

Assessing the Effectiveness of Private Media in Covering Political News: Case Study of Prime Television in Lusaka District

Miracle Kahona¹ & Dr. Sycorax Tiyesa Ndhlovu²

^{1,2}Department of Media Studies, Information and Communications University and Zambia Research and Development Center, Lusaka, Zambia

ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: February 2026 Keywords: Private media effectiveness Political news coverage Prime Television Media accuracy Agenda-setting	This study assessed the effectiveness of private media in covering political news in Zambia, focusing on Prime Television in Lusaka District, guided by Agenda-Setting Theory. The research assessed journalists' accuracy in providing political news, the effectiveness of political coverage in shaping public understanding, and challenges faced by electronic media in handling political news. A mixed-methods design combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 30 respondents, including reporters, editors, sub-editors, media owners, and representatives from the Independent Broadcasting Authority IBA and Media Institute of Southern Africa MISA Zambia. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Stata for quantitative components, with thematic analysis for qualitative data. The findings revealed encouraging performance in key areas. Regarding accuracy, 43.33% rated Prime Television's commitment to factual reporting as good, while 56.67% of journalists frequently cited credible sources. The station demonstrated effectiveness in shaping public understanding, with 76.67% rating news delivery as timely or very timely. Additionally, 52% agreed that coverage promotes transparency and accountability in governance, 30% strongly agreed it influences public opinion, and 50% rated coverage as neutral in presenting multiple viewpoints.

1. Introduction

The role of media in democratic governance emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry during the latter half of the twentieth century, when communication theorists began systematically assessing how news media influenced political processes and public opinion formation. The concept of media effectiveness in political coverage evolved from early propaganda studies in the 1940s to more sophisticated frameworks that recognized media as integral components of democratic accountability mechanisms. Traditional theories of media influence, particularly agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, established foundational understanding that media not only informed the public but also shaped the salience of political issues in public consciousness. The normative concept of the fourth estate emerged in democratic theory, positioning media as essential watchdogs that monitored governmental power and facilitated informed citizen participation in political decision-making.

Globally, private media outlets experienced significant transformation between the 1990s and early 2020s, with liberalization policies in numerous countries reducing state monopolies over broadcasting. This period witnessed unprecedented growth in private television stations, which became primary sources of political information for citizens worldwide. In Western democracies, particularly the United States and United Kingdom, private television networks developed sophisticated political coverage frameworks characterized by investigative journalism, fact-checking mechanisms, and diverse editorial perspectives.

The Zambian media environment underwent substantial transformation following the country's return to multiparty democracy in 1991, with private media outlets emerging to challenge the dominance of state-controlled Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC). This liberalization accelerated in the early 2000s with the establishment of several private television stations, including Muvi TV, ZNBC's commercial competitors, and subsequently Prime Television. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act of 2002 provided the regulatory framework for private broadcasting, establishing guidelines for balanced political coverage and journalistic standards.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Recent media monitoring reports indicate that over 60 percent of surveyed respondents in Zambia believe the media cannot operate freely, due to frequent instances of harassment and intimidation faced by journalists and bloggers. Reporters without Borders' 2024 World Press Freedom Index shows that Zambia declined from 87th to 95th position globally, citing concerns about journalist safety and editorial independence. These challenges raise critical questions about the effectiveness of private media outlets like Prime Television in fulfilling their democratic role of providing accurate, balanced, and timely political coverage to Zambian citizens.

2. Literature Review

The African context presented unique challenges for assessing media effectiveness, including political interference, economic constraints, and varying levels of press freedom. Studies conducted between 2015 and 2020 across sub-Saharan Africa documented persistent tensions between private media aspirations for independent political coverage and governmental pressures for favorable reporting. The Kenyan media landscape, for instance, demonstrated both the potential and limitations of private media in political coverage, with major television stations like Citizen TV and KTN News providing extensive political coverage while navigating complex relationships with political elites.

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods design combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 30 respondents, including reporters, editors, sub-editors, media owners, and representatives from the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zambia. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Stata for quantitative components, with thematic analysis for qualitative data. The study was guided by Agenda-Setting Theory, which posits that media influences public perception by determining which issues receive attention and how they are framed.

4. Findings

The findings revealed encouraging performance in several key areas. Regarding accuracy in providing political news, 43.33% rated Prime Television's commitment to factual reporting as good, while 56.67% of journalists frequently cited credible sources. This demonstrates a reasonable foundation for credible journalism, though with room for improvement in verification practices.

4.1 Background characteristics of respondents

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by age group

Age group	Number	Percentage (%)
18-25	5	16.67%
26-37	6	20%
36-45	9	30%
46 and Above	10	33.33%

Source: Research Data, 2026

The findings reveal that the largest group of participants (33.33%) are aged 46 years and above, indicating that most respondents are highly experienced and possibly hold senior positions in their organizations. This suggests that the responses reflect a mature understanding of political journalism and its practical implications. The 36–45 age group, which constitutes 30% of the sample, also represents a significant portion of the respondents. Individuals in this category are likely to be in their mid-career stage, actively engaged in journalistic work and decision-making processes related to news coverage. The 26–35 age group accounts for 20% of respondents.

4.2 Effectiveness in Shaping Public Understanding

The station demonstrated effectiveness in shaping public understanding, with 76.67% rating news delivery as timely or very timely. Additionally, 52% agreed that coverage promotes transparency and accountability in governance, 30% strongly agreed it influences public opinion, and 50% rated coverage as neutral in presenting multiple viewpoints. These findings suggest that Prime Television plays a meaningful role in political discourse, though balanced presentation of diverse perspectives could be strengthened.

Assessment of journalists' contributions to public understanding revealed varied self-perceptions: 20% considered their work very effective, 17% rated it as effective, 50% viewed it as somewhat effective, and 13% acknowledged it as ineffective. This distribution suggests that while journalists recognize their impact, many perceive significant room for improvement in enhancing public comprehension of political issues.

4.3 Challenges Faced by Electronic Media

The study identified significant challenges in handling political news. Regarding censorship or restrictions, 30% of respondents indicated this occurs sometimes, 23.33% reported it happens often, and 13.33% stated it always occurs, totaling 66.66% who experience some level of censorship. This represents a substantial constraint on editorial freedom and suggests that external pressures influence news coverage decisions.

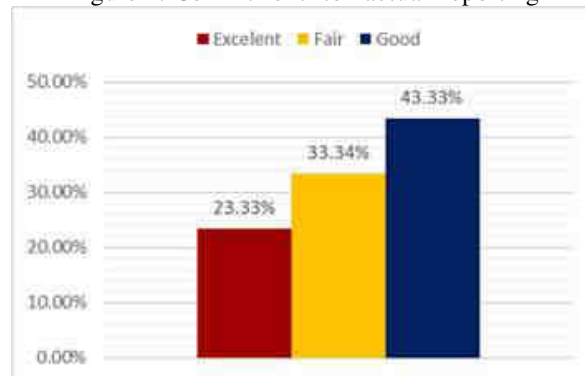
Despite these challenges, transparency perceptions remained largely positive, with 56.67% rating transparency processes as very transparent and 33.33% as somewhat transparent. Only 10% perceived processes as not transparent, indicating that despite censorship concerns, the station maintains reasonable openness in its operations.

4.4 The extent to which Prime Television journalists provide accurate political news.

Factual reporting in political news is perceived differently across three categories: Excellent, Fair, and Good. The highest rating is 'Good,' with 43.33% of respondents selecting this, indicating a general approval but not highest possible rating of their factual reporting. Following closely is the Fair category, at 33.34%, suggesting that a significant portion of the audience perceives the

factual reporting as adequate but not excellent. A smaller segment of 23.33% rated the reporting as 'Excellent,' indicating that despite positive views, there is room for improvement to reach excellence according to a substantial portion of the viewers

Figure 1: Commitment to Factual Reporting



Source: Research Data, 2026

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Figure 2: Verification Process in political news reporting



Source: Research Data, 2026

Verification process in political news reporting. The pie chart illustrates. The findings show that 37% rated the process as Poor, indicating concerns about how effectively Prime Television verifies information before publication. Meanwhile, 23% rated the verification process as Average, suggesting moderate satisfaction. Both Excellent and Good ratings were given by 20% of respondents each, showing that a minority of participants believe the verification process meets high standards.

4.5 The Effectiveness of Prime Television's Political Coverage in Shaping Public Understanding

Figure 3: Rate of Transparency Process in dealing with political news

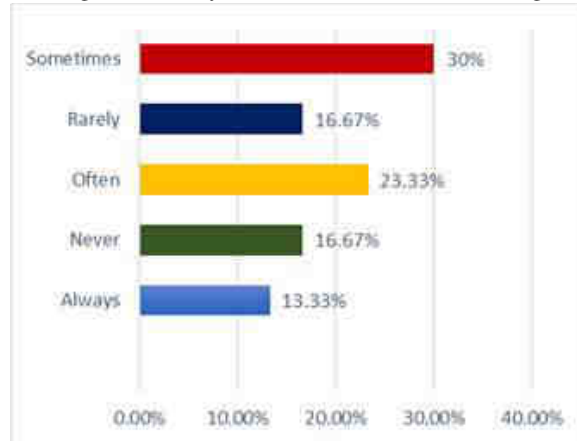


Source: Research Data, 2026

A largely positive perception of transparency among the surveyed population. A predominant majority, 56.67%, rated the transparency as Very Transparent, indicating strong confidence in electronic media's clarity and openness regarding political news. Additionally, a significant portion, 33.33%, considered the media to be Somewhat Transparent, suggesting a general acknowledgment of transparency, although with room for improvement. The minority, comprising only 10% of respondents, deemed electronic media's processes as Not Transparent, reflecting a small yet notable dissenting view.

4.6 The Challenges Faced by Electronic Media in Handling Political News

Figure 4: Challenges Faced by Electronic Media in Handling Political News



Source: Research Data, 2026

Restrictions when handling political news. 30% of respondents believe this occurs sometimes, indicating a moderate level of occurrence. Additionally, 23.33% of respondents think it happens often, suggesting a significant presence of censorship or restrictions. On the other hand, 16.67% of respondents indicated that it rarely happens, and another 16.67% believe it never occurs, totaling 33.34% who perceive minimal to no censorship. Lastly, 13.33% of respondents believe that electronic media always face censorship or restrictions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The study concluded that Prime Television significantly contributes to expanding Zambia's media pluralism and supporting political discourse. Agenda-Setting Theory demonstrated that the station effectively influences which political issues receive public attention and plays a meaningful role in shaping public understanding of politics. Prime Television demonstrated reasonable commitment to factual reporting, with verification practices showing room for improvement. The frequent citation of credible sources by journalists strengthened the station's credibility foundation. However, challenges including censorship, political pressure, and resource constraints continue to affect the station's ability to fully realize its democratic watchdog function.

5.2 Recommendations

Strengthening fact-checking protocols and verification procedures to enhance accuracy in political reporting.

- Investing in continuous journalist training on political reporting standards, investigative techniques, and ethical journalism practices.
- Diversifying revenue sources to reduce dependence on single funding streams and enhance financial sustainability.
- Enhancing editorial independence by establishing clear protocols that insulate news decisions from commercial and political pressures.
- Maintaining balanced coverage by ensuring diverse political viewpoints receive fair representation in news programming.

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