

Organisational Communication Practices and Workplace Culture at Kenya Broadcasting Corporation: An Ethnographic Study

Paul Mbuvi Mung'ala*, Dr. Isaac Mutwiri, Dr. Sammy Baya

Faculty of Media and Communication (FAMECO), Multimedia University of Kenya

*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

Organisational communication and workplace culture are inextricably linked, yet no systematic empirical study had examined this relationship within the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), a public broadcaster facing recurrent strikes, documented victimisation of employees, and persistent political interference. This qualitative ethnographic study set out to examine organisational communication practices at KBC, assess the prevailing workplace culture, and identify the key factors shaping communication within the organisation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty-six participants and six weeks of participant observation at KBC headquarters, and analysed thematically through the lens of the Cultural Approach (Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The findings revealed a communication landscape where informal channels—particularly WhatsApp—had superseded formal mechanisms, with suggestion boxes observed to be dusty and unused. A pervasive culture of silence, rooted in the 2012 strike legacy, constrained upward communication as employees feared reprisal. Horizontal communication was strong within departmental teams but weak across departments and generations, creating operational silos. Workplace culture exhibited tension between strong peer collaboration and distrust of senior leadership, with employee engagement highly segmented. Influencing factors included rigid hierarchy, bureaucracy, severe financial constraints, infrastructure deficits, political interference inducing self-censorship, and trade unions functioning as alternative upward channels trusted over formal management routes. Together, these factors sustained a self-reinforcing cycle in which fear and hierarchy hindered grievance resolution and eroded trust. The study contributes empirical evidence on communication in African public broadcasting and offers actionable recommendations for leadership and policy reform, including anonymous feedback systems, skip-level meetings, and strengthened editorial independence protections.

Keywords: Organisational communication, Workplace culture, Public broadcasting, Ethnography, Culture of silence

INTRODUCTION

Organisational communication and workplace culture are widely recognised as mutually reinforcing (Putnam & Mumby, 2013): communication constructs and sustains culture, while culture shapes what can be communicated, by whom, and through which channels. This relationship is particularly consequential in public sector broadcasting, where communication failures carry implications not only for employee welfare but for editorial independence and public accountability. Despite this, no systematic empirical study had examined the relationship between organisational communication and workplace culture at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), Kenya's oldest and only state-owned public broadcaster, an organisation marked by recurrent industrial action, documented victimisation of employees following the 2012 strike, and persistent political interference in editorial affairs.

This study addressed that gap through three objectives: (1) to examine the current organisational communication practices within KBC; (2) to assess the prevailing workplace culture within KBC; and (3) to identify the key factors influencing organisational communication within KBC. In pursuing these objectives,

the study contributes empirical evidence on communication dynamics in African public broadcasting, a context that has received comparatively little scholarly attention relative to private sector or Western organisational settings. The study is informed by three complementary theoretical frameworks: the Cultural Approach to organisational communication (Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982), which focuses on how communication creates and maintains shared meaning; Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which illuminates the dynamics of in-group trust and out-group distrust; and Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which conceptualises organisations as open systems with feedback loops that can become blocked or distorted.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic design, combining semi-structured interviews with sustained participant observation to capture both what employees said about communication and culture and what could be directly observed in practice. This approach was chosen because ethnography is particularly suited to understanding how organisational culture is enacted and reproduced through everyday communication practices (Spradley, 2016), and because the research questions required access to both espoused beliefs and tacit, taken-for-granted behaviours that may not be accessible through interviews alone.

Study Site

Fieldwork was conducted at KBC headquarters (Broadcasting House, Nairobi) over six weeks between January and February 2026. Four departments were selected for concentrated observation based on their relevance to the research objectives: News, Production, Marketing, and Human Resources. These departments were chosen to capture both editorial and non-editorial functions, and to observe communication practices across the organisation's core operations.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Twenty-six participants were purposively sampled across five functional areas—news/editorial, production/broadcast, marketing, human resources, and support staff—spanning multiple seniority levels and tenure lengths (see Table 1). Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation across different departments, hierarchical levels, and lengths of service, enabling the study to capture variation in communication experiences and perspectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Department	Senior Management	Middle Management	Junior Staff/Non-Management	Total
News/Editorial	2	3	3	8
Production/Broadcast	1	2	3	6
Marketing	1	1	2	4
Human Resources	1	1	1	3
Support Staff	0	1	4	5
Total	5	8	13	

Table 1. Composition of the interview and observation sample, by functional area. Gender distribution: 15 male, 11 female. Tenure ranged from 2 to 28 years (mean: 11.4 years).

Participants were recruited through a combination of departmental heads' referrals and snowball sampling, following initial institutional consent from KBC management. The recruitment process was sensitive to the documented history of retaliation against employees who raised concerns (Business Today, 2012; Qurium,

2023a); potential participants were approached individually and provided with full information about the study's purpose, confidentiality protections, and their right to decline participation without consequence.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all twenty-six participants, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes each (mean duration: 62 minutes). Interviews were conducted in private offices or meeting rooms where available, and in two cases in neutral locations away from KBC premises at participants' request. The interview guide covered four main areas: (1) participants' roles and communication responsibilities; (2) their perceptions of formal and informal communication channels; (3) their experiences of upward, downward, and horizontal communication; and (4) their views on workplace culture and factors affecting communication. The guide was piloted with two former KBC employees (now working elsewhere) to refine question wording and identify any gaps. Interviews were conducted in English or Swahili based on participant preference; all were audio-recorded with verbal consent and transcribed verbatim. Swahili transcripts were translated into English for analysis.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was conducted over six weeks, with the researcher spending approximately 30 hours per week at Broadcasting House. Observation sessions were distributed across the four departments, with additional time spent in common areas such as the staff cafeteria, corridors, and notice board areas. Observation focused on: communication behaviours in meetings (both formal and informal); use of communication technologies and channels; interactions between colleagues across hierarchical levels and departments; and material artefacts of communication such as notice boards and suggestion boxes. Field notes were written daily, capturing both observed behaviours and the researcher's reflections on emerging patterns. Observations were documented in a field notebook and later transcribed into digital format.

Documentary Sources

Where available, organisational documents relevant to communication practices were collected, including: internal memos (where voluntarily shared by participants), notice board announcements, and publicly available reports on KBC's operations. These documents served to complement interview and observation data, providing insight into formal communication channels and official communication policies.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic approach, with interview transcripts imported into NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software to support the coding process. The analysis began with a familiarization stage, during which all interview transcripts and field notes were read and re-read to gain a holistic understanding of the data, while initial impressions were recorded in analytical memos. This was followed by open coding, where transcripts were analyzed line-by-line to identify relevant data segments using descriptive codes that remained close to participants' own language (e.g., "use of WhatsApp," "fear of speaking up," "peer support"), yielding a total of 347 initial codes.

In the third stage, axial coding was conducted by iteratively grouping related codes into broader categories through comparison and abstraction; for example, codes like "fear of victimization," "self-censorship," and "hesitation to raise concerns" were consolidated under the category "constraints on upward communication," resulting in 42 distinct categories. Next, thematic development organized these categories around the study's three core research objectives, defining and refining themes through theoretical comparison and collaborative discussions between the researcher and supervisors to ensure analytical rigor and grounding in the data.

Throughout the analytical process, data saturation was continually evaluated. Saturation was formally reached after the 22nd interview, as no new codes or themes emerged, and interviews 23 through 26 served

to confirm established patterns—aligning with recommended sample size standards for ethnographic qualitative studies (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Palinkas et al., 2015). Finally, the synthesis stage organized the finalized themes to directly address each research objective, culminating in an integrated discussion that linked the empirical findings back to theoretical frameworks and existing literature.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure qualitative trustworthiness, the study implemented several core strategies established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), beginning with measures to establish credibility. Credibility was achieved through the triangulation of multiple data sources, including interviews, direct observations, and documentary evidence. To further strengthen these insights, the researcher spent six weeks in the field, utilizing prolonged engagement to build rapport and observe recurring patterns over time. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with five participants, who confirmed that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

Methodological dependability and confirmability were maintained through rigorous documentation and external oversight. To support dependability, a comprehensive audit trail was preserved—encompassing raw interview transcripts, field notes, coding records, analytical memos, and key decisions made during theme development—making the research process accessible for peer review. To ensure confirmability and minimize researcher bias, regular debriefing sessions were held with research supervisors for external scrutiny. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document personal reactions, surface underlying assumptions, and track how these factors were actively managed.

Finally, the study addressed transferability by providing a detailed, thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and specific communication practices. While empirical generalizability was not the intended goal, this rich contextual reporting provides readers with the necessary depth to evaluate how applicable the findings might be to other settings.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher is a Kenyan media professional with prior experience working in broadcast journalism, though not at KBC. This background provided useful contextual knowledge but also required active management of potential biases. Specifically, prior knowledge of KBC's reputation for industrial conflict and political interference could have predisposed the researcher toward certain interpretations. To address this, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance throughout: regular journaling documented how prior expectations might be influencing observations and interpretations; debriefing sessions with supervisors provided external perspective; and analytic memos explicitly considered alternative interpretations before settling on final themes. The researcher's position as an outsider to KBC (never employed there) also facilitated participant openness, as they were not speaking to a potential colleague with organisational loyalties.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained in writing from the Board of Postgraduate Studies at Multimedia University of Kenya prior to any contact with KBC or its employees, and a research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (License No: NACOSTI/P/26/4192449). Formal institutional consent was secured from KBC management prior to participant recruitment.

Given KBC's documented history of retaliation against employees who raised concerns internally (Business Today, 2012; Qurium, 2023a), the study adopted enhanced protections. Informed consent was obtained verbally rather than in writing, following an ethical adaptation approved by the researcher's supervisors after participants expressed reluctance to sign documents linking their identities to their responses. All participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty; verbal consent was documented in a field log stored securely off KBC

premises. Participant identities are protected throughout through the use of anonymised identifiers. Audio recordings and transcripts are stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organisational Communication Practices

Formal Channels: Present but Underutilised

KBC operates formal communication channels—including memos, official letters, notice boards, and scheduled meetings—primarily to facilitate downward communication and official documentation. Highlighting their importance, a News Editor with 15 years of tenure noted, "Memos are the biggest communication channels at KBC. They are official, they are usually signed, and they are timely for the most part."

However, field observations revealed a significant gap between the formal channels documented on paper and those actively utilized in practice. Notice boards across Broadcasting House frequently contained outdated materials, with some announcements dating back years and recent postings restricted mainly to high-traffic locations like the main reception. The disuse of official tools was most vividly illustrated by the organization's suggestion boxes; three boxes located across different departments were observed covered in dust, with one even showing cobwebs across its opening. A Morning Show Presenter of eight years remarked, "You see those suggestion boxes? They might have messages that go back years because no one has opened them"—an observation validated when none of the boxes were opened or emptied throughout the six-week fieldwork period. Formal grievance procedures suffered a similar fate, remaining documented yet largely ignored by junior staff who cited fear of reprisal as the primary deterrent to raising concerns.

Informal Channels: The Rise of WhatsApp

Despite the existence of formal channels, informal communication—particularly through WhatsApp—dominated day-to-day operations and task coordination. Fieldwork in newsrooms and production offices revealed staff constantly monitoring and responding to WhatsApp messages throughout their shifts. Underscoring this shift toward informal platforms, a Presenter with six years of service noted, "Emails are hardly used in our vernacular station. Information is usually sent via WhatsApp." Observational data confirmed that WhatsApp groups fulfilled several critical functions: relaying breaking news updates, coordinating shift handovers, leaking management decisions prior to official announcements, and providing a space to vent grievances that staff avoided raising through formal channels. The speed of this medium was highlighted when a middle manager posted a schedule change to a group; within ten minutes, eleven staff members had confirmed receipt—achieving a level of responsiveness far exceeding the traditional memo process.

However, reliance on WhatsApp as the primary communication hub introduced significant operational challenges. Staff reported suffering from information overload, struggling to separate official directives from unofficial chatter, and experiencing structural exclusion if they lacked smartphones or stable internet access. Illustrating this digital divide, a Senior Producer with 22 years of tenure explained, "I don't use WhatsApp; I prefer face-to-face. But sometimes I find out about schedule changes from colleagues after the fact. They assume everyone is on the group."

Directional Communication Patterns

In alignment with its hierarchical public sector structure, communication at KBC flows predominantly downward. Senior managers report issuing directives through formal, top-down channels, while junior staff describe receiving these instructions with virtually no opportunity to provide input. Field observations of departmental meetings consistently reinforced this dynamic; across four of the six meetings attended, management presented decisions while staff listened silently, asking no questions before the proceedings concluded.

By contrast, upward communication is significantly constrained across the organization. Employees from various departments expressed widespread hesitation and fear regarding the prospect of raising concerns, with a Journalist of five years explicitly linking this reluctance to the workplace environment: "There is a culture of silence on some issues because employees do not feel safe speaking up to management." This observation was borne out in practice: during two meetings where junior staff were specifically invited to voice concerns, the initial invitations were met with tense silence, and the few comments eventually offered—predominantly by senior staff—were delivered with visibly careful wording.

Meanwhile, horizontal communication displays a sharp contrast depending on structural proximity. Communication within departmental teams is strong, characterized by staff as supportive, collaborative, and friendly, yet it remains remarkably weak across departmental and generational boundaries. Observational data in the staff cafeteria highlighted this siloed reality, showing clear clustering where news staff and production staff sat exclusively with their respective peers, keeping cross-departmental interactions to a minimum. Summarizing this divide, a Radio Producer with four years of tenure noted, "We work well within our team, but other departments? We don't even know what they're working on."

Generational Digital Divide

A further theme that emerged was a clear generational divide in communication preferences across the organization. Younger staff under 40 overwhelmingly gravitated toward digital platforms, whereas older employees over 50 preferred face-to-face interactions and formal, printed channels. This preference gap was further exacerbated by unreliable Wi-Fi connectivity and a lack of formal training on new digital systems. Summarizing this structural challenge, a Department Head with 20 years of service observed, "The younger ones are on their phones all the time, but the older staff—they want a printed memo. We've tried to go digital, but the infrastructure isn't there." Indeed, observational data supported these infrastructure concerns, noting intermittent internet connectivity on 14 out of 30 fieldwork days, which frequently forced staff to rely on personal mobile data to conduct work-related communication. Furthermore, fewer than half of the study participants reported receiving any formal training on digital communication tools.

In contrast to routine operations, crisis communication activated a markedly different pattern where existing organizational barriers were temporarily set aside. During an observed breaking news event, communication shifted rapidly toward informal, direct channels, leading to accelerated decision-making processes. Managers routinely bypassed standard formal procedures, staff communicated through whatever channel was immediately available, and response times decreased significantly. This shift suggests that KBC possesses a latent capacity for highly effective, agile communication that remains dormant under normal conditions. Reflecting on this dynamic, a News Editor with 15 years of experience noted, "When the news breaks, everyone works together. It's like we forget all the bureaucracy. But as soon as it's over, we go back to the old ways."

Workplace Culture

Peer Collaboration versus Management Distrust

Workplace culture at KBC exhibited a dual nature, characterized as simultaneously collaborative among peers and fearful regarding leadership. Within individual departments, employees built strong interpersonal relationships and demonstrated consistent teamwork. Field observations in the news and production departments confirmed these dynamics, showing colleagues actively sharing resources, resolving technical problems together, and socializing during breaks. Highlighting this sense of solidarity, a Journalist with seven years at the station explained, "My colleagues are like family. We support each other, we cover for each other. That's the only way we survive here."

In stark contrast, trust in senior management was significantly lower than trust in immediate supervisors. Low-level employees frequently cited concerns over leadership integrity, with a Radio Producer of eight years stating, "There is very little trust among low-level employees and the management, with complaints including corruption, nepotism, favouritism." Reflecting an even starker reality, a Senior Manager with 25

years of service noted the lingering impact of past conflicts, observing, "The space is not as free and fair because there's a lot of victimisation... since the 2012 strike, things have not necessarily cooled down."

Observational evidence strongly reinforced these accounts of pervasive anxiety surrounding management. In common areas, discussions regarding leadership were routinely held in hushed tones, staff visibly avoided the offices of certain senior managers, and very few employees remained on-site after completing their shifts—a clear indicator of limited discretionary engagement within the organization.

Segmented Engagement by Tenure and Department

Employee engagement varied significantly based on tenure and department within the organization. Longer-serving staff members with over 15 years of service frequently expressed feelings of resignation and fatalism, drawing on past experiences where raising concerns yielded no visible change. A Senior Producer with 22 years of experience highlighted this pervasive mindset, remarking, "The older ones—we've seen everything. We know that speaking up doesn't change anything, so why risk it?" In contrast, newer employees with less than 5 years of tenure were more likely to describe a "free environment"; however, this sense of openness was primarily limited to peer interactions rather than dialogue with management.

Disparities in organizational alignment were equally pronounced across different departments, with news and production staff demonstrating a much stronger connection to the company's core mission compared to their counterparts in marketing and HR. A Marketing Officer with 4 years at the organization underscored this divide, observing, "The news people, they believe in the mission. For us in marketing, it's just a job. There's not that sense of purpose."

Innovation and Risk-Taking

Innovation within the organization was consistently constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, limited resources, and systemic resistance to change. Consequently, successful innovative efforts typically stemmed from informal, individual initiatives rather than formal organizational support processes. For instance, observations highlighted a presenter who independently developed and executed a popular social media strategy without receiving prior departmental approval or dedicated resources. Reflecting on this dynamic, the presenter noted, "I just started doing it. If I had asked permission, I'd still be waiting for a response. So I did it, and now they're happy—but they didn't support me to do it."

This dynamic was far from isolated; the overarching pattern of innovation occurring despite existing organizational structures—rather than being fostered by them—was observed across four additional instances spanning various departments.

Factors Influencing Organisational Communication

Leadership Style

Leadership emerged as a central factor influencing communication across the organization. Participants generally described leadership as hierarchical and unapproachable, though they noted meaningful variation depending on the specific department and individual manager. Illustrating this inconsistency, a News Producer with ten years of tenure observed, "Some managers you can approach; others, you wouldn't dare. It depends on who you're dealing with." Fieldwork observations strongly confirmed this management split. In one department, the manager actively fostered an accessible environment by holding weekly open-door sessions; in another, the manager's door remained consistently closed, and staff expressed clear hesitation to knock or initiate contact.

The Legacy of the 2012 Strike

The 2012 strike emerged repeatedly across interviews—even among employees who were not working at the organization at the time—serving as a watershed moment whose initial management response continues

to function as a powerful, cautionary organizational narrative. Highlighting how this history is passed down to newcomers, a Journalist with four years of service explained, "I wasn't here then, but everyone knows what happened. They tell you when you join—don't speak up, don't join the union openly, or you'll end up like them."

Documentary evidence strongly reinforces this institutional memory. Business Today (2012) reported that KBC employees went on strike over poor working conditions, with the labor action lasting five days (Momanyi, 2012). Subsequent reports (Qurium, 2023a) documented widespread victimization of strike leaders in the aftermath, including demotions, forced transfers, and in some cases, employment termination. Together, these historical events established an enduring culture of fear that participants reported still actively shapes employee communication behaviors today.

Organisational Structure

Organizational structure further compounded these dynamics of fear and inertia. Pervasive approval layers and heavily centralized decision-making meant that even routine daily matters required senior sign-off. Highlighting the friction caused by this administrative drag, a Production Officer with eight years of service observed, "To get approval for anything—even a small purchase—you need three signatures. It takes weeks. Sometimes you just give up." Fieldwork observations directly corroborated this structural bottleneck. In one tracked communication process, a routine staff request took 18 days to receive a formal response, as it was forced to pass through four separate hierarchical levels before completion.

Technology and Infrastructure

Technology adoption was highly uneven across departments and generations, serving to reinforce existing organizational divides. Inconsistent Wi-Fi connectivity, outdated equipment, and a widespread lack of training created persistent barriers to effective digital communication. Fieldwork observations highlighted this operational friction, showing staff spending an average of 10 to 15 minutes per day simply troubleshooting technical connectivity issues. Underscoring the frustration driven by these technical limitations, a Broadcast Technician with 12 years of experience explained, "They want us to use email and the system, but when you can't connect, what do you do? We go back to WhatsApp."

Political Interference

Political interference was reported to significantly alter editorial directives during election cycles, inducing a climate of self-censorship among staff. Describing this phenomenon, a Senior Journalist with 18 years of experience noted, "When elections come, you'll see. The directives come from above—not from the news manager, from above him. You're told which stories to lead with, which angles to avoid. You learn to read between the lines."

These findings align directly with documented patterns of political interference in Kenyan public broadcasting (Onyango & Okoth, 2018). Furthermore, financial data from the 2025 budget estimates (Parliament of Kenya, 2025) underline the organization's continued dependency on state funding, with KBC receiving 78% of its budget directly from the exchequer—a setup that reinforces the structural conditions necessary for ongoing political influence.

Financial Constraints

Financial constraints were pervasive across the organization, traceable in part to the 1997 liberalization of Kenya's airwaves and the resulting loss of license-fee revenue. Study participants reported that these ongoing financial pressures led to the elimination of cash rewards, predictable salary increments, and professional training opportunities. Illustrating the toll this has taken on workforce morale, a Department Head with 20 years of service explained, "We used to have annual bonuses, training budgets, everything. Now? Nothing. People come to work just to get paid—if the salaries come on time."

Parliamentary documents (Parliament of Kenya, 2025) confirm this economic strain, showing that KBC's allocated budget has remained flat over the past five years even as operational costs have steadily risen. Participants consistently identified this ongoing financial stagnation as a primary driver of reduced employee engagement and widespread workplace demoralization.

Trade Unions as Alternative Channels

Trade unions—notably the Communications Workers Union (CWU) and the Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ)—emerged as a highly trusted alternative channel for upward communication within the organization. Employees consistently reported a greater willingness to raise workplace concerns through union representatives than through formal management routes. Highlighting this reliance on union advocacy, a Broadcast Technician with nine years of service explained, "The union is the only way to raise some issues. At least with the union, you know someone is fighting for you. Management... they'll just say 'raise it formally' and nothing happens."

This pattern aligns directly with findings by Kiplagat and Rutto (2020), who noted that trade unions frequently function as essential, trusted intermediaries within Kenyan state-owned enterprises, particularly in organizational environments characterized by low employee trust in management.

DISCUSSION

The Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Communication Breakdown

Read together, these findings describe a self-reinforcing cycle rather than a set of isolated problems. Hierarchical structure constrains upward communication; constrained upward communication leaves grievances unaddressed; unaddressed grievances erode trust and entrench fear; and fear further suppresses upward communication, reinforcing the hierarchy that produced it in the first place. Systems Theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) frames this as a blocked feedback loop: the 2012 strike functioned as a feedback signal about employee grievances, but management's punitive response severed that loop, foreclosing organisational learning and leaving underlying issues unresolved.

This pattern of blocked feedback and organisational forgetting of grievances is consistent with research on authoritarian communication cultures (Tourish, 2014; Mumby, 2015). The 2012 strike—a moment of collective employee voice—could have prompted system-level learning. Instead, management's response reinforced the existing power structure by punishing dissent, creating a legacy of fear that continues to shape communication nearly a decade and a half later. The absence of formal feedback mechanisms (as evidenced by the dusty suggestion boxes) and the unreliability of formal upward channels means that the system lacks the information it needs to adapt or respond to employee concerns.

Culture of Silence as Organisational Narrative

The Cultural Approach (Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982) helps explain why the gap between espoused and enacted communication persists: the dust on KBC's suggestion boxes is not merely a maintenance failure but a material artefact of a shared, tacit understanding that speaking up is unsafe or futile. This understanding is reproduced through organisational stories (the 2012 strike narrative), material artefacts (the suggestion boxes), and everyday practices (the silence in meetings, the hushed conversations in corridors).

This is consistent with Kariuki and Ogola's (2017) finding that formal upward channels were structurally present but functionally unused in the large majority of Kenyan state corporations they studied. The current study extends that finding by demonstrating how organisational memory—through narrative and material artefacts—perpetuates silence across generations of employees who were not present at the original events. The 2012 strike narrative functions as what Orr (1996) termed organisational storytelling, transmitting tacit knowledge about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour to new members.

Social Identity and Trust Differentiation

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) accounts for the persistent split between strong in-group trust (peers, immediate supervisors, union representatives) and weak out-group trust (senior management). Employees identify with their immediate workgroups because these groups provide social support, information, and protection. Senior management, however, is perceived as an out-group—distant, untrustworthy, and potentially punitive.

This pattern is consistent with Owuor's (2020) research on trust differentiation by hierarchical level in Kenyan state-owned enterprises. The current study extends this finding by showing how union representatives are perceived as in-group members and therefore trusted conduits for grievances that employees are unwilling to raise through formal management channels (Kiplagat & Rutto, 2020). However, relying on unions as alternative upward channels is problematic: unions are external to the organisation's formal communication structure, and not all employees are union members or feel comfortable using this channel.

Political Interference and Self-Censorship

Political interference aligns with Onyango and Okoth's (2018) findings on election-cycle communication distortion in Kenyan public broadcasters. The self-censorship described by participants represents a form of anticipatory compliance: employees restrict their communication because they anticipate negative consequences, even in the absence of explicit directives. This underscores that external political and financial pressures shape internal communication in public broadcasting in ways not fully captured by private sector organisational communication models.

The structural conditions for political interference are reinforced by financial dependency: as Parliament of Kenya (2025) budget estimates show, KBC receives 78% of its funding from the exchequer. This creates a principal-agent problem where the organisation's accountability to the public is complicated by its financial accountability to political actors. While the High Court ruling (Kissiu, 2025) struck down a directive requiring state agencies to advertise exclusively in government-friendly media, the underlying structural vulnerability remains.

The Generational and Departmental Fragmentation

The generational digital divide and departmental silos identified in this study reflect broader patterns in public sector organisations, where legacy systems, bureaucratic inertia, and resource constraints hinder communication modernisation. The finding that younger employees prefer digital channels while older employees prefer face-to-face communication is consistent with studies on workplace generational differences (Ng et al., 2012; Tolbize, 2008). However, the current study shows how technology deficiencies—inconsistent Wi-Fi, lack of training—compound these generational differences, creating communication gaps that reinforce existing silos.

The departmental fragmentation is particularly concerning because it undermines coordination in an organisation where cross-departmental collaboration is essential for broadcast production. The observation that crisis communication temporarily overcomes these barriers suggests that KBC possesses latent capacity for effective communication but that this capacity is not activated under routine conditions. This raises the question: what would it take to make crisis-level communication the norm rather than the exception?

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focused on KBC headquarters in Nairobi, excluding regional bureaus that may operate with different communication dynamics. Findings may not be transferable to these regional offices or to other public broadcasters in Kenya or elsewhere. Second, while the study achieved data saturation, the sample of twenty-six participants represents a fraction of KBC's workforce; additional perspectives might have revealed other patterns. Third, the study relied primarily on self-report data (interviews) and observation; access to internal documents was

limited. Fourth, the sensitive research context meant that some participants may have been cautious in their responses despite confidentiality assurances. Fifth, the researcher's prior media experience, while helpful for contextual understanding, may have introduced biases despite reflexive efforts. Sixth, political interference and financial constraints were reported by participants but could not be independently verified through access to documents such as management directives or financial records. Finally, the study was conducted at a single point in time; a longitudinal design would have captured communication dynamics over time and through organisational changes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined organisational communication practices and workplace culture at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, identifying a wide gap between formal structures and actual practice. Informal channels—particularly WhatsApp—have superseded distrusted formal channels. Workplace culture is characterised by strong peer-level trust set against persistent distrust of senior leadership, sustained by the enduring legacy of the 2012 strike. This dynamic is driven by an interlocking set of factors—rigid hierarchy, bureaucracy, financial constraint, political interference, and generational digital divides—that together sustain a self-reinforcing cycle of fear and unresolved grievance.

The study makes several theoretical contributions. It demonstrates the utility of integrating Cultural Approach, Social Identity Theory, and Systems Theory to understand organisational communication in African public sector contexts. It extends knowledge of the culture of silence by showing how organisational memory and material artefacts perpetuate it across generations. It contributes to understanding of how trust differentiation operates in hierarchical public organisations, and how external political and financial pressures shape internal communication.

Practical Recommendations

These findings point toward concrete reforms:

1. Anonymous Feedback Systems

Introduce genuinely anonymous feedback mechanisms that do not depend on trust in visible reporting structures. Anonymous digital platforms or external independent feedback channels (not managed by HR) could provide safe avenues for upward communication. These systems should be actively monitored and responded to visibly, demonstrating that feedback leads to action.

2. Skip-Level Meetings

Implement sanctioned, low-risk channels for upward communication across hierarchical layers. Skip-level meetings—where junior staff meet with senior leaders without middle managers present—could provide structured opportunities for voice without direct threat of reprisal. These should be regular and transparent in their outcomes.

3. Strengthened Editorial Independence Protections

Establish institutional safeguards to reduce self-censorship induced by political interference. This could include an editorial independence charter, external oversight, and protection for journalists who resist improper directives. A governance reform that reduces financial dependence on the exchequer—perhaps through a diversified funding model—would also reduce structural vulnerability to political pressure.

4. Communication Technology Upgrades

Address the digital divide through improved Wi-Fi infrastructure, provision of devices (or data allowances), and age-sensitive training programmes that accommodate different learning preferences and digital literacy levels.

5. Addressing the 2012 Strike Legacy

Acknowledge the historical grievance of the 2012 strike through an independent review, amnesty for affected employees, and formal reconciliation processes. Without addressing this legacy, new communication channels are likely to remain distrusted.

6. Leadership Development

Invest in leadership communication training that emphasises openness, active listening, and feedback responsiveness. Leadership behaviours must demonstrate that upward communication is welcomed and safe.

Because the dysfunction identified is self-reinforcing rather than the product of any single deficiency, isolated interventions—such as introducing a new communication channel without addressing the underlying culture of fear—are unlikely to succeed on their own. Interventions must be bundled and sequenced to break the self-reinforcing cycle: trust-building must precede (or at least accompany) channel introduction, and visible responses to feedback must demonstrate that speaking up is not futile.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research might usefully extend this ethnographic approach to KBC's regional bureaus to test whether similar patterns exist outside headquarters. A comparative design across multiple African public broadcasters would test the generalisability of the self-reinforcing cycle identified here and illuminate the role of national political contexts. The findings suggest specific hypotheses for testing: that organisations with histories of punitive management response to employee voice are likely to exhibit stronger reliance on informal channels; that union trust increases when formal upward channels are perceived as unsafe; and that political interference is positively correlated with self-censorship. Quantitative studies could test these hypotheses across a larger sample of public broadcasters. Finally, longitudinal research tracking communication dynamics through organisational change—such as the implementation of reforms—would illuminate how cultures of silence can be transformed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND DATA AVAILABILITY

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality and anonymity assurances given to participants, and the sensitivity of the research context, which involved employees at risk of retaliation for discussing internal organisational matters. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethical approval.

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