

Ex-Ipsos data expert Wolf defends research firms

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Ipsos lead researcher Tom Wolf participates during the Kenya Alliance of Resident Association forum at Laico Regency on February 12, 2019. He says that there are many market research firms that avoid polling on public issues. PHOTO | FILE | NATION MEDIA GROUP

By [Walter Menya](#)

What you need to know:

- Citizens deserve an opportunity to give their thoughts about things that affect them like drought, corruption, inflation, security and so on.
- Before the 2007 elections, some PNU politicians went around Nairobi with their loudspeakers inciting people against me personally.

Former Ipsos data expert Tom Wolf speaks on the welfare of Kenyans and parting ways with the firm after years as its face of public opinion surveys.

Are you feeling bitter at having been sacked from Ipsos Kenya?

Even without knowing the reason for my exit, it is still more sadness than bitterness.

Aside from enjoying seeing the data and analysing the same, forming the questions and also getting the reactions from politicians and the media among others.

I believe that Kenyans had come to depend a great deal on Ipsos and me to report their experiences and air their views about a wide variety of issues that remain critical to them and to the country as a whole.

Why did you release the statement? Wouldn't you have waited for Ipsos Kenya to do so?

I felt I had no choice. Ipsos had remained silent and I already had been out of work for over a week.

Mind you, there was no discussion with me before I left as to how to make this public.

In the absence of any guidance as to what the company was going to do, and given that I have become a fairly well-known figure, I thought it was proper for me to tell the public.

Even in the office people were not told until I issued my statement.

Second, I did not want this information about my sacking to leak out before I made a statement, because some people might have thought I had been intimidated or threatened.

That is why I had to make it absolutely clear in my statement that I have no information whatsoever that this decision taken by Ipsos was influenced by anybody in the Kenyan government.

You have talked of the countless encounters you have had with ordinary Kenyans who have been wondering why survey results were not being released. What do these incessant questions from the public say about the place of Ipsos in Kenya's public life? In what ways will the apparent shift in approach by Ipsos affect its operations in Kenya?

The people who don't like our work will not be asking me those kinds of questions, but clearly, most Kenyans – and from all walks of life – have come to appreciate it.

We found this in our surveys as well: About two-thirds of Kenyans think that these surveys support the growth of Kenya's democracy.

I believe that citizens deserve an opportunity to give their thoughts about things that affect them like drought, corruption, inflation, security and so on.

And these are in addition to a host of social and cultural issues which are also extremely important to Kenyans.

There is no country in the world that can put on a 'T-shirt' that says 'Democracy' but denies citizens the opportunity to express themselves, at least if there are survey/research firms who are prepared to provide this opportunity.

Especially now when there are so many pressing public issues, Kenya's democracy can only be strengthened by allowing citizens to 'have a say' through scientifically valid instruments such as nationally random surveys.

After all, we have elections only once every five years, and those are choices about candidates and parties, not explicitly policies as such.

Over the years, there have been accusations that Ipsos (Steadman and Synovate, as it was known) was being paid by political players to skew opinion polls in favour of the paying party. These claims have persisted to date and probably will do so in the future. What do you have to say to this?

If you look at the history of public releases in Kenya, for Ipsos and other firms, you usually find people complaining and making all kinds of accusations.

In my experience, the worst was in the pre-2007 election period. But even just before the 2005 referendum when we at Steadman were accused by Kibaki's people of promoting a "Western agenda".

I was even called a CIA operative by one publication! They alleged that we were trying to undermine Kibaki and the Wako draft.

Before the 2007 elections, some PNU politicians went around Nairobi with their loudspeakers inciting people against me personally.

As a result, I was almost attacked by a gang at Kangemi. Likewise, just a few weeks later, I was almost attacked outside an ODM rally in Mombasa because our final survey showed that Raila's lead over Kibaki had almost disappeared, and some ODM people assumed that I had been compromised.

What has been your take on the accusations of being a CIA agent, or that you have been compromised by one party or another, especially close to an election?

At first, I was a little bit surprised by such fantasies, but I got used to them and they never really bothered me, especially with encouragement from my bosses: first George Waititu then Maggie Ireri and lastly Aggrey Oriwo.

Ipsos Kenya has for many years been the leader in public surveys, including political polling. Does the apparent shift in policy spell doom for public surveys?

I hope that Kenyan research firms will remain active or even increase their involvement in public surveys, or perhaps even one or more new such firms will emerge.

There are also many market research firms that avoid polling on public issues.

Perhaps some of them will see an opportunity created by Ipsos' apparent withdrawal and move into this important space.

At the same time, there is much work that needs to be done to increase the public's understanding of the challenges of such methodologies.

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