



The Role of Newspaper Editors in the Prioritization of Environmental News Stories in the Kenyan Media

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role of editors in the prioritization of environmental news stories in selected print media in Kenya. When it comes to prioritization of issues in the print media in terms of placement, spatial, and frequency of coverage, the editors' role is vital. This paper was guided by two objectives; 1) to determine the role of editors in the publication of environmental news stories, and 2) to analyze the placement, spatial, and frequency of environmental news stories. The paper was guided by two research questions; 1) what is the role of editors in the publication of environmental stories? 2) In what way do the print media prioritize environmental stories in terms of placement, spatial, and frequency? The study was based on a qualitative research method and used a phenomenology research design. The study use homogenous sampling and the sample size was two environmental editors. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The study found that indeed editors still play significant roles in the gatekeeping functions. When it comes to prioritization of stories, the study established that in terms of story placement, the two newspapers place most environmental stories on minor pages. When it comes to spatial coverage, the study revealed that environmental stories occupy insignificant spaces in the newspaper. When it comes to frequency of coverage, the study further found that environmental stories are not published frequently in the two leading newspapers in Kenya. The study recommends recommended that this research be replicated in various other newspapers such as the Nairobi, the People Daily, and the Start to learn about the phenomenon of print media coverage of environmental stories and its impact on the audience.*

KEYWORDS: *Print Media, Environmental Stories, Editors, Newspapers, Agenda-Setting Theory*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The mass media remains one of the most essential tools used in the dissemination of information to the masses in the 21st century (Otieno & Ndonge, 2022). Various forms of media today are utilized for the same function. Traditionally, media was categorized into print media and electronic media i.e. television and radio (McLuhan, 1964). However, today, mass media can be categorized into two broad categories; traditional media and new media traditional media include all media forms that operate minus the internet and the news media,

which operate with the aid of the internet. Over the years, there have been tremendous changes in the media where the so-called traditional media underwent a radical shift by using modern technology to create their online version. Today, we have digital and online radios, television, and newspapers. All these modern changes have elongated the lifespan of traditional media, which most scholars thought would be extinguished by the arrival of new media and the invention of social media. However, according to Briggs and Burk (2005), print media remains one of the oldest forms of media that continue to exist and one that has revolutionized with the aid of the internet globally.

Ndonye and Telewa (2013) define a newspaper as a scheduled publication that contains news of current happenings. In Kenya, print media still enjoys the prestigious role of information and educating the masses on various issues. The two dominant media conglomerate that controls the print media in Kenya are the Standard Media Group (SMG) and the Nation Media Group (NMG), which owns the Standard newspapers and the Nation newspapers respectively. However, when it comes to prioritization of news stories in the print media, editors who are also known as media gatekeepers plays important role in the decision are making process. As Gilani (2017) remarks, newspaper editors are senior media experts who are conversant with publication ethics, rules, and ethos and who provide leadership and supervision of the entire publication process in the newsrooms.

On the other hand, environmental issues have taken the center stage in the global discourse in recent years. Today, there are many discussions on global warming and climate change among other environmental issues. Philander (2008) defines the environment as a natural surrounding encompassing all living and non-living organisms. These natural surroundings need protection to meet our social and environmental needs. However, because of excessive human activities, the environment is degraded and unable to support life. The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) predicts that because of inadequate environmental knowledge, the public will have a limited understanding of matters environmental and hence remain unprepared for increasing environmental responsibilities in the years to come if nothing is done about it. The majority of people will be unprepared and unable to handle environmental challenges such as Global warming and climate change that are currently threatening the entire globe (Krassowska, 2009). Since mass media is mandated with the responsibility of educating and informing the public on various matters including the environment, the media, therefore, must step up and editors equally must ensure that adequate environmental stories are published. To elevate the availability of environmental information, the media must take up matters environment seriously and educate the public on the need for environmental protection and conservation. The media must also create awareness among Kenyans if the war on environmental degradation is to be won.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Newspaper editors play major roles in the prioritization of news items including environmental news stories. Therefore, the placement, space, and frequency of environmental publications can go a long way in informing and educating the public on environmental matters. Although there are studies that have looked into the role of editors in the publication of stories, there is inadequate data on the roles editors play in the prioritization of news items. This study, therefore, aims at establishing the role played by environmental editors in the prioritization of environmental news stories in the two leading print media in Kenya.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous cases where editors who are senior gatekeepers in the newsrooms and decide what goes on air and what does not see the light of the day never appreciate environmental issues. Most of them accord minimum attention to environmental news stories (Banterer, 2002). As Shanahan (2011) posits, many journalists and reporters struggle to convince their editors that environmental stories are newsworthy, but their efforts are often ignored. Many would want to report the severe effect of climate change and global warming, but their stories are never published. Shanahan went on to say that, most editors view stories on climate change and global warming as international stories and leave international media outlets to be the first to air those kinds of stories (Shanahan, 2011). This tendency is a shred of clear evidence that environmental stories are subordinated compared to other issues.

Additionally, a survey study by Baker (2007) on the Rediscovery of traditional ecological knowledge as adaptive management observes that media organizations on the intentional stage pick out environmental movements that capture their corporate interest and demand for newsworthiness and ignore the rest. Seldom, what is picked in most cases does not serve the public's interest, while that which is killed is what matters most to the public. Therefore, the media does a lot of dishonesty in terms of environmental coverage, thereby limiting the public's understanding of matters of environment and environmental conservation. According to Adel (2013), Environmental coverage in the United States is represented by just 1.2 percent of headlines. Meanwhile, entertainment and crime coverage continued to dominate the media space.

Once international media outlets highlight these stories, the local editors pick them from western news agencies and report them without adding local taste. This kind of reporting does more harm than good to the vast majority of media audiences who look up to the media as their science teacher (Shanahan, 2011). Many who are exposed to this reporting end up viewing environmental issues such as global warming and climate change as problems of the western world; hence, many people end up abdicating their environmental protection and conservation responsibilities. Dobson (1997) is of a similar opinion to Banterer (2002) that environmental-related stories are often underreported, and most media gatekeepers and senior editors do not give environmental stories the attention they deserve. Local environmental issues are never given attention until international media outlets pick up the stories and give them international coverage (Dobson, 1997). Then and only then will a local media organization highlight the story to its audience.

Although credibility, trust, and accuracy are essential in mediating audience perceptions in media coverage, environmental issues' context, and body coverage are equally important. A cross-sectional study by Wonneberger et al. (2019) using a two-wave online survey approach in the Netherlands on media coverage of climate change across sampled audience segments shows that important events may cause limited changes in public opinions because of a neglected focus on specific audience segments and content. Of importance is the fact that many journalists reporting on environmental issues cannot place the issue in context or dissociate their biases or preconceived ideas on the news segment. This lack of contextual and complete body coverage of issues could explain the paucity of public support for crucial issues despite their overt public importance. This aspect was observable in Murukutia et al.'s (2019) review of media coverage of air pollution and cancer in the US. The authors found gaps in media reporting on the perceived correlation between air pollution and cancer from sporadic and episodic reporting of the issue. Hence, a lack of full-body coverage and adequate issue contextualization warrant the needed public support.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proponents of Agenda setting theory i.e. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw posit that the themes or news items that the mass media pays attention to in their publication often gain dominance hence media audiences deem it as the most important items (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory also highlights how media legitimization of events and other indispensable issues affects the perception of the audience's realities. As emphasized by Littlejohn and Foss (2009), the news media's primacies later became the priorities of the media audience. McCombs (2004) submitted that the more the mass media concentrates on a specific news item, the more that item gains prominence, thereby creating a mental construct in the audience to view that news item as the most important. However, as much as the media hold immense power in the audiences' mental constructs; it can only suggest to them what to think about but is incapable of suggesting to the audience what to think (Griffin, 2012; Scheufele, 1999). According to McQuail (1994), the agenda-setting theory assumes that the mass media concentration on a specific topic ultimately makes the media audience view that topic as most vital among other topics. The more a story is published in the mass media, the more it becomes glaringly stored in individuals' memories when there is a need to recall it, even if it does not overtly affect them or register as a noticeable issue in their minds (McQuail, 2010). Arguing on the same line, Sheafer (2007) noted that the media could filter and shape what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience. In this study, the theory will be applicable in establishing the role editors perform in the prioritization of environmental issues and secondly, in evaluating if, priority in terms of placement, space, and frequency is accorded to environmental issues in the Standard and the Nation newspapers; the public will consider environmental issues important.

V. METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research method and used a phenomenology research design. As Mugenda and Mugenda remark, qualitative research is employed when the topic under study requires exploration (2003). On the other hand, Creswell (2014) postulates that phenomenology research design is appropriate when the researcher requires firsthand information from participants' lived experiences. The target population was environmental editors of the Standard, and Nation newspapers; the study used a homogenous sampling method. According to Creswell and Creswell (2013), homogenous sampling is suitable when a researcher is interested in studying a particular group with similar traits in-depth. The sample size was two and as Patton (2002) remarks, a homogenous sample requires a smaller sample size than a heterogeneous sample. Data were collected using an in-depth interview guide and analyzed using thematic analysis where the information obtained was organized into themes. As Mason (2002) posits, organizing data in themes makes it easier during the analysis and interpretation. Finally, a conclusion and recommendation were drawn.

VI. RESULTS

The section presents the findings obtained through the in-depth interview. During the individual in-depth interviews, eleven themes were identified and described. However, only three themes are discussed here. They include; story placement, spatial coverage, and frequency of coverage. The views of study participants are presented in the paragraphs below with illustrations of their descriptions.

5.1 Story Placement

Probing why most environmental stories were not placed on the major pages in the newspapers, like the front page and other important pages, and that were only published on the other pages like pullout magazines. The participant argued that the front page highlights the key stories and has limited space for details; therefore, it does not matter much whether they highlight it there. People normally are interested in the details. Participant EESMG indicated that:

I am one of those editors who encourage the placement of environmental stories in those pullout magazines and other pages where competition is less. You see, on the major pages, such as the front page and the back page, the competition is high, and the space is limited; therefore, the depth of information is narrow, whereas these other pages and magazines have enough space and information are rich in terms of depth irrespective of the placement. Besides, some people do not necessarily read the headline but other newspaper sections.

Another participant said that normally, the pullout papers have humble space, and since they appear weekly, readers can still obtain lots of environmental information from them. Again, due to the competitive nature of news pages, only a few selected stories can make it to the front pages while the rest of the other stories go to the other pages. Participant EENMG summed it up by commenting:

Newspapers do not have the space to include all the day's stories. That is why we have pullout magazines such as climate change magazine, which runs on Sunday once a month, or the seed of gold, which normally runs on a Saturday. These pages serve to highlight environmental stories. So you see! We are making some effort to highlight climate change and global warming stories. hehehe! Furthermore, about environmental stories appearing mostly in weekend papers, it could be a coincidence or deliberate effort by the team of editors who usually makes the final decision.

Whether front pages were the most lucrative in the newspaper, editors had contrary opinions regarding whether the front page was the most important. There is no need to fight for front pages if there are other spaces available on other pages to air the story. Participant EENMG posits that:

Front pages are very vital pages in the newspaper. The headline usually sells the newspaper, and stories placed on the front page are of keen importance in the newsroom. Different editors would want their stories to appear there.

Participant EESMG said:

I do not think the front pages of newspapers are extremely imperative, as many people tend to think. As an environmental editor, I do not have to fight for the front page. Some people do not even read stories on the front page. They go straight to the section of newspapers they feel most attracted to.

Concerning placement of environmental stories on major pages like the front page, the study participants were of a similar view that most environmental news stories do not enjoy front-page placement. However, they both indicated that pullout magazines are key in offering detailed environmental information. Start harvest magazine, found in the standard newspaper, and the seed of gold magazine, and climate change magazine, found in the Nation newspaper, normally play key roles in highlighting environmental and agricultural stories to the public.

5.2 Spatial Coverage

Inquiring why most environmental stories were not accorded full pages in their publication while political stories, in most cases, were on full pages, the editors said that for a story to be given full-page coverage, that particular story must be of great importance to many people. Participant EENMG pointed out two examples when a story is given full-page coverage. EENMG described:

You remember when president Kibaki died, most front pages, as well as subsequent pages in various newspapers across the country, gave him full pages of coverage. That particular story enjoyed excellent spatial coverage. Another example was in 2017 when the Supreme Court nullified the presidential election; the story enjoyed full spatial coverage. Therefore, that could explain why perhaps environmental stories have not enjoyed such coverage. The story's impact is key.

Another Participant EESMG said that there is a serious problem when it comes to environmental knowledge. She added that the lack of media experts conversant with matters of the environment plays a major role in the limited spatial coverage of environmental matters. Here is what EESMG narrated:

Journalists are not prepared to cover environmental stories effectively. On several occasions, I have received stories that are poorly articulated. In short, many journalists and even senior editors cannot link environmental stories with what is happening in society. It is purely ineptness. No wonder we do not assign environmental stories adequate space in our print media.

Participant EENMG said the following when asked what factors determine the spatial coverage of environmental stories in the print media. EENMG had this to say:

The length of the story equally dictates the amount of space we, as editors, give to stories. Another thing is that before we decide on the space to assign a story, we look for several things in a story, such as a story's impact. For instance, in a story on the drought problem in northern Kenya, the question will be how many people are affected by that drought? Furthermore, that will inform the amount of space we give. For example, there were floods, and people died, a big story that will get prominence in terms of space.

Regarding why political stories enjoy much spatial coverage compared to environmental stories, the editors said that Kenya is very political and that many of their audience are interested in political stories, so that is what they cover. Participant EENMG commented on politics and described it as follows:

Politics reflects society, and many Kenyans are interested in political stories; therefore, we have no choice but to give them what they want.

Participant EESMG, on the other hand, stated:

Newspapers must be sold, and money has to be made; therefore, we give the public what they want the most. The second reason political stories enjoy must space is that some senior editors believe that political stories must be included in the newspaper, period! These senior editors have made up their minds, and you cannot change them.

From the spatial coverage interview excerpts of the role of newspaper editors in the publication of environmental news stories, the participants seem to be of similar viewpoint that there are factors that determine the space allocation in print media. These could include issues of prominence and impact, among others. On why political stories enjoy more spatial coverage, this study cohort seems to think that their audience is more interested in political stories than environmental stories.

5.3 Frequency of Publication

Ask how often environmental stories are published in the newspapers and why most of them appear in weekend newspapers, not daily newspapers. The participant in this cohort indicated that most of the pullout magazines, such as the seed of gold or the start harvest, normally appear in the weekend papers, and that could be the reason why the frequency of environmental coverage was found more in the weekend papers as opposed to the dailies. Participant EESMG described the aspect of frequency and said:

The newsroom has limited environmental champions to push for the environmental agenda. That fact could explain why the frequency of environmental publications is limited—on the contrary, concerning why there were most environmental stories on weekends than on weekdays is simply because of the pullout magazines that highlight matters of agriculture and the environment.

Participant EENMG commented and said:

Generally, the frequency of environmental publications was low this year due to the concentration on political events in the country. If you were to analyze our last year or next year's papers, the results would be different. However, concerning why there are more environmental stories in the weekend papers, the reason could be that pullout magazines are published on the weekend.

VII. DISCUSSION

In print media, the editor's role in the prioritization of issues is determined by three aspects i.e. story placement, spatial coverage, and frequency of publication. The study findings established that editors still have enormous powers in determining the fate of a story and make major decisions when it comes to the three aspects of story placement, spatial, and frequency of coverage. The results also indicated that in terms of story placement, environmental stories do not seem to enjoy significant placement on major pages of the two newspapers. These findings further revealed that the Kenyan print media is skewed towards politics, business, and sports, which enjoy much coverage and are prioritized in terms of story placement, space, and frequency of coverage. However, study participants were quick to point out the reasons why they prefer having environmental-related stories on pages such as pullout magazines, which they argued, provide sufficient space for details. It revealed that specific pages are designated for sports, business, and politics, while environmental stories are often placed on minor pages such as pullout magazines and other sponsored content. Regarding spatial coverage, the findings revealed that environmental stories occupy insignificant spaces in the two newspapers. Participants argued that in terms of spatial coverage in the print media, there are factors such as story prominence and the impact that seem to determine the amount of space a story is given. Again, they opine that most of their audience prefers fewer environmental stories in comparison to other stories touching on politics and sports among others. On the frequency of environmental coverage, the findings established that environmental stories are not infrequently published since they mostly appear on special pages that only appear once a week. That means the two leading print media in Kenya do not prioritize environmental stories.

The previous studies cited in the literature review section of this paper show that many scholars have established that print media appears to give casual attention to environmental news stories and issues in general (Banterer, 2002; Dobson, 1997). The two authors believe that editors often give minimum attention to environmental stories in their publications. These previous findings seem to conquer with the current study that established that indeed print media editors in Kenya do not prioritize environmental stories often in their publications. Dobson (1997) in a study established that there is serious underreporting of environmental stories and that editors accord passive attention to these stories. This finding equally agrees with the current study findings. A separate study by Shanahan (2011) found that editors view stories on global warming and climate change as international stories and often leave them out for international news media to publish first. This study disagrees with this previous finding. On the other hand, Baker (2007) in his study found that media outlets only pick stories that capture their corporate interest and leave out those that do not. This finding agrees with the current study findings which seem to suggest that editors often cover stories that they feel are relevant to them. Lastly, Abel (2013) in his study found that limited environmental stories are appearing on the front page of the newspaper and this finding equally agrees with the current study which established that most editors prefer placing environmental stories on the inside pages.

Several earlier studies established that there is serious underreporting of environmental stories in the print media and that most media gatekeepers and senior editors do not prioritize environmental stories in terms of placement, space, and frequency of coverage (Dobson, 1997 & Banterer, 2002).

The participants' responses in this study illustrated above echo previous scholars' sentiments that several journalists cannot place environmental stories in context. They often dissociate their biases or preconceived ideas on the news segments. This lack of contextual and complete body coverage of issues explains the paucity of public support for crucial issues despite their overt public importance (Wonneberger et al., 2019). This aspect was observable in Murukutia et al.'s (2019) review of media coverage of air pollution and cancer in the US. The authors found gaps in media reporting on the perceived correlation between air pollution and cancer from sporadic and episodic reporting of the issue. Hence, a lack of full-body coverage and adequate issue contextualization warrant the needed public support. These two previous findings concur with current findings that established that many journalists and reporters could not contextualize environmental stories and frame them so that the audience gets the full meaning.

The in-depth interview revealed that editors play a key role in the prioritization of stories in the print media. The study also established that the two newspapers in Kenya do not prioritize environmental stories looking at the aspect of story placement, spatial, and frequency of environmental coverage. Responses from the study participants seem to suggest that most editors do not care much about which pages in the newspapers carry environmental stories. For instance, one participant said, "Well, it doesn't matter much to me where an environmental story is placed, the most important thing is that it is published." Another participant added, "Looking at magazines where environmental stories often appear and the amount of space these pages have, I think am I okay with the coverage." Based on the comments of participants, the study Concur with the agenda-setting theory, which suggests that if the media fails to prioritize a particular issue, the public might believe that issue, is insignificant. However, if the editors who are media gatekeepers fail to prioritize environmental issues as were the findings in this study, then these issues fail to gain prominence hence audience assume that environmental issue is not vital.

The sentiments, insights, and observations made by study participants and the findings from the content analysis of the two newspapers resonate with the agenda-setting theory. As early discussed, the proponent of the agenda-setting theory was Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw who argued that there was a perfect correlation between the issues listed by the voters as most important and the topics that were given the most space and time and were frequently covered by the news media. The agenda-setting theory, therefore, stipulates that the more the media focuses on a particular issue, the more that issues gain prominence, thereby making the audience view the issue as the most important at a specific period. The media, in this case, is presented as having absolute power in redirecting the focus of the audience on a given issue while, at the same time, maintaining the freedom of the audience. On the other hand, if the media gives less attention to a particular issue, then the public will assume that issue is unimportant.

Based on the responses and comments by the study cohort (editors), agenda-setting theory is still applicable today. Suppose editors, who are the gatekeepers fail to prioritize an issue. In that case, that issue fails to gain prominence, making the audience believe that the issue is less vital and not worth attention. From the finding in this study, it was established that editors do not think environmental issues are vital and worth giving proper placement, significant spaces, and frequent coverage. Because of this, the editors focused more on political stories than environmental stories creating an impression that politics is more important than the environment and making their audience believe so. One participant questioned, "What is there about the environment that needs reporting?" another participant said, "Papers have to be sold, and so we must make stories juicy because our audience wants politics, and that is what we give them." He added, "If it means making environmental stories sound more political to attract more readers, then we go in that direction. Remember, there are bills to be paid."

VIII. CONCLUSION

Upon analyzing the role of print media editors in the prioritization of environmental news stories, the study concludes that indeed editors remain relevant and play a key role in determining the fate of stories. Secondly, editors equally make key decisions when it comes to story placement, spatial, and frequency of environmental news coverage in the Kenyan leading print media. On the second objective of this paper, which was to analyze the placement, spatial, and frequency of environmental news coverage, the study concludes that the two leading Kenyan print media do not prioritize environmental stories when it comes to story placement,

spatial, and frequency of coverage. Most environmental stories appeared on minor pages, occupy insignificant spaces, and are not frequently published.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that editors need to be more proactive when it comes to environmental publications and should place environmental-related news stories on major pages in the newspaper. They should equally accord them significant space and frequently publish them in their various newspapers. The study also recommends that media organizations formulate policies that favor environmental publication in the print media and, at the same time, devise directives regarding environmental news selection by their editorial teams. The study recommends that editors consider consistency in following up on environmental stories published in their print media. This, in turn, will ensure that the masses do not miss any important environmental updates. Lastly, It is recommended that this research be replicated in various other newspapers such as the Nairobian, the People Daily, and the Start to learn about the phenomenon of print media coverage of environmental stories and its impact on the audience.

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