda.
5. To establish the relationship between broadcasting and politics.

The research questions and hypotheses were tested by reference to Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko's biography or life history. Derived from the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses were applied to the study.

1. Politics and public broadcasting are both shaped by history, character and culture.
2. Politics and public broadcasting incorporate political debates, historical reports, and theological discussions.
3. The meaning of politics and public broadcasting is inherent in events.

### 1.3 The Relationship between Broadcasting and Politics

In most African countries broadcasting has been the most controlled medium for both technical and political reasons (Kupe, 2003) Political implications are embodied in radio's ability to reach the majority of citizens within a country. Colonial administrations which introduced broadcasting to Africa controlled it and largely applied it to political propaganda. Post-colonial governments also emulated the same tendency.

During the last decade and half in African history, Uganda has also witnessed remarkable changes in the broadcasting sector on the continent with most of the new changes occurring alongside or symbolizing the opening up of political space in different countries as single party and military rule went into decline and multiparty systems were introduced. The African media especially broadcast media, has been chained for long, and controlled by African leaders and their collaborators, as well as multinational companies. They in that way contributed greatly to the jeopardizing of democracy in African nations, including Uganda.

On the brighter side though, currently African broadcast media have undergone tremendous and generally positive changes in the last decade. In the recent democratization process of the 1990s privately owned FM radio stations in countries where they have been allowed, has created a medium through which the voice of the opposition can be articulated during elections, thus enhancing the campaign making process, as well as free and fair elections in some countries (Kupe, 2003). In Uganda for example, talk shows like "Spectrum" on Radio One and discussions have been influential in enhancing robust political debate.

The relationship between broadcasting and politics cannot be discussed without looking at media and democracy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, western liberal democracy gained popularity in many African countries, Uganda inclusive. Consequently, pluralistic politics which is today linked to the existence of pluralistic and diverse media systems rather than government and state monopolies (Kupe, 2003). Africans have witnessed a tendency toward the creation of monolithic political institutions. For example the authoritarian nature of political governance, the noticeable abuse of various human rights and freedoms in general, and the freedom of expression in particular. This political interference in media operations including broadcasting, are justified by some scholars such as Ansah(1988) and McQuail(1997) who advocate for state intervention in media operations, in the interest of development. The Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa adopted in 2002, also advocates for restrictions to freedom of expression as long as such restrictions are not meant to trample but regulate (Anite and Nkuubi, 2014). This is in line with a number of conditions such as the fact that the right to freedom of expression cannot be regulated by a public official but by an official body; its limitation must be backed by a legitimate aim (such as respect for the rights of others, protection of national security, public order, public health or morals); and such limitations to freedom of expression must be truly necessary in the sense that it must be done for a pressing social need, and not merely out of convenience. In this case therefore, media operations are sometimes justifiably interfered with by political actions.

African countries have never experienced real press freedom during or even after colonialism (Faringer, 1991). The notion of a public sphere is relevant to Africa, based on the idea of a positive Universalist urge of building and strengthening democracy around the world. The media in Africa especially broadcast media has greatly shaped peoples' political consciousness. The public sphere therefore can help in organizing media patterns in terms of the normative notions of citizen access and participation in the political process.

The public sphere in Africa also encourages the development of a civic society, through civic participation, through the use of media like broadcast media, as vehicles of information transmission. Therefore Africa as a developing continent, both democratically and economically, needs the public sphere for its citizens to speak freely, share and transmit varying perspectives, as well as similar interests and concerns. Through the public sphere for instance, information

about elections is relayed to the citizens, enabling them to make informed choices; public opinion is enhanced by providing an independent forum for debate; and the masses are able to air their concerns to the ruling governments which can then audit their performances. In this case, the media acts as a fourth estate. This therefore aligns with the assertion, that the media are essentially the major institutions of the public sphere (Dahlgren and Parks, 1991). Hence the media are public sphere enhancers (Gillwald, 1993). For instance she considers the media as a conduit for democratic participation and education, both contributions being very important to the public sphere. In addition, the media can contribute to the formation of collective identity among the citizens of a nation through provision of public spheres of political participation, for instance through radio talk shows.

Violations of the public sphere in Uganda are evident in some of its laws that hinder freedom of expression. A case in point for example is The Public Order Management Act 2013(POMA) which is meant to provide a regulatory framework for public assemblies. It gives the police extra ordinary powers over freedom of expression by giving the Inspector General of Police the discretion of deciding whether individuals or groups of people in the form of associations are free to exercise freedom of expression. This implies that even radio or television talk shows can at one time be affected.

Despite the changes in the late 1980s and 1990s, most African governments are still far from being democratic. This is evident in rigged elections, use of brutality against political opponents, among other shortcomings (Mbaine, 2003). Therefore most governments are uncomfortable with the situations in which the media is free to report and comment on the conduct of political leaders during public affairs. For example, an EU 2016 Ugandan presidential elections' report notes that the incumbent government was given a lot of media coverage during election time. Consequently the voter's accessibility to varied and balanced information was hindered.

#### **1.4 Data analysis**

Data analysis involved sorting the data, categorized by 'codes' which summarized or ordered the material. It was a continuous process during the accumulation and scrutinization of the data. This process provided new insights and ideas, new ways of organizing parts of the data, forming types and raising new research questions. As suggested by Demetrio (1999), the following elements were looked for in the key informants' story and were useful in data analysis: Biographemes (basic life events); Biosemantemes (meanings attributed to the narrated matter); Bionemes (general reflections on experience); Biomyths (personal myths, unrealistic conceptions on events, phenomena, people); Bio themes (themes found in narratives). Four themes were identified in relation to the research objectives.

From the theoretical framework, 4 implied areas of empirical analysis emerged as follows:

1. Social background and early influences of the key informant
2. Experiences of the key informant in public broadcasting and politics
3. The interplay between politics and public broadcasting over time
4. Media policy

#### **1.5 Theoretical framework**

Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984) was applied to the study. The narrative paradigm posits that we are narrative beings who experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends. If this is true, then "all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories. Fisher applies the principles of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity to analyze various types of communication. According to Fisher, the very fact that the narrative paradigm can be applied to this wide range of communication genres is strong evidence of its validity. Due to constrictions of space, this theory is not discussed here in detail.

According to Fisher, not all stories are equally good. Even though there's no guarantee that people won't adopt a bad story, he thinks that everybody applies the same standards of narrative rationality to whatever stories he or she hears. Stories such as those related to politics and public broadcasting are interpreted in relation to the society's values which dictate a common mode of judgment to those stories.

## **1.6 Findings**

### **1.6.1 Social background and early influences of the key informant**

Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko grew up during a period characterized by dictatorial political regimes whose influence extended to public broadcasting media as well. His leadership ability hails right from Secondary school during which he was a House Captain of Agakhan house at Kibuli Secondary School and Chairperson of the Debating society. Therefore his character had a strong influence on his political skills which later impacted on his broadcasting duties.

### **1.6.2 Experiences in public broadcasting and politics**

He enrolled in the Uganda School of Journalism at IPA, which was a body that was affiliated to the Ministry of Information and other Journalism related organizations. It was also the first Institute to teach Journalism and broadcasting. Hajji Nsereko therefore has a background of professional training in Journalism which is revealed in the execution of his duties at Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC).

He later got a scholarship to go to Egypt to study Information and Broadcasting techniques at the Institute of Radio and Television. This success by Hajji is an indicator of his exceptional ability in the field of Journalism. Hajji says that during his studies, he was always selected on merit. He was for example an excellent Biology student during his secondary school level, at Kibuli Secondary School. This can be attributed to his being hard working, focused and talented and probably being disciplined because disciplined people usually emerge successful in life. Discipline in terms of one's character is also paramount to the success of politicians who engage in public broadcasting activities.

Hajji started working in December 1970 as a program and news producer. He was therefore interested in his broadcasting career, since he immediately joined the broadcasting profession after his training. He ascended to the highest position at the then Radio Uganda, when he became an Assistant Controller of Programmes. This is a further attestation of his exceptional ability in the broadcasting area.

In 1998, he left the Civil Service and joined active politics as an amateur politician with a good background in Journalism and Broadcasting, as Secretary for Information in Kampala Central Division, located in Uganda's Capital city. He thus got a short break from active Journalism into politics but he continued broadcasting pro-development programmes at Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) when he was a politician as well. This reveals a linkage between politics and broadcasting in as far as his career is concerned in relation to the social use of public broadcasting to politicians. Thereafter, he took on another political post as a City Councilor in Kampala City Council during which he was appointed by the Councilors as Chairman of the Marketing committee. His acquisition of the afore-mentioned political duties is also an indicator of Hajji's exceptional leadership qualities.

He became the Speaker of Kampala City Council when so many activities were decentralized to Local governments, a position which could have been attributed to his speaker abilities such as confidence, persuasion, and being a good listener among others. He thereafter became the Chairperson of the National Speaker's Association of Uganda.

Hajji Nsereko worked hard to make sure that he uplifts politics in Uganda and also to clear the misconception of "politics being a dirty game". He achieved this through his broadcasting skills and since that time, many journalists have joined the politics profession and others have gone to



Makerere University to undertake degree programmes in Political Science. This testifies the link between politics and broadcasting whereby public broadcasting is a medium through which political communication relays messages to its intended audiences. In light of the aforementioned role played by Hajji Nsereko, whereby he acted as both a pace-setter and a role-model in the sphere of politics and broadcasting, it can be deduced that politics and public broadcasting are inherent in events (refer to hypothesis 3). This finding also aligns with Fisher's Narrative paradigm which alleges that values in a story are indicators of whom we should emulate.

### **1.6.3 Experiences of the key informant in public broadcasting and politics**

Hajji Nsereko worked as a Civil servant and played an advisory role to politicians to ensure that they didn't act antagonistically as well as ensure that the broadcasted programmes were relevant to government programmes and policies. In this case he played a supervisory role in broadcasting. It can also be deduced that media act as representatives of political ideologies that have to be forced to fulfill their function for the state that legitimately represents society and controls it to a certain degree (Birkner and Kramer, 2016). It is also an indicator of his professionalism since he abided by the then existent media laws.

Hajji's supervisory role in broadcasting was a success, because most of his input was accorded the seriousness it deserved. For example, he had a lot of listeners by way of correspondence, since at that time there were no phone-in programmes, hence the only mode of communication with the listeners was through mail/letters. Politics and public broadcasting are there influenced by character as posited by the second hypothesis of this study. It is Hajji's belief that this strong communication with the listeners contributed to his quick rise through the public broadcasting ranks at the then existent Radio Uganda. In other words, he made great use of his positive self-representation to win the love of his audience. Hence the media and television in particular, create the illusion of a personal, charismatic and almost unmediated relationship to the population (Birkner and Kramer, 2016). Hajji Nsereko believes that he might have performed very well and that he left a legacy for others to emulate. This is a further re-affirmation of Fisher's allegation of the influence of values on peoples' behavior. Given the fact that Hajji's programmes were good and that they contributed to Uganda's national cause, he was recalled back to UBC from politics, to occupy the post of Director of Political Programmes. Public broadcasting therefore played a political role of ideological reliability, which concurs with Fisher's principle of narrative coherence in which characters can be counted on to act consistently.

Hajji also holds a philosophy of public media and private media serving the same public. However he notes that Public broadcasting involves selling government programmes and ideology. In other words, it involves serving the government in place and following its instructions. This elaboration shows Hajji's conformity to existing rules and regulations as prescribed in the media laws, hence being professional. He also notes that private media does not necessarily serve the interests of government. Despite the fact that private media is supposed to counter-check government actions, some private media in Uganda have gone to extremes, by becoming abusive toward the ruling government, and making their listeners perceive everything related to government, negatively. As Hajji elaborates therefore, the relationship between politics and public broadcasting can be negative with one of them (in this case public broadcasting) negatively impacting the other.

He also remarks that anti-government politics rhymes better with private media and that politicians or political parties usually use private media in their struggle to oust governments or to topple and even undermine governments. He also notes that politicians use private media to hold government accountable for all the negative happenings in society. This concurs with what some media scholars say in as far as the role of private media is concerned and it's a manifestation of Hajji's extensive media knowledge. It can be deduced that Hajji's story has

narrative fidelity in which he uses his broadcasting knowledge to maintain a consistent pro-government stance in his programmes which are believable to his audience.

#### **1.6.4 Media policy**

This section of Hajji's biography was gauged through asking him about the challenges he faced as a public broadcaster, and how he managed to overcome them as a way of mapping out the influence of media policy on public broadcasting.

One of the biggest challenges faced by Hajji Nsereko was related to orientation and training at the Institute of Public Administration, School of Journalism in Kampala, which had just been established by the Government of Uganda. Fresh from secondary school, he had to go for that training with others who were already practicing broadcasting and journalism at IPA. For example, they all had to sit in the same class, study the same content, and later do the same exam. This challenge indicates a lack of selection criteria for upcoming journalists by the then IPA-School of Journalism. It further indicates that Uganda's frail Journalism legislative framework has been in existence for a long time.

Hajji says that he overcame the above challenge by the Grace of the Almighty God, whereby he was able to excel in the examination of the first course which was known as "Information and Broadcasting Skills." This success is an indicator of Hajji's excellence, perseverance, and hardworking nature, given the stiff competition he faced.

Hajji and his colleagues also faced challenges while rendering service to the public. For example, they worked under so many directives from the then ruling government which dictated the way the programmes were run. In addition, while some directives allowed broadcasters time to prepare, many of those directives were abrupt and very strict, and had to be followed.

This revelation by Hajji mentions the rigid nature of state-controlled broadcasting prior to media liberalization, which never allowed for independent broadcasting. This was the case in many if not most African countries. Hajji's ability to work under such strict and government 'remote-controlled' conditions is an indicator of his loyalty and perseverance to both the government and broadcasting. Furthermore it can be deduced that politics makes us of the media to achieve its desired objectives.

Hajji notes that today's journalism is more liberal due to more freedom of speech and more freedom of press. In other words, there is not too much censorship of journalism today. This also indicates that the dispositions once acquired by politicians and the changing media structure restrict their strategies. Hence old media strategies by politicians are successful for some time, but structural and cultural changes limit their success. This agrees with the first hypothesis of this study which posits that the shape of politics and public broadcasting is influenced by culture and history which are in turn linked to the character of the politicians.

#### **1.6.5 The interplay between public broadcasting and Politics**

Hajji elaborates that when we talk about broadcasting and politics we are nearly saying the same thing because broadcasting refers to disseminating information to the people through broadcasting gadgets, and politics involves disseminating political slogans, political ideologies, political statements to the people using the media including broadcasting media. Broadcasting is therefore a medium through which information can be passed on to the people. It is meant to create awareness in the people on what we want and how we want it.

Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko managed to make use of both his political and broadcasting skills to make some contributions in both areas as follows:

Through his effort and initiative in compiling programmes, Hajji became very popular in communicating and chairing or moderating programmes on both radio and television. This was especially so in the area of religious programmes. For example, he was the first public broadcaster to go to Mecca and cover the Hajji ceremony, whereby he transmitted the radio

<http://jrdsjournal.wixsite.com/humanities-cultural>

programmes from Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to the then Radio Uganda and Uganda Television. That coverage being good enough, earned him a status of being a member of the broadcasters of the Islamic Conference, hence starting up the International Islamic States' Broadcasting Organization (ISBO) as a unit of the Islamic Conference. This he believes was his greatest contribution in as far as broadcasting is concerned. This achievement concurs with the second objective of the study which envisages theological discussions as embedded in politics and public broadcasting.

Hajji is one of the few broadcasters in Uganda who started producing and presenting programmes in the local language of Luganda and in English dubbed "Calling Farmers" which was about forest farming; he read news; he made commentaries on various functions; he made programmes on guiding people on how to build their personal houses; and he made pro-development programmes. He currently runs two programmes on Star FM radio namely "Sekanyolya" and "Ewakanyumiza" a politically oriented program. He believes that those programmes made him very outstanding as one of the prominent contributors to Public broadcasting. It can therefore be posited that politicians can use public broadcasting as a channel for the transmission of their ideologies to media audiences. This also proves the third objective right, since events give meaning to politics and public broadcasting.

It is through his effort and contribution that the position of Secretary for Information in the politics of Uganda came into existence and consequently very many people in Uganda particularly broadcasters and journalists joined politics, and have gained considerable benefits.

Due to the way in which he used to present and moderate his political programmes, people envisaged in him the talent of being "Speaker of the Council" which he says he did very well, and that when he left, he was ordained and decorated with an award of "*Speaker Emeritus*" from the Speakers' Association of Uganda in conjunction with the Uganda Local Government Association. This is an attestation that politics and public broadcasting are indeed embedded in character, culture and history (refer to hypothesis 1). Hajji also served as a Resident District Commissioner of Kyenjojo district from 2005 whereby he served for 4 years and he was mainly involved in settling land disputes during his term of office.

He is currently serving as the "Director Political Programmes" at Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) and he is honored to have been brought back to Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) in 2008 by the President of Uganda from politics of the district, so that he can guide UBC staff on presenting, composing and producing political programmes. The Government of Uganda's merit-based system is reflected here whereby Hajji was selected irrespective of his tribe and religion, but in relation to his exceptional abilities. The third hypothesis is proved right since Hajji's political and public broadcasting roles are inherent in events that occur throughout his career and influence his progress in both spheres.

Other sources of data collection revealed Al Hajji Nsereko's exceptional qualities in leadership, broadcasting and social relations. Some of the qualities were already evident in the previously collected data from the narrative interviews with Hajji Nsereko himself, but some findings were totally new and revealing of Hajji's additional qualities that were not evident before. The researcher therefore appreciates the value of data triangulation in as far as enhancing data validity is concerned, as well as discovering new data. These diverse data sources enhanced our understanding of biographic research in general and the key informant's life in particular.

Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko has been described as possessing the following professional characteristics: exposure, experience, education, articulate, enthusiastic, committed, dedicated, mentoring, person-centered, advice-centered, and innovative. Fisher says we are concerned with the values embedded in the message, the relevance of those values to decisions made, the consequence of adhering to those values, the overlap with the world view of the audience, and conformity with what the audience members believe is "an ideal basis of conduct." Adoption of



these aspects to the data analysis enabled the researcher to describe Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko using the afore-mentioned characteristics.

### **1.7 Conclusion**

From the findings it can be concluded that public broadcasting can confirm and strengthen trends of political opinion already formed. In other words, a body of opinion forms a public broadcast rather than a public broadcast a body of opinion.

Hajji Nsereko's political and other social achievements in relation to his public broadcasting career emphasize the importance of class both as a social fact and social symbol (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1982) whereby emphasis is placed on merit rather than rank, skill rather than status as indicators of democratic rule with the political and public broadcasting institutions in which he served. Using Hajji Nsereko as an example, it can be concluded that politics and public broadcasting are related in the sense that they both involve social mobility whereby Hajji is portrayed as ably participating in new groups both politically and socially via public broadcasting.

### **1.8 Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited by the fact that there is no consensus about what a narrative approach looks like (Roberts, 2002). The researchers read available literature on the narrative approach to get guidance on how to go about this approach. In order to be taken seriously, we need a framework that explicitly acknowledges the reality of structures behind stories and can engage in the analyses of the interaction between agency and structure, since knowledge is to understand as well as explain meaning (Steensen, 2006)

One of the selected interviewees, a veteran gate man at Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) refused to participate in the study, and yet he was envisaged to be very knowledgeable about Al Hajji Abdul Nsereko. He was substituted with other interviewees.

Information is power and digital technologies transform access to information. Future researchers therefore need to ponder on how the transformative power from people's intimate stories might be used.

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