

Examining freedom of expression in Bunge la Mwananchi forums in Kenya using the Public Sphere Theory

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Received: 15 March, 2024 | Accepted: 20 July, 2024 | Published: 16 August 2024

Abstract: For almost twenty years, Bunge la Mwanainchi (BLM) has served as a platform for sharing information and has been used by politicians, activists, and regular people to further their objectives. Despite its presence, researchers have paid little to no attention to BLM preferring to concentrate on messages and information spread through other traditional media like radio, television, and newspapers. For almost twenty years, Bunge la Mwanainchi (BLM) has served as a platform for sharing information and has been used by politicians, activists, and regular people to further their objectives. Despite its presence, researchers have paid little to no attention to BLM preferring to concentrate on messages and information spread through other traditional media like radio, television, and newspapers. This research sought to investigate messages exchanged during the Bunge la Mwanainchi discussions in Kenya using the Public Sphere Theory (PST). Public Sphere Theory was proposed by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas in 1962. The tenets of the theory include disregard for class, popular concern, and inclusivity. A descriptive research design was employed where ten in-depth interviews and fifteen focus group discussions were utilized to gather data. The participants for the FGDs and interviews were chosen using convenience and purposive sampling techniques, respectively. The generated qualitative data was analyzed thematically and presented in narration and verbatim. The study revealed that BLM doesn't create original content for its members. Instead, the messaging is mostly influenced by what is trending in the mainstream media. The study concluded that although BLM messages and material are mostly influenced by what is popular in mainstream media stories, there are times when BLM produces original content that is covered by the media. However, these are rare occurrences. The results of the study will add to the corpus of knowledge in the fields of political communication, civic participation, and media studies. The results may be utilized as a means of encouraging community mobilization in favor of Kenya's Vision 2030 Plan.

Keywords: Bunge la Mwanainchi, Culture, Kenya, Kisumu, Political communication, PST

1. Introduction

The phrase *Bunge la Mwanainchi* (BLM) means "People's Parliament" in the Swahili language. It's a local movement for social justice that began in the 1990s in opposition to Kenya's continuous economic misrule and mismanagement, (Pambazuka, 2014). However, in this study, it has been examined as an alternate information medium arising from individuals who congregate in public places like street corners, marketplaces, or under trees for critical public debate on relevant community concerns of the day and to promote social or political change. Thus, the goal of this research was to ascertain whether Public Sphere Theory (PST) is effective in providing insightful information about how BLM operates and whether it offers a theoretical framework that is

suitable for explaining the kinds of messages that were debated during the *Bunge la Mwanainchi* forums in Kenya's Kisumu Central Constituency. The study was conducted between April and June of 2021.

2. Bunge la Mwanainchi

Bunge la Mwanainchi is a local movement for social change that arose in the 1990s in reaction to Kenya's continuous economic mismanagement and misuse (Pambazuka, 2014). Gacheke (2014) contends that it was created and led by those who feel they have been denied equal treatment and proper living conditions for example the low-wage workers, small-time traders, squatters, jobless people, and victims of ethnic conflicts. The platform provides a space for ordinary people to discuss political and socioeconomic issues that affect both the public and their own lives. It envisages a "Kenya where people possess unfettered freedom to mobilize to free themselves from all kinds of repression and exploitation" (Gacheke, 2014).

The term *Bunge la Mwanainchi* was used in 2003 to refer to the movement's first election, which was a mock of the parliamentary polls that took place in December 2002. These elections did not speed up the legalizing of dissent; rather, they represented an extension of the national space that called for more open communication and debate. Considering the initial steps toward a free assembly, Kenya's association space remained constrained until 2002. 1992 saw the implementation of a multi-party system of governance (Nasong'o, 2007).

The majority of BLM members were either homeless or street sellers seeking a forum to share and debate their opinions with other members of the community on social and political issues. BLM gatherings generally increased in activity around significant political occasions, such as polls and referendums (Kimari & Rasmussen, 2010). In an attempt to fulfill its ethnically diversified goal and as a longer-term preventive measure, BLM stepped up its efforts after the 2007 Kenyan post-election violence (Rasmussen & Omanga, 2012). One particularly promising aspect of citizen and participatory journalism has been identified as providing a platform for grassroots voices and visibility (Holt, 2018; Domingo et al., 2008).

According to Nyongesa (2011: 63) "Bunge la Mwanainchi is the concept of bringing together local individuals who share their self-identified barriers to development to advocate for a people-driven development strategy - either informally or formally, in communities and marketplaces, on the roadside or beneath a tree; to discuss important community challenges". The practice is defined by a continuous dialogue that often leads to an unhindered "negotiation of meaning," in which problems are cooperatively resolved as part of a dialectical process of interaction and the formation of standards, ideals, and knowledge (Bunge la Mwanainchi, 2019).

According to McNair (2015), BLM has given activists, intellectuals, and regular Kenyans a platform to debate issues, voice their opinions, and promote social change throughout the country's more than 20 years of political and social upheaval. Sishak (2016) agrees, saying that rather than being trapped in exclusive places and pre-structured frameworks, people can commit to an alternative approach that tries to change the game by using the citizen's assembly as an inspiring example.

BLM mirrors the society at large and suppressive systems predicated on, for example, race, age, or gender identity through its active participants as well as, to mention, the steady stream of recruits brought in by its democratic participation framework (Gacheke, 2014). But, in a "war of ideas," these methods are openly contested and confronted via meditation practice, adhering to the core principles of inclusiveness and equality, and producing radical democratic praxis. Consequently, it is argued that the BLM embodies the unconventional character of participative groups or communities or organizations. The core principles of the *Bunge la Mwanainchi* are therefore more process-based because they are constantly addressed; also, there is a firmly established practice of inclusion and equitable opportunity (Hagensen, 2014).

Presently, BLM is regarded as a public space that welcomes conversation from anyone (BLM, 2010). According to Gacheke (2014: 11), "There is not much more special about humans than an assembly of ordinary minds, whose makeup spans beyond various socioeconomic groups and classes and is varied across the spectrum of race, ethnicity, traditions, generations, and physical abilities." where individuals regularly get together in public for friendly discussions to assess political and socioeconomic trends critically. According to Bunge la Mwananchi's method, issues are collaboratively addressed in a continuous discussion that often involves a wide "communication process" as a part of an evolutionary process of socialization and the creation of information, traditions, and beliefs (Bunge la Mwananchi, 2019).

Bunge la Mwananchi, according to some academics, is inclusive of the oppressed and disenfranchised; this might be viewed as a social movement and a form of popular education (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1985 as referenced in Hagensen, 2014). Hagensen claims that Bunge la Mwanainchi is a movement as well as an idea, centered around the idea of gathering for important public discourse. According to Hagensen (2014), it is also a real movement of individuals advocating for equitable treatment, with roots in a blend of regional and global inspiration as well as vernacular traditions. The movement is founded on a Kenyan tradition of meeting to discuss significant community issues in public places like street corners, marketplaces, or trees (BLM, 2010; Rasmussen & Omanga, 2012).

"Bunge la Mwanainchi's impact on important issues like social justice, equality, the eradication of poverty, greater participatory democracy, and other civil liberties has made it well-known nationally and kept it at the forefront of popular contestation throughout the nation." The movement has gained influence with political figures, political organizations, and the government by putting up a range of recommendations and positioning itself as "alternative" rather than "against" everything (Okoth, 2012: 29).

According to Okoth (2012), the BLM's participants support good governance because they want citizens to exercise their rights and liberties. They provide Kisumu locals with widespread education on contemporary political issues, such as the significance of voter registration. They serve as government watchdogs because they challenge the status quo and push for reform, keeping politicians from becoming overconfident (Okoth, 2012). "Civil society communication is an open-access feature. In order to achieve public aims of shared or universal interest, people contribute openly and on the same terms in labor groups, alliances, grassroots movements, and interest groups that are self-organized and public goals of shared or universal interest" (Boeder, 2000: 37).

Due to its influence on related problems, Bunge la Mwanainchi has maintained its position as a major actor in national struggles involving civil liberties, social justice, equity, poverty alleviation, and increased participatory democracy (Okoth, 2012). Members of Bunge la Mwanainchi advocate for good administration because they want locals to be able to enjoy their freedoms and rights. Mass education on contemporary political issues, including the importance of voter registration, is provided to Kisumu residents. As government watchdogs, they act to prevent lawmakers from becoming overconfident and ignoring the opinions of voters who are unafraid of the government or personal authority. They accomplish this by denouncing the government and advocating for reform. Lastly, according to Bokros et al. (2017), they also combat land grabs in Kenya by a number of powerful individuals and organizations.

3. Public Sphere Theory

Habermas defined the public sphere as a "sphere that mediates between society and the state, in which the public organizes itself as the transmitter of public opinion" (Habermas, 1974: 50). In reference to Jürgen Habermas' book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the public realm is the intellectual arena where ordinary persons gather to debate issues that influence the formation of society's views, political groups, and grassroots organizations (Habermas 1989).

The German critical theorist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas initially used the phrase in his 1962 post-doctoral thesis, "*Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*." Many of the arguments made by Habermas in the first study were later revisited and altered; these were published in 1978, 1981, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1996, 1997, 2006, and so on. Still, the book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is the most frequently mentioned work on the subject of conceptualizing the meaning of the term "public sphere."

The public domain idea is critical as it defines how citizens engage in a free and democratic environment as a 148 result of free expression, the right to free movement, and media independence (Nyambuga, 2011). The idea proposes that the press influences the discussion of politics in an environment and that individuals become involved because of potential flaws in liberal democratic structures in political conflicts within the political system (Nyambuga, 2011).

Many academics have defined the public sphere in many ways over time. For example, Soules (n.d.) views the public space as composed of ordinary individuals gathering as public and communicating the demands of society to the government. Fraser (1990) defined the public sphere as a theatre in contemporary societies where political engagement is carried out through dialogue. Asen (1999) defines the public sphere as a social area in which ideas can be formed. Some researchers, for example, Bello and Wilkinson (2016), argue that the public domain is a social setting in which views and knowledge are communicated on issues of common concern, thereby shaping public opinion. According to Dahlgren (1995), the public sphere emerges when citizens form public entities to address contemporary concerns, particularly political ones.

Benhabib (1992) argues that the public sphere should inform state policies and laws and that the only democratic regimes are those that do this. According to him, the concepts of democratic involvement and how popular agreement turns into political action form the basis of public sphere studies. Graham (2009) argues that this logic establishes the public domain and the ecosystem of regular political conversations within it as vital platforms for discourse and democracy. Engaging in regular debates increases one's awareness and knowledge, fosters empathy, allows one to try out new and old ideas, and allows one to express, modify, and change one's preferences. According to Graham (2009), these are essential for proactive, powerful, and engaged public perceptions as well as the public sphere in its entirety.

Four fundamental components form the foundation of the Public Sphere theory: (i) Each participant deserves a 174 fair chance to initiate a discussion, submit questions, examine, and make a proposal. (ii) It should be acceptable for anyone to object to the chosen discussion subjects. (iii) Everyone deserves a fair chance to express their needs, wants, and emotions. (iv) Contributors ought to be free to express their opinions about the discourse procedures and how these procedures are practiced. If they are excluded from the discussions, they should also be free to discuss the hegemonic relations that restricted their ability to express themselves (Livingstone et al. 2013: 28).

This research sought to investigate messages exchanged during the Bunge la Mwanainchi discussions in Kenya by applying the Public Sphere Theory. The primary goal of this research was to examine if the messages and information promoted by BLM follow the same structure as the public sphere, using examples primarily from Habermas theory. Do BLM contributors have an equal opportunity to strike up a discussion, submit questions, look into, analyze, and put out a point made by Habermas (1989)? According to Bolton (2005), does anyone have the right to protest to the debate topics that have been selected? As suggested by Anria (2013), do speakers have the flexibility to voice their ideas about how dialogue processes are used and constructed, and do all have equal chances to share their needs, wants, and feelings?

Upon examining the arguments put out by the aforementioned scholars, it becomes apparent that while the four components of Habermas' theory of the public sphere have been expressed in diverse ways, the overall goals have stayed rather consistent. The public sphere is a place where people with similar views, not just professionals or politicians, come together for important public discourse. It is a place where people can express

their opinions without fear of discrimination or judgment, despite their group, race, ethnic origin, rank, or societal position.

Boeder (2000: 15) asserts that everyone has access to the public domain. Every conversation that brings together private persons to form a public body contributes to the public domain. Another area of focus for this research is the discussion approach within the context of popular unstructured political speech (Graham, 2009). In contrast to other types of communication, discussion as a form of social interaction is accessible to altering decisions, choices, and views throughout exchanges utilizing reasoning as opposed to force, manipulation, or deception, according to Dryzek (2000); Graham's (2009).

The debate allows for preference modification because, in a voting-only system, it exposes participants to concepts, viewpoints, and new information that they otherwise would not have explored before deliberation (Graham, 2009). While voting and negotiating by themselves tend to accentuate personal preferences, Elster (1998) contends that free and equal individuals should have an open dialogue to change personal inclinations into a shared desire that is oriented toward the common good.

However, BLM provides a venue for common people to talk about political and social concerns that impact both their lives and the general public. According to Habermas, the deliberative communication model provides a critical standard that may be used to hold the public sphere accountable for its flaws and disruptions. In order to liberate themselves from all types of tyranny and exploitation, it envisions a Kenya where people are free to organize without limitations (Gacheke, 2014).

3.1. Bunge la Mwanainchi and the Public sphere theory

According to Okoth (2012), Bunge la Mwanainchi is an evolving and diverse movement, that differs from other structured formations with rules, beliefs, and customs. This is demonstrated by the significance of the campaign's backers as well as by their objectives and requests. On the other hand, some people prioritize ecological and ethical concerns over social and political ones. Others blame capitalism, free markets, globalization, outsourcing, and the emphasis on unfairness and social inequality as the main causes of their problems. Many people viewed the campaign as a means of expressing their worries and initiating communication with international organizations and the government (Okoth, 2012).

3.2. Messages discussed during public forums

The reason the movement has endured is that it is grassroots and run by regular people whose priorities are local and national issues rather than international ones. However, the movement uses formal and informal structures that coordinate at the national and global stage to operate on a worldwide scale. Okoth (2012: 11).

According to Habermas' theory, the public sphere is defined as the real society where thoughts, suggestions, and views on issues of public concern are shared. This sharing of ideas and viewpoints eventually shapes public perception, which guides the political process (Habermas, 2006: 50). "When private individuals openly gather to discuss current political and social issues, the public domain emerges." (Terje, 2015: 9).

In McQuail (2005), Habermas states that "expression is guaranteed, and access to the space is free." There is a gap where mediation occurs between the bottom and the top of society. "The political organizations at the core of the public life," he continues, "while the base can be considered to be the private sphere of the life of all citizens." Nyambuga (2011) makes a similar claim, asserting that the public sphere philosophy is based on the freedoms of free speech, assembly, and the press. A liberal democracy is built on these liberties (Nyambuga, 2011).

Laws regulate the activities of all public spaces and information media, including member involvement in these forums and the discussion of certain topics. For example, the National Assembly, the Senate, neighborhood barazas, and even social media groups have certain subjects or content that they cover. A lot of these forums

only allow participation by those who follow the rules. This research aims to investigate the subjects or content that are discussed in the BLM forums because of this. According to Jacobson (2000), participation from all societal members, including those with less clout, is essential in public domain discussions, especially in low-income countries. The purpose of this study was to investigate the messages that were conveyed and their impact.

The study aimed to evaluate the nature of these topics by examining the messages or information provided in the debates. This will help determine whether BLM produces original messages or only discusses content that is previously covered by mainstream media. "Every person deserves the freedom to challenge the chosen subjects of discussion" (p. 30) in public meetings, according to Habermas (1989). The study aims to examine the subjects discussed in the BLM debates in order to make sure that this demand is satisfied.

Since open communication and member inclusion are key to the public sphere paradigm, it is imperative that we examine the messages or subjects. There should be a fair chance for each contributor to raise questions on the suggested discussion topics in order to foster inclusivity and open communication. Only by understanding the subjects or content of the BLM will the study be able to determine whether or not the public sphere theory's predictions about inclusivity and open discourse in BLM forums come true.

3.3. Purpose of the study

The goal of this study was to use the Public Sphere Theory to investigate messages discussed during Kenya's Bunge la Mwanainchi forums.

4. Research methodology

This study used a descriptive research design since it was deemed suitable for investigating a specific event. The study was conducted in Kisumu Central Constituency. Kisumu Central Constituency was chosen because, according to Kisumu County's Urban Institutional Development Strategy (CUIDS) (2018/2019), it hosts the majority of the county's socio-economic and political activities; it also houses Kisumu County Headquarters, making it the most active area of the county.

In addition, compared to other sub-counties, the population of Kisumu Central Constituency is fairly diversified (CUIDS 2018/2019). Furthermore, the BLM Chairman claims that Central Square has hosted numerous BLM events since the organization's founding in 1991, which is why this study was carried out in the Kisumu Central Constituency. 170,592 people call the Kisumu Central Constituency home, according to the 2019 Housing and Population Census conducted by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS). This is part of Kisumu County's total population of 1,155,574. The six wards that make up Kisumu Central Constituency are Nyalenda B, Railways, Milimani, Kondele, Kaloleni-Shauri Moyo, and Migosi. Kisumu City and the county's dispersed satellite high-population centers account for the majority of the country's urbanization, according to the Kisumu County Urban Institutional Development Strategy (CUIDS) 2018-2019. The county's most populous urban hub is Kisumu City.

This study focuses mostly on Bunge la Mwanainchi participants from Kisumu's Central Constituency in Kisumu County. According to the KNBS Population and Housing Census (2019), Kisumu Central Constituency has a population of 170,592. Bunge la Mwanainchi has an estimated 1,500 members in the Kisumu Central Constituency (Bunge la Mwanainchi, 2019).

Because the Constituency has few BLMs, this research includes all BLMs in the aforementioned wards. The study's participants included ten BLM chairpersons from each branch and eight general members. The chairpersons were picked because they are branch leaders who are well-informed about the BLM. They're also well-informed. Participants were selected based on their involvement in the branch, attendance, and willingness to participate during the data collection period.

For FGDs, participants were chosen based on their willingness to take part in the study, their availability on the day of data collection, their residency in Kisumu Central Constituency, and their membership in BLM, with at least six months of attendance. The investigation utilized 15 Focus Group conversations with 8 respondents chosen from 10 Bunge la Mwanainchi sessions in the six wards of Kisumu Central Constituency. Whereas the research had chosen 10 BLMs as research samples, certain branches had too many participants to be included in a single FGD, therefore the investigator chose to conduct two or three FGDs from a single BLM branch. One such occurrence was at the Central Square BLM, where there were a large number of members eager to take part in the FGD.

The additional FGDs from other branches brought the total to 15, despite the fact that the BLMs was only 10. The survey also includes BLM branches such as Kondele, Nyalenda 'B', Migosi, Kaloleni, Manyatta 'A', Shauri Moyo, and Railways. For the in-depth interviews, one leader was chosen from each of the ten Bunge la Mwanainchi forums in the six wards of the Kisumu Central Constituency. It is worth noting that each ward has at least one active BLM branch. The reason for using eight participants was because, as Dawson et al. (1993) argued, focus groups operate best with four to twelve persons. Groups larger than eight [participants] might be challenging to manage.

The purpose was to collect data and statistics from the attendees' exchanges during these focus group discussions. The goal of the focus group discussion was to gain a better comprehension of the contributors so that the investigator could learn about their personal experiences and beliefs, as well as identify issues such as participant behavior and perceptions, group dynamics, organizational structures, and cultural norms. Furthermore, the FGD would contribute in the development of knowledge that would not have been available if the contributors had not participated.

The pretest was conducted in Kisumu East Constituency's Nyalenda 'A' Ward before moving on to Kisumu Central Constituency for the main study. Kisumu East Constituency was chosen since it has similar characteristics, such as a diverse population, commercial operations, BLM activities, and membership, etc. Before beginning the main study in Kisumu Central Constituency, a pilot study was carried out in one of the Bunge la Mwanainchi branches located in the Nyalenda 'A' ward in Kisumu East Constituency. During the pilot investigation, insufficient items were adjusted and others were deleted in order to enhance the instrument quality. Twenty individuals (20 guys) were selected from the Kisumu East Constituency. Focus group conversations were conducted with leaders and participants in the selected focus group discussions. These participants, however, were not included in the main research.

In this study, data was analyzed using narrative analysis. To fulfill the research objective, common patterns in replies from recorded focus group talks were identified and critically analyzed. The study's data presenting methods included verbatim, text, and narration. The study also employed content analysis. Content analysis is a subset of theme analysis that entails quantifying occurrences of specific events of interest. In this study, content analysis entailed classifying verbal or behavioral data in order to classify and summarize the information gathered. The procedure includes transcribing the audio recordings for closer examination, data coding, identifying noteworthy patterns, interpreting meaning from data, and then establishing a logical chain of proof to make sense of the data gathered.

5. Data analysis and Findings

The study aimed to investigate messages communicated during the Bunge la Mwanainchi discussions in Kenya using the Public Sphere Theory.

5.1. Language used by BLM members to pass the messages in the BLM sessions

The data showed that Swahili, English, and some Dholuo were the languages used to communicate the various messages. According to the research, participants are at liberty to express themselves in the language that they are comfortable with.

Members are at liberty to express themselves in the language that they are comfortable with. We don't mandate the use of a certain language. (Participant BLM, P016, 14 April 2021)

A claim made by Bokros et al. (2017) that participants should speak Swahili and English fluently somewhat corroborates this discovery.

5.2. The type of messages debated on the BLM gatherings:

Data also showed that the themes that shaped the content of BLM conversations were political and socioeconomic. Still, the majority of the communications debated contained political content.

Politics was everything when BLM first started, but now we've moved past that. We discuss not only political messages but also social, religious, cultural, economic, and traditional ones". (Male P22 participant in BLM, June 6, 2021).

Data collected from a FGD forum with BLM members showed that:

Our daily reading of the newspapers serves as our main information source. The radio broadcasts came next. For instance, I tune in to radio programs that cover a variety of subjects and have a larger audience such as Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and Radio Citizen. In addition to listening to vernacular radio stations, we also obtain our news from television programming, particularly from expert analysis and TV interviews that air on morning shows. After absorbing all of this, we share it with the locals when we arrive. We listen to political analysts like Herman Manyora, Dr. David Ndii, Prof. Edward Kisian'gani, and Mutahi Ngunyi, among others. (Male P37 participant in BLM, May 12, 2021).

According to the study, in order to get political insight, interviews with political commentators including Herman Manyora, Prof. Edward Kisian'gani, Mutahi Ngunyi, and Dr. David Ndii were attentively monitored. 366 The survey found that BLM teaches its members about Luo cultural practices and customs in addition to discussing current political events. Thus, BLM has, in a way, transcended the political, social, and economic problems. Additionally, the survey noted that while politics first dominated discussions in the BLM forums, messages on economics, social issues, religion, culture, and Luo custom are now prevalent

The study's results show that Kisumu locals actively participate in BLM sessions, and as a result, they learn about socioeconomic, political, and other concerns, increasing their awareness of what is going on both locally and nationally. As a result, they get involved in promoting information access and political understanding, which boosts Kisumu residents' political involvement and inclusion. Although BLM gatherings are accessible to anyone, the study observed that some participants purposefully provided untrusted material that caused resentment among other participants. Further, some participants lacked neutrality in the conversations, their goal was to sway the participants by manipulating the facts.

The study also found that BLM participants engage in self-censorship or self-regulation. The research noted that when participants identify an unusual face among them, speakers become circumspect in their arguments and refrain from bringing up controversial topics or calling out influential individuals. Members turn to using proverbs and choosing their words carefully. According to the data, this shields them from issues or attacks after the debate.

Furthermore, it is clear that the people living in Kisumu Central Constituency use BLM as a communication 386 tool and a source of political information in order to interact with their political leaders, exchange ideas, support equitable public resource distribution and good governance, and engage in civic outreach regarding social, fiscal, and political issues.

The investigation also found that the necessity to obtain information from the media, which the State tightly controlled, contributed to BLM's rise to popularity. The report also noted that BLM provided citizen engagement on recently emergent issues at the county and national levels. For instance, BLM forums helped with the signature drive and informed participants and the general public on the benefits of the Kenyan Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 2020 when the county government was gathering signatures. Furthermore, the government invited BLM leaders to a meeting when the national government intended to introduce the COVID19 vaccine. The County commissioner briefed the leaders on the vaccine's advantages and asked for their assistance in disseminating information to encourage BLM members and the general public to get the vaccine.

These findings are consistent with the ideas of Ogutu (2015), who stated that Bunge la Mwanainchi has become widely recognized across the nation. It has continued to play an important role in popular polls across the nation due to its impact on critical issues including equality, social equity, alleviating poverty, increased democratic participation, as well as human rights. The movement now includes a diverse spectrum of social pressures, actors, and organizations, each with their objects, while sometimes contradictory, are united in their operative methods. "Members of the non-confessional, non-profit, and non-partisan movement include non-profits, grassroots groups, religious groups, labor unions, sports clubs, and non-governmental people who join in specific actions" (Ogutu, 2015: 14-15).

5.3. The reliability of the messages shared on the BLM sessions

The research found that the majority of the content used to assess the speakers' credibility in the BLM debates was based on daily news from newspapers, TV, or radio. The research established that a speaker's ability – or lack thereof – to explain his informational source determines how credible the speaker is. Speech is ignored, viewed in very low regard, or deemed baseless if the speaker is unable to justify the source; conversely, if the 412 content is verifiable or substantiated, it is highly valued. One BLM chair, in an interview, stated the following:

Here at BLM, the majority of the material we share comes from radio, television, or newspapers. Occasionally, someone may show up with knowledge that he is unable to refute. What was his source for the information as it hasn't been reported in any newspaper, radio show, or television program? For instance, only yesterday, there were rumors circulating that Mwai Kibaki, the previous president, had passed away. However, nothing is there when you read the newspaper, watch TV, or listen to the radio. However, someone arrives here with this knowledge, informing us that Kibaki has passed away. He becomes speechless when you ask him to name the information's original source. That's when you find that this person is a propagandist a liar pr gossip. He can't be the only one with this knowledge. At that moment, individuals will recognize the person as a propagandist or rumor monger. They will distinguish between those who tell the truth and those who lie. They'll claim that while one person speaks the truth, the other is lying. We refer to such individuals as "Jabelo propagandists)". (Central Square BLM Chair C01, April 14, 2021).

According to information provided by one of the BLM chairpersons in an interview, the research found that:

We have participants that are truth-tellers and propagandists, and we recognize them. People will listen extremely carefully and intently to the truth-teller. However, they tell the propagandist "enough." The speaker's ability – or lack thereof – to defend the information source establishes the speaker's credibility. Speech is ignored, seen as baseless, or both if the speaker is unable to justify the source; conversely, if the speaker is successful in doing so, the source is highly respected and 433 accepted (Nyalenda BLM Chair C10, May 25, 2021).

The study indicates that a sizable portion of BLM's content is unverifiable. Even while the group asserts that it mainly depends on media reporting, there are instances in which rumors predominate over the truth, particularly during the electioneering season when candidates frequently try to sway the public. A few speakers show up at the sessions to see how things work for other people or organizations, such as the government or a specific politician. The study also found that anyone who spoke had to cite their information's source, or they were considered propagandists, rumor mongers, or "Jabelo," as they are known locally.

Because BLM is easily accessible, the citizens can participate in lively and engaged discussions and activities, which affects their political affiliations and voting habits. Through its interactions, BLM has also improved the accessibility of political messages and, by extension, the knowledge and participation of the people living in Kisumu Central Constituency.

The study found that BLM has an impact on local politics and how effective it is in influencing political decisions. According to the study, they accomplish this by criticizing county assemblies and the leadership of the county governments. The study also found that BLM is a legitimate alternative information medium. This is because it advocates for social change and opposes established and institutional politics. Additionally, BLM has improved the standard of democratic society in Kisumu Central Constituency by establishing an open space where residents may congregate and exchange concerns. Public sphere theory holds that private individuals must interact and deliberate.

The results demonstrate that BLM increases political engagement by providing a platform for opinion expression and direct interaction with political actors, such as opinion leaders and shapers. Because BLM is used by its members as a political weapon and venue for political communication, it advances political inclusion. Initially, BLM was perceived as a movement that called for improved governance and critiqued the government. The BLM's goals, as the research findings indicate, appear to have shifted slightly and are now mostly informational instead of a forceful critique of the government's policy and actions. Though BLM makes an effort to maintain its independence, the study found that by virtue of having to follow state regulations in order to be legally recognized as an organization, it is subject to state influence. However, the data also show that participation in the sessions is open to anyone, even those who are not members, regardless of gender, ethnicity, color, or status.

The data additionally disclosed that BLM is presently acknowledged by both the national and county governments, and that the county government views them as stakeholders in county affairs, particularly in relation to advocacy and information exchange.

5.4. Source of the messages discussed in the BLM forums

According to the survey, BLM primarily obtains its information from stories in the mainstream media. It also draws information or material from individuals, including those with access to intelligence, as well as from statements made by the state or the government. and imparts the same information to its members. what has been reported by other media. This is the material that the BLM discusses or repeats to its members who don't have access to radio, television, or newspapers, or who are too illiterate or semiliterate to comprehend the news or read the newspapers.

Our daily reading of the newspapers serves as our main information source. The radio broadcasts came next. For instance, I tune in to radio programs that cover a variety of subjects and have a larger audience, such Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and Radio Citizen. I also tune in to radio stations in the vernacular. Additionally, TV broadcasts – particularly TV interviews and expert commentary on morning shows – provide us with knowledge. After absorbing all of this, we share it with the locals when we arrive.

We listen to political analysts like Herman Manyora, Dr. David Ndi, Prof. Edward Kisian'gani, and Mutahi Ngunyi, among others (Male P37, BLM participant, 482 May 12, 2021).

Furthermore, research showed that every topic or issue deserves a discussion in the BLM. There isn't a unique message, but the study did point out that BLM mainly relies on mainstream media for members and doesn't generate any content on its own.

BLM began as a political organization to combat bad governance and push for political freedom and other rights, but today, debates cover a wide range of topics and issues, including social, religious, political, and economic concerns as well as security. (Male P42, BLM participant, April 13, 2021).

The study noted that, despite the impression that BLM is merely an extension of the mainstream media, there are instances in which BLM speakers become information sources, such as when they take part in national discourse or when the media requests their opinion on a particular matter of national significance. Furthermore, there are times when someone – for instance, a politician's personal assistant – has confidential information that they can provide to the members, provided that doing so does not jeopardize the speaker's life. In some cases, BLM obtains reports from the estates that haven't been covered by the media, such as killings, rapes, violent crimes, burglaries, thefts, and fires. By discussing these topics, the information is disseminated and reaches the mainstream media. This insight was revealed during a FGD conversation, during which one of the participants stated the following:

We discuss fresh issues and events that surface on a daily basis from social media, newspapers, radio, and television in our forums. We discuss economic, social, religious, cultural, and traditional messages in addition to political ones. Politics is no longer our focus. We distribute these messages or information to people who were unable to read or watch the news. To make sure I get all the news everywhere else, I personally monitor multiple stations, such as Citizen, NTV, KTN, etc. (Male P08, BLM participant, April 12, 2021)

The research revealed that BLM attendees obtained their information from newspapers, radio, and television. They then disseminated the messages in the BLM proceedings using their knowledge of English or Swahili and their analytical skills. In this manner, everyone who is literate or has little comprehension will be able to understand what is happening. This revelation is supported by Okoth (2012), who said that in the early 1990s, BLM was one of the prominent networks engaged in collective mobilization for the fulfillment of basic needs, respect for fundamental rights, and democracy.

Given how much BLM depends on the traditional media for information, It is also reasonable to believe that BLM acts as a center and a conduit for information, although a secondary one. It is also reasonable to believe that BLM has helped to realize the goals outlined in articles 33, 34, and 35 of the Constitution, which, in turn, provide for a right of speech, press freedom, and right to access of information. Generally speaking, these fundamental results align with the majority of Habermas's (1989) public sphere theory's premises, which include inclusiveness, common concern, indifference to socioeconomic status, and public engagement.

Additionally, the study discovered that BLM contributors use self-censorship. This occurs when participants notice a new face among them. Based on the data, speakers become circumspect in their arguments and refrain from bringing up controversial topics or calling out influential individuals if other regular members spot a guest among them. Members turn to using proverbs and choosing their words carefully. According to the data, this will protect them against problems or criticism following the discussion.

Bokros et al. (2017) support this, noting that contributors to the People's Assembly serve as government watchdogs by criticizing the government and pushing for change, preventing politicians from becoming too comfortable. They also provide widespread political education to Kisumu residents, including voter registration. These actions are motivated by a need for citizens to enjoy their liberties and rights. The study's 531 findings are corroborated by McNair (2015), who pointed out that BLM organized protests against civil rights violations such as price gouging, violence against women, and police brutality in addition to pushing for political and constitutional reforms.

Regarding BLM's position as a primary source of information, the investigation discovered that it provides comparatively little first-hand information because it heavily relies on other media sources. People can discuss and identify societal issues in an open manner in the public arena, and by doing so, they can have an impact on political activity. In an ideal world, world, a public sphere is essential for reconciling conflicts between the state and society and allows civic control over governmental actions. To encourage discussion and the shaping of public perception, records of state-related actions and court cases must be made available. These results unequivocally demonstrate that BLM endorses shared concern, the central tenet of the public sphere approach.

The information also reveals that the BLM exchanges in Kisumu Central Constituency partially reflected three dimensions – structural, representational, and interactive – that are essential in today's public arena. It is clear that BLM encourages users to express themselves freely and to be inclusive, both of which are dynamic in and of themselves. Furthermore, BLM's participants – primarily from Kisumu Central Constituency – have been exposed to a variety of opposing viewpoints and have been able to create their own agendas thanks to the wide range of themes covered. This is essential to Kisumu's democratic and political communication developments.

Moreover, BLM has gained legitimacy due to the acknowledgement from both the federal and local governments, as well as the involvement of both practicing and former politicians in the discussions. Because of this, the topics covered may not always be written off as gossip because they have value and meaning. According to the research, BLM serves as a central repository of information that disseminates knowledge imparts knowledge, and promotes impartiality and equity from both federal and local authorities. It is noteworthy that it is a platform where people get together to discuss, listen, and evaluate current events assess current affairs to learn more or gain knowledge, and/or to support human rights while battling for fairness and the administration of justice.

6. The implications of the study

Overall, the study discovered that BLM participants in Kisumu Central Constituency partially represented three qualities – structural, representational, and interactive – that are significant in the contemporary public 560 arena. It is evident that BLM encourages both dynamic inclusion and freedom of expression among its users. The study indicates that BLM plays a significant influence in the Kisumu Central Constituency's democratic and political systems. This is partially because it offers a platform for diverse individuals to engage in politics, communicate, and interact with one another.

It is clear that the people living in Kisumu Central Constituency utilize BLM as a communication tool and a provider of information about politics to interact with their political leaders, exchange ideas, support fair public resource distribution and good governance, and obtain civic education on social, political, and economic issues.

The lively and engaged debates and activities that are made possible by BLM's accessibility have an impact on residents' political affiliations and voting behaviors.

Additionally, by establishing a public forum where locals may gather and discuss issues, the BLM raised the bar for democratic governance in Kisumu Central Constituency. The public sphere hypothesis states that private persons must communicate and engage in meaningful dialogue.

7. Contributions to the scientific community and future research

This work advances the corpus of knowledge particularly in the areas of media studies, public participation in Africa, and political discourse studies. It can be used by researchers and academics to increase our understanding of political discourse and provide them with the necessary knowledge to do additional research. Researchers and scholars can utilize the study's findings to broaden the body of information already known about social movement tactics and to gather the necessary literature for future research projects.

The results of the study will aid government and nonprofit organizations in comprehending Bunge la Mwanainchi's contribution to enlarging Kenya's democratic sphere. The creation of speech guidelines for participants in Bunge la Mwanainchi discussions in Kisumu Central Constituency is examined by the public sphere theory.

The study's findings will be used to evaluate how well Kenya's social movement is promoting electoral and social reform. Two main areas emerged from the investigation that should be the focus of future studies. Further research is needed to determine why women in Kisumu Central Constituency did not participate in the BLM and how often they participated in Bunge la Mwanainchi events. Two, further research is necessary to ascertain whether the BLM's use of the Dholuo language during talks impairs or affects non-Luo members' ability to participate in or contribute to the conversation.

8. Recommendations and suggestions

BLM platforms can be used as a tool for community mobilization and civic education by devolved governments like Kisumu County and other Counties in Kenya to drum up support towards achieving the Vision 2020 Blueprint.

To achieve this purpose, the BLM platforms must establish a standard language that all users can use when contributing to debates. This can be Swahili because, unlike English, it does not require formal education to speak. The establishment of a universally recognized common language would ensure that non-Luo members are not made to feel excluded while others contribute in Dholuo. Consequently, it will draw a greater number of people rather than the current limited audience.

9. Suggestions for future investigation

1. Additional research is required to determine how BLM's use of Dholuo language during debates restricts the freedom of speech and participation of non-Luo members.
2. More investigation is needed into the use of propaganda and fake news in information posted by BLM participants in Kisumu Central Constituency.

10. Conclusion

The content of BLM is mostly influenced by what is popular in radio, newspapers, and television reporting, among other mainstream media. BLM provides the media with fresh information occasionally, such as during interviews, but only in certain situations does the press report on it. The research revealed that all subjects, including socioeconomic and Luo cultural life, could be debated during the Bunge la Mwanainchi discussions

in Kisumu Central Constituency, with political messages being the most frequently mentioned. This aligns with the widespread concern of Habermas' fundamental ingredient.

According to the study, there is a protocol that needs to be followed in order for participants to contribute to the debate. The chairman leads the conversations. Whereas a huge number of participants participate in the discussions, not every person takes an interest in current affairs; others are solely keen on politics and they often push the chairperson to guide the discussion towards that direction despite the fact that the topic is social. Political information on BLM is likewise questionable in terms of its veracity.

For instance, because the material is repeated from the mainstream media and is subject to speaker distortion and exaggeration, not all of the speakers speak with authority. The presenters overstate a point because other members might not have known about it because the main media was not easily accessible to them. The public domain theory tenet/condition of inclusion, according to BLM, is that anybody can speak, irrespective of their age, gender, socioeconomic standing, or level of education.

Additionally, it seems fair to suppose that BLM supports Habermas' fundamental prerequisites or elements of the public domain, such as contempt for class, populist concern, inclusion, and public engagement. Moreover, the statistics show that BLM is a type of Public Sphere concept that permits members of any age or sexual orientation, education level, or status to participate in BLM sessions.

Even though a large percentage of the studied participants indicated they routinely participated in the BLM debates, only a few of Kisumu Central Constituency residents did so. The BLM falls short of fulfilling Habermas' requirement for inclusivity because of this exclusion from political discourse. A portion of the discussions appears to be excluding other members of the Kisumu central constituency due to immaturity, ignorance, intolerance, and ethnicity.

Finally, it may be claimed that BLM is conforming to Habermas' fundamental framework for the public sphere, which includes the aspects of class, inclusiveness, and public concern, as indicated by public talks between the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, and the learned and the ignorant. However, there is a slight problem because nearly all of the BLM chairpersons and participants are men. However, the study's findings regarding the lack of interest as a justification for female absence remain uncontested. Second, the political topics covered on BLM made a shared worry evident. However, it appeared that inclusivity – the third prerequisite – was difficult to achieve.

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