

Reflecting on News Quality

An examination of audience perspective on TV news programs quality and the effects of commercialization on news content

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Abstract: *This study examined the audience perspective on what constitutes quality television news programs and the effects of commercialization on news content with regards to news quality. The media is a commercial enterprise like any other business investment venture, it therefore seeks to create and supply products that are suited and demanded by its clients. Clients of all products and services demand the best quality of all they seek to purchase.*

The tenets of social responsibility consider quality news programs to constitute in-depth and analytical news coverage that serves the society in terms of development and ensures information dissemination for social good. The study indicated that the audience instead preferred non-comprehensive, non-analytical news stories. Based on this analysis, it was evident that quality news programs, according to audience depend on how informative it is with regards to current affairs.

Among the factors that were considered important elements of news quality included informational content, depth of news coverage and insights, comprehensiveness of news stories among others. Additionally, others factors that were considered by the audience to make quality news programs included thoroughness in reporting, creativity in presentations and studio layout, clarity of thoughts and ideas during news presentations, validity in treatments of news subjects, diversity of opinions, ease of comprehensibility, considerations of gender balances and interactivity with the audiences among others factors. From the study it is evident that the audience perspective of what constitutes quality news programs differs considerably from scholarly and idealistic expectations as per the social responsibility theory.

Keywords: *Audience, Commercialization, News quality, programs, Social responsibility,*

1. INTRODUCTION

The social responsibility of the media as agents of information, education and development communication in general should be the basis of analysing the quality of TV news programs. The media has responsibilities toward the public. These responsibilities may include: contractual responsibility in relation to the media and their internal organization; social responsibility obligations towards public opinion and society as a whole; responsibility or liability deriving from the obligation to comply with the law; and the responsibility towards national and international communities, to ensure acceptable values, (Ugwuanyi :2005). Any media which performs these functions in furtherance of their responsibilities to the general public can be said to have delivered good quality news programs to its audience. But a situation whereby media practitioners perform their duties based on financial promptings and reward negate the ethic and objectives of the profession.

It should be considered that the establishment of media institutions as commercial enterprises upsets this roles and responsibilities of the media to society because the drive for more profits becomes the overriding objective for most of such media houses. Ironically though, most commercial media houses are somehow able to invest in new technology, undertake better reporting because they hire professionals and are able to explore expanded markets to widen their reach and share. All this are done by commercial media houses to increase their audience base in terms of numbers for maximization of profits.

The focus of media majority of entrepreneurs has shifted from the audience to advertisers. The importance and value of advertisers in the eyes of media managers and entrepreneurs have exceeded audience interests. Using the same rationalization, audience ratings which are primarily meant to attract advertisers have become more important than the content. The content production largely skewed towards pleasing and satisfying advertisers has been done with absolute disregard to interest of the public.

The quality of news depends on the objective, ethical and professional coverage of issues that touch on the society in general. The lack of such quality coverage on the Kenyan TV station has been glaringly evident as the number of complaints to the Media Council of Kenya has increased in the past one year. While the training of journalists in Kenya has been consistently undertaken through proper curriculum development and in-house media training policies, the gaps of quality news reporting still exist. The majority of the complainants who submit their issues to the Media Council term the coverage as unprofessional and lacking ‘quality’.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To determine audience perception on quality of news programs with regards to pre-defined quality dimensions.
- To understand audience perception with regards to what defines quality news programs and how factors resulting from commercialisation affect such qualities.
- To establish the general audience perception of news programs with reference to news quality and its contrast to scholarly definitions.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used survey methodology with open ended, partially categorized and closed ended questionnaires. The survey process is the creation of questions that accurately measure the opinions, experiences and behaviors of the respondents. The study was done in Nairobi where the population was derived from the population’s census of 2009. Using the Cochran sampling formula, a sample size was calculated from where multi-stage random sampling was used to identify the respondents.

The first stage used stratified random sampling while the second stage used simple random sampling to identify the individual respondents. The precondition for the administration of the questionnaire was the consumption of news programs in whichever TV program that the audience engaged in. The study was done in a time frame of three months after which data analyses was done using SPSS and excel to come up with the findings.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. Viewership of News Program by Kenyan Audience

Due to audio-visual effect of TV news, the facts get lively presented to the audience and they get involved with the news. Thus, TV news satisfies the inquisitiveness of the audience mind through presenting video footage and audio description. Scornia (1965) has placed the TV as ‘superior to the print media’ due to its magic power of telling and presenting a fact or event meaningfully and successfully.

News programs are the most watched TV programs among Kenyan audience according to Audience research study done by The Kenya Audience Research foundation. This viewership results from a number of factors including the strategic nature of news programs as tools of information on current affairs and occurrences on both local and international scale. The second factor has to do with the timing of the news programs especially on TV where the morning, lunch hour and evening news segments generate high audience viewership consumption patterns.

Viewer’s responses to TV programs can be very complicated because it is anchored on audience preferences and choices .However, the nature of current affairs stories consisting mainly of hard and soft news in TV news programs facilitates maximum consumption among the audience.

News programs have the highest time allocation and time spent by the audience in its consumption. According to a quarterly audience study report by The Kenya Audience Research Foundation, 31% of total time allocated for all News programs is dedicated for news programs.32% of time is spent by the audience in the consumption of news programs. The quantity of news programs in Kenyan TV stations in terms of time allocation and time spent is remarkable judging by its performance relative to other programs. However, the quality of news programs is of greater importance and worth a closer microscopic examination.

4.2. News Quality Criteria

Quality is broadly a subjective and relational concept meaning that there is no single feature or characteristic defining it. Quality in this report refers to the fulfillment of a set of inherent characteristics and expectations anchored on principles of social responsibility theory where the media is supposed to serve public interest first. A definition that has been adopted from McQuailwho

alleges that quality standards with regards to the media must be developed from media performance principles.

According to McQuail, the aspects of quality relates to social quality where media news supplies information that is crucial for citizen’s participation in social, economic and cultural life. An aspect of professional news presentation is also a key factor in the determination of news programs in this study. Therefore social responsibility concerns and journalism professional functions formed the key definitions of News Quality for the study.

News is considered a direct, compact and possibly objective communication about a new event that is important and interesting to the public through the media platform. News quality therefore is perceived in the light of the fact that it should provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues affecting them on a daily basis. The media offers a wide range of products to its audience who are consumers and the desired recipients of such valuable products in the distribution chain (Jones.S, 2008).

Just like in other industries, quality is an important aspect of consumption of media products. Similarly just like in other industries products, the definition of quality is quite subjective and therefore complex to categorically define. This springs from the fact that quality depends on consumers taste and preference, intended usage among other complex issues (Chernov.G, 2010).This study adopted the definition of quality based on media role as an important tool of communication and education to its audience.

Zaller,J (2009) argues that many authors have found it useful to distinguish between an information model of journalism and an entertainment model. According to Zaller, good journalism must both inform and entertain, but the balance may vary. One element of the conception of “quality journalism” to be used in this paper is that it is primarily intended to provide information about the larger world. The other key element is the content of news. According to Zaller (2009) The news media provide information about a great variety of topics, from the activities of government to stock prices to tips on how to pick high quality Cabernets. Some of this content refers to matters of general social or political significance and is implicitly intended to help citizens in their role as democratic decision-makers; other information is intended primarily for purposes of entertainment or personal consumption. My notion of news quality stresses the former. He therefore defines high quality news as information about matters of general political or social significance

4.3. Expectations of the Media with Reference to News Quality

The media is normatively expected to provide relevant, diverse, pluralistic, and carefully investigated information to the public in form of news stories. Furthermore, the media is also expected to place relevant information within a broader context and background, within diverse perspectives, and should provide commentary about its various characteristics (Christoph, S, Sharon, L, 2010).Such elements of news stories according to Christoph and Sharon enrich their quality and enhance their clear understanding of issues by the audience. The media is also expected to offer a free and neutral platform for full participation of members of the society in line with their rights and freedom as enshrined in the constitutionally and any other relevant policy or legislation in Kenya.

4.4. Elements of High Quality News

Table1. *TV News quality criteria*

Aspect of quality	Quality Criteria
Packaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of reasons, causes beyond factual information • Presence of background information • Attachment of clips and visual evidence
Objectivity & Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity of viewpoints • Diversity of news sources • Balance of opinion • Clear separation of journalistic fact and opinion
Information comprehensiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensiveness of information • Diversity of topics • Diversity of actors in stories • Diversity of source
Mode of presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manner of news presentation by anchors/reporters • Inclusion of news sources as part of story • Main actors/subjects in news story

The quality of news programs is determined by the degree of professionalism exhibited by journalist and their general adherence to the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism. Journalists and editors are expected to not only check the information they receive from whatever source, but also to actively research and investigate additional information. Well balanced stories require the use of diverse sources so that a range of actors (political decision-makers, representatives of groups, the general public) are represented in news reports (Christoph,S, Sharon .L ,2010).

Journalists are expected to provide their readers not only with facts but with context as well. Hence, news stories should contain background information referring to the context, and information on causes of a reported fact as well as on its supposed consequences. Such background enhances the quality of news stories in that it enriches the knowledge of the audience on various issues and does not merely offer them crust information that maybe shallow and misleading (Christoph,S, Sharon ,L(2010).News stories should contain different viewpoints, usually opinions of different actors. The more viewpoints, the better the range of potential opinions on a specific subject is reflected, and thus the better the quality of news program. The journalist's opinion may add to this quality in case the opinion is strictly separated from reported facts and viewpoints (for example, as a commentary)

4.5. Competition and Quality of News programs

The media industry like any other operates within highly competitive and lucrative environment. However unlike other industries, the nature of competition in the media industry is made unique by the uniqueness of media products. The media competes first for the audience who will then attract advertisers who will in turn bring in revenue.

Access to most of the European and Japanese TV channels is provided free of charge to viewers while production and operating costs are essentially covered by a mixture of television licence fees, tax appropriation and advertising receipts. Advertising receipts also contribute up to 60 per cent of total receipts of the press industry in Europe (Picard 2005).This is the case with Kenya where advertising receipts form the biggest chunk on revenue for commercial TV stations although Kenya doesn't have television licence fee or tax appropriation as major sources of income.

The financial structure of the media industry finds its origin from the fact that the very existence of most manufactured goods produced by the industrial sector cannot be brought to consumers' knowledge without some media intermediation. As a consequence, advertisers depend on media to promote and sell their products while media exploit this dependence to finance media production. In fact, media firms sell a joint product to two different classes of buyers: the media support, sold to advertisers (together with the media audience), and the media content, sold to the media audience (Gabszewicz et al, 2006).

There exist two-sided network effects between the media and advertising industries: the size of demand in the advertising industry influences the utility of the operators (media owners and media consumers) in the media industry, and the size of demand in the media industry influences the utility of the operators in the advertising market. The presence of this two-sided market for audience and advertising raises several interesting questions concerning its impact on competition in the media industry and on media content and diversity and to a large extent on quality (Gabszewicz et al, 2006).

Production costs are nearly constant with respect to audience size (once a big antenna has been purchased) but advertising revenue increases with audience size. News competition may be defined as the extent to which two or more news providers offer the same kind of news product to the same audience in the same format at the same time. But like in conventional product industry where product differentiation is done, TV station try to package their news programs differently to that offered to their competitors.

The Kenyan media industry operates in relatively lesser (in size) market compared to developed nations which is based on a countries economic potential. Zaller argues that bigger markets can mean more advertising revenue per hour of news programming, which could translate into more resources for the production of each hour of news, which could lead to more reporters, more in-depth reporting, and, more generally, "higher quality" news (Zaller, 1999). One must therefore assume that all news programs that offer their product within the same geographical market are to some degree in competition with one another, such that gains by one tend to reduce the market share of others. Competition becomes more intense as: two or more news providers focus on the same general type of news (e.g., local news), two or more news providers compete in the same medium, such as print or television, two or more news providers offer their product in the same time slot. On the other hand,

competition becomes less intense when one or more news programs receives any sort of subsidy whose effect is to free it from the need to win audience share through market competition (Zaller, 1999).

4.6. Commercialization of news content

The definition of commercialization in this study is adopted from Jorgensen and refers to any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve (Jorgensen et al,2009).

Ekwo's (1996) notes that news commercialization is a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentified or unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that news is fair, objective and socially responsible. In effect therefore, commercialization leads the media to emphasize the profitable aspects of media products while in the process sacrificing their quality or debasing inherent functionality.

The primary content of the media today is commercialized news and features designed to appeal to broad audiences, to entertain, to be cost effective and to maintain readers whose attention can be sold to advertisers. The result is that stories that may offend are ignored in favor of those more acceptable and entertaining to larger numbers of readers, that stories that are costly to cover are downplayed or ignored and that stories creating financial risks are ignored (Picard, 2004).

The commercial success of free to air Television stations is boosted by advertising revenue unlike pay TV whose revenue consist of both subscription and circulation figures. The quality of news programs on TV stations may be affected by commercial interest because of the element of prioritization. When adverts become interruptive and inconveniencing to the news audience, such may lower the quality of new programs which are meant to inform. The adverts especially on television station provide for a significant portion of the revenue of the media industry because it has a combination of audio and visual components. The free to air channels rely solely on the advertisements as their source of revenue and this makes advertising a critical focal point to ensure sustained efficiency in operation by the media houses (Upshaw, J., Chernov, Gennadiy & Koranda, D, 2007)

Economic dynamics of profit margin in the media industry has made cost benefit analysis a vital aspect in production and sale of media products .Cost control measures have received more emphasis as media organisation outsource parts of production chains in a bid to minimize costs, the number of staff in newsrooms is shrinking, external sources such as Public Relation are becoming more important news sources, and costly investigation of topics is restricted (Siegret et al, 2008).

The overall impact of such commercial oriented measures is that optimizing cost efficiency is gaining dominance over optimizing the quality of the news programs as a media product. This has led to what Picard calls "homogenization of information and ideas" and the range of opinions reflected in media reporting shrinks (Picard 2005).

Media priorities have shifted and entirely tilted towards the advertisers. The quest of audience to be informed and educated cannot be quenched adequately. The media has been known to create advertising-friendly content to attract more advertising. Boundaries between advertising and editorial content are fading, and media are becoming increasingly dependent on advertisers. Consequently, they become vulnerable to outside pressure (Picard 2005).

News is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties. By this practice individuals, communities, private and public organizations, local governments, state governments and ministries, gain access to the mass media during news time for a prescribed fee in order to boost their public awareness for profit purposes.

Broadcasters compete in two dimensions: On the number of viewers, as well as on the number of firms which they advertise for. Profit is made by selling airtime to firms whose willingness to pay depends on the number of viewers. The number of viewers is also negatively affected by the number of advertisements. Therefore, the profit maximizing advertising prices are determined by balancing the endogenously-determined number of viewers with the endogenously-determined number of advertising firms. In this respect, the role played by broadcasters in the environment described in this paper resembles very much firms that operate in two-sided market (Rochet & Tirole, 2003).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table2. Demographic profile of respondents

Respondents:	Audience sampled from Nairobi city, Kenya
Sample Size:	232
Response:	94.3%
Age:	18-19 (13.8%), 20-24 (40.5%), 25-29 (19.8%), 30-34 (6.5%), 35-39 (8.2%), 40-44 (4.3%), 45-49 (6.9%)
Gender:	54.3% female 45.3 Male
Education:	Degree (30.6%), Diploma (59.1%) Certificate (8.6%) masters (1.7%)
TV station watched	Citizen (47.4%) KTN (21.6%) NTV (27.0%) KBC (4%)

Table3. Demographic profile of respondent

Respondents:	Response rate
Do you watch TV 5 times a week?	96.6% yes 3.4% No
Do you watch news programs at 7 and 9 pm?	95.4% yes 4.6% No
Time of watching news	7pm: 28.9% 9pm: 71.1%
Gender:	54.3% female 45.3 Male
Education:	University educations

5.2. Segments of News Programs Considered by Audience to have High Quality

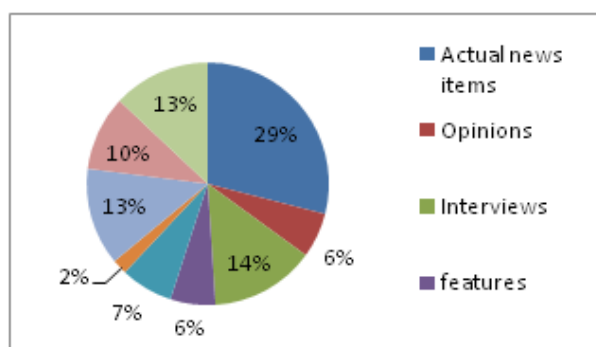


Chart1. Segments of news considered to contain high quality

The respondents indicated that the actual news items and stories were considered major components of quality news programs. This consisted of 29% of the respondents while analytical and in-depth coverage components of news stories like commentaries, documentaries and even investigative pieces were ranked low by the respondents with regards to quality. This consisted of 6%, 13% and 13% respectively. This is an indication that such in-depth and analytical news segments do not constitute quality as far as audiences are concerned.

5.3. Topical Composition of Quality News Programs

29.3% of the respondents indicated that the human interest stories in the news programs were key in constituting high quality content in news programs. 23.7% stated that political stories were important aspect in determining quality content in news programs while 13.8% of the respondents stated that development stories were a very important component of news programs in Kenyan TV.

This is an indication that the audience expectations and indications of quality news programs were very different from the tenets stipulated in the social responsibility theory. While news content like development, news with legal policy issues, and economic analysis among other stories should have been considered as important elements of quality news content, the audience perceptions are quite different.

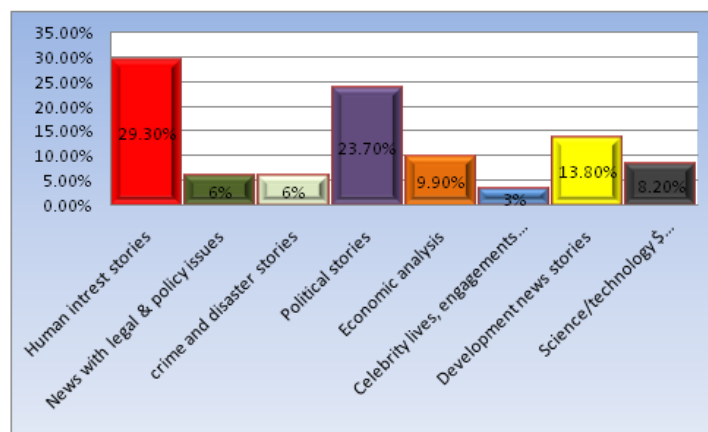


Chart2. Topical composition of quality news programs

5.4. General Audience Perception of News Programs with Reference to News Quality

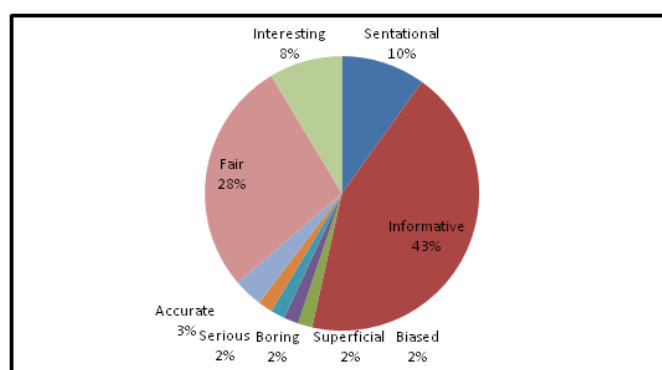


Chart3. Audience description of quality news programs

43% of the respondents indicated that the news programs were informative, 28% indicated that they were fair and balanced, 10% thought that the news was sensational while 8% indicated that it was interesting. Based on this analysis, it was evident that quality news programs, according to audience depend on how informative it is. This is an indicative factor as to what drives audience consumption of news programs in Kenya. Some of the respondents found news programs to be biased, boring, very serious and mostly superficial.

5.5. Audience Consideration of What Constitutes Quality News Programs

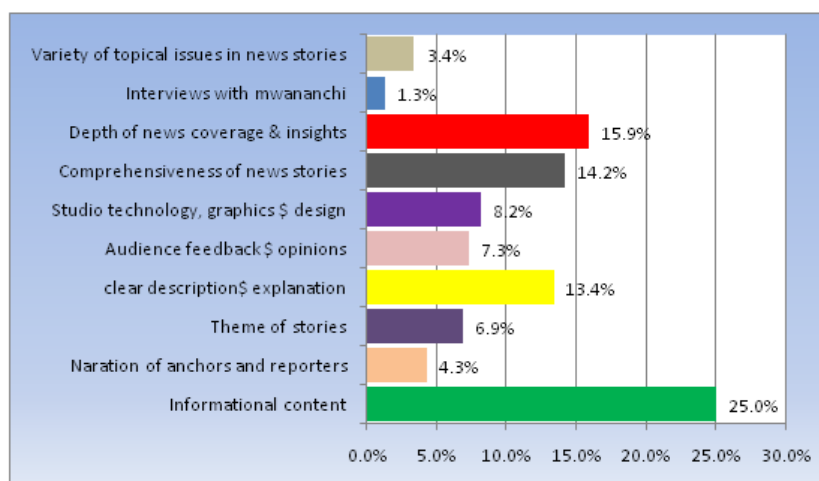


Chart4. Audience description of quality news programs

Generally, what constitutes quality news programs varied as indicated by the respondent’s reaction. To some, informational content of the news programs largely determined if news was quality while 15.9% indicated that the depth of news coverage was very important. Comprehensiveness of news stories was also considered by 14.2% of the respondents an important element in determining quality

news programs. Clear descriptions and explanations were also mentioned by 13.4% of the respondents as a major indicator of quality news programs.

5.6. Quality Dimension of News Programs

Table5. *Quality dimensions of news programs*

Quality dimension of news programs			
Dimension	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Thoroughness in reporting	232	3.4224	.84414
Creativity in presentation	232	3.9569	.92481
Clarity of thoughts and ideas	232	3.5862	.98534
Valid treatment of news subject	232	3.4310	.80823
Diversity of opinions	232	3.4181	.96350
Ease of comprehensibility	232	3.5302	.79443
Gender balance & sensitivity	232	3.5172	1.14327
Aesthetic and studio design	232	3.9138	.97651
Logical, understandable flow	232	3.7629	.84761
Interactivity with audiences	232	3.6164	1.00832
Suitability for family viewing	232	3.7759	1.00721
Total valid (N)	232		

Some of the factors that were considered by the audience to make quality news programs included thoroughness in reporting, creativity in presentations and studio layout, clarity of thoughts and ideas during news presentations, validity in treatments of news subjects, diversity of opinions, ease of comprehensibility, considerations of gender balances and interactivity with the audiences among others factors.

Respondents were asked to rate the news programs they watched based on a number of news quality dimensions. While the respondents had near similar views with regards to the majority of the quality dimensions indicated, gender balance & sensitivity, Interactivity with the audience and suitability with the audience were some of the dimensions which varied greatly among the respondents.

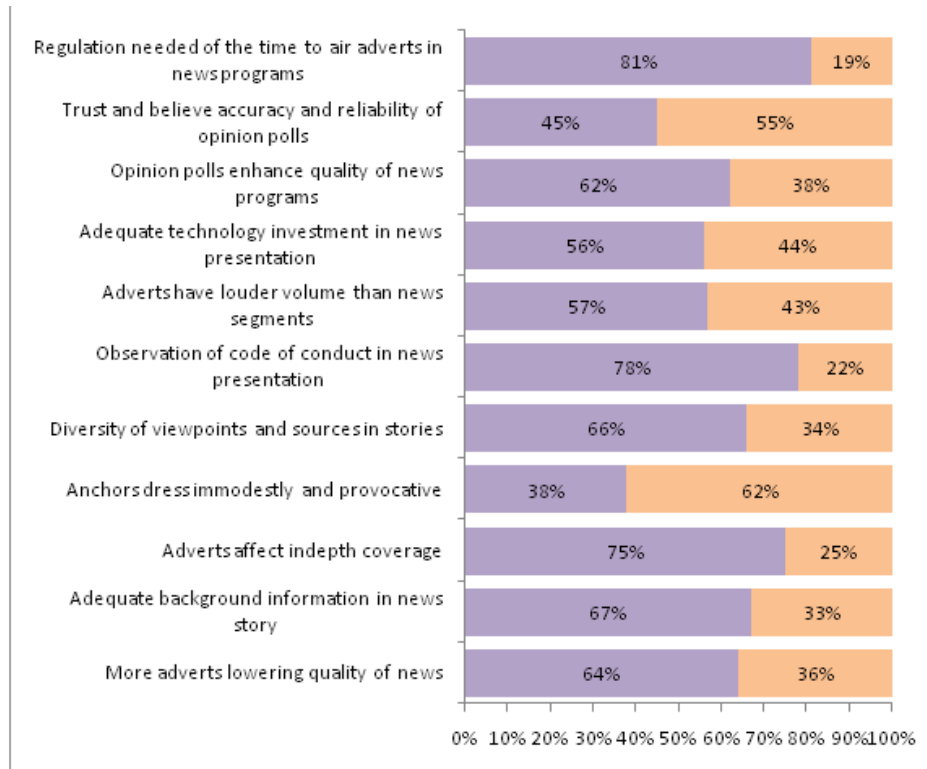


Chart6. *Quality dimensions of news programs*

64% of the respondents indicated that the more adverts in the news programs served to lower the quality of news, 75% indicated that the adverts affected in-depth coverage of news stories.38% thought that anchors dressed immodestly and provocatively and this affected the quality of news programs especially with regards to family viewing. 66% agreed that the news programs had diversity

of viewpoints and sources in the story and this enhanced the news quality. 56% of the respondents indicated adequate technology investment in news presentation would enhance news presentations and quality as compared to the current status.

The respondents also considered some of the factors like opinion polls as constituting quality news programs; however, 38% felt that it was not an important component of news quality as such. The observation in code of conduct for the practice of journalism was also rated as among the most important factors that should constitute news quality.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The question of television news quality programs is whether news provides a sufficiently rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work. The prevalence of quality news programs has been made complicated by the fact that the line between news and entertainment is increasingly blurred. Traditional news has gotten softer, and many new kinds of information programming have begun to carry public affairs information. While different scholars differ on the constitution of quality news programs, the most important criterion for assessing the quality of the news is that it should provide the information citizens need to discharge their democratic responsibilities.

The definition of quality news according to the audience is very important. This is because they dictate the content that the media houses are able to air. In an era where the media is continuously operating as commercial enterprises where a client is king, the modeling of media content to fit into consumer demands has become an important aspect in defining news quality. While very few studies have in the past focused on news quality in the audience perspective, such cannot be complete unless this perspective is included. From this study, it was evident that news quality according to the audience depended on factors like: thoroughness in reporting, creativity in presentations and studio layout, clarity of thoughts and ideas during news presentations, validity in treatments of news subjects, diversity of opinions, ease of comprehensibility, considerations of gender balances and interactivity with the audiences among others factors. While the audience consider content in form of the mode of presentation/packaging and also in terms of the content of the news programs, the scholarly definitions mainly focuses on the content.

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