

## Effects of Editorial Policies on Demand for Comprehensive Research on News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

*Media houses play pertinent roles in the social transformation of their consumers and ultimately their countries. By casting light on issues affecting the society, they spur and steer national dialogue on these issues from the grassroots of households in the community, to the offices of leaders in power. For this to take place though, journalists should ideally work in an atmosphere devoid of unnecessary limitations. Regrettably, journalists have to contend with an ever decreasing operating sphere, due to limitations posed by editorial policies among other restrictions. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of editorial policies on demand for comprehensive research on the coverage of news in the print and social media channels in Kenya. The study adopted the Gatekeeping Theory. The mixed method study was used. The target population was 60 journalists, 30 editors and 20 sub-editors all from the NMG. The sample size was 110 individuals drawn from the above. The study participants were purposively sampled. Questionnaires and interviews were used in data collection. The findings show that journalists are forced to work within a constrained framework by editorial norms in media organizations, particularly when it comes to obtaining, developing, and disseminating news information. This might result in some news stories being excluded, which would reduce the tendency of media outlets to support social change. Thus, the interaction between editorial policies and the spread of social media necessitates that we reconsider what gatekeeping is and how to modify the editorial policies. According to Pearson correlation, there was a statistically significant association between compressive research policy and media house news coverage ( $r=0.527$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Demand for thorough research policies was thus refused, leading to the conclusion that they had no appreciable impact on Kenya's print and social media news coverage. Compressive research policies might statistically and significantly predict media house news coverage, according to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) ( $F=18.036$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Compressive research policy ( $t=19.955$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) could statistically significantly predict media house news coverage, according to t-test results. The study makes the suggestion that editorial practices be revisited in order to improve their capacity to report on news that may have an impact on social transformation.*

**Key Words:** Editorial Policies, Social Transformation, Media, News Coverage, Gatekeeping Theory

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Media houses play pertinent roles in the social transformation of their countries. However, the challenges faced by journalists in executing their duties cannot be denied. In media, news decisions and work autonomy are intertwined principles. This is because the amount of freedom a journalist has in the newsrooms influences the choices they make while writing for print or broadcast media. Autonomy is, in reality, a key feature of professional work (Brownlee & Beam, 2012). However, journalists face diverse restrictions while performing their duties, including those imposed by the government, media regulations, editorial policies, media owners, politicians, and advertisers. This study hypothesizes that editorial policies significantly affect media house news coverage by placing limitations on journalists.

Editorial policies condition journalists to carry out thorough research, often with financial and time constraints, before submission of the articles and going to press. They also condition their words, failure to which they risk their work being thrown out by editors or being fired over a story, as in the case of Shaffie Weru's dismissal by Radio Africa over remarks he made on his breakfast show on Homeboys radio (BBC, 2021). During a discussion of a court case in which a guy was accused of shoving a woman he had met on Facebook out of a 12th storey building window on their first date, the presenter was accused of victim blaming. Furthermore, a lot of journalist's news items

have been thrown out to make way for regional balanced reporting. As a result, journalists cannot always report as they wish. Weak editorial policies affect the quality of news coverage as is evidence among some scholars (Kibisu, 2017; Kabucua, Nyamboga, & Matu, 2020). This is confounded by problems such as editorial policy conflicts, prejudices, political sycophancy, and editorial policy control in most media houses (Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2019). The ability of journalists to have sustained coverage of some the areas of societal concern, is also thwarted by the hurdles placed by editorial policies.

However, the impact of editorial policies on media house news coverage and social transformation in Kenya has not received much scholar attention. This means that there is minimal empirical evidence on the impact of these policies on news coverage on issues of societal concern in the country. In this regard, it is untenable to understand how reporters respond to challenges emanating from editorial policies. It is also unfeasible to make empirically informed recommendations on the possible ways of bridging the policy gaps that limit news coverage in print and social media platforms. Without studies such as this current one, the capacity of media houses to systematically influence societal issues of national concern could remain inadequate. This should not be the case in a country that faces an array of political and socioeconomic challenges such as corruption, terrorism, insecurity, unemployment and pandemics such as COVID 19 among others that need constant attention. As a result, this paper uses the case study of Nation Media Group to analyse how editorial policies affect the selection of news content in print and social media platforms in Kenya.

### 1.1 Research Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>:** Demand for comprehensive research policies has no significant effect on the coverage of news in print and social media channels in Kenya.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is based on the gatekeeping theory. The theory was originated by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1943. The theory explains the key roles that are played by news media. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009, p.1), gatekeeping is the “process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day.” In this regard, the environment in which reporter’s work entails decisions at all stages of production to find out whether the information passed is objective or not because journalists do not work in a vacuum but are guided by both the editorial and land laws in many jurisdictions. As a result, reporters have to work round the clock and sieve numerous pieces of news to ensure that the relevant information reaches the audience.

According to Barzilai-Nahon (in press), gatekeeping broadly refers to the process of regulating information as it passes through a gate or filter and is connected to the use of various forms of power. In terms of epistemologies, theories and models, vocabularies, heuristics, and research difficulties both within and beyond disciplines and fields, the literature on gatekeeping is dispersed. This occurs as a result of the relative isolation with which gatekeeping discourse is conducted inside each profession (Shoemaker, 1991).

The gatekeeping theory, therefore, is applicable to this study since reporters are supposed to play gatekeeping roles on issues of societal concern. They could thus contribute to social transformation by airing these issues as news. However, this role is challenged by the demand to adhere to editorial policy guidelines. Demands on extensive research (sometimes beyond ones geographical jurisdiction) before reporting, could affect their decision to include some news items while leaving out others. Choice of words as well as demands for geographically balanced news coverage could also affect their gatekeeping role in news coverage.

### 2.2 Literature Review

Brownlee and Beam (2012) points out that commercial restrictions, news organization policies, procedures, or customs and professional practices restrict journalistic independence. Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert (2016), in a survey to gather comparative data on journalists' perspectives and attitudes toward their work in the United Kingdom (UK) show that editorial policies at news organizations, as well as media law and regulation, are among the most powerful sources of influence on their work. The study reported that, 64% of journalists believe their organization's editorial policy is "very" or "highly" influential, while only 9% believe it has "little" or "no" impact. The influence of media law and regulation was viewed similarly by respondents with 63% believing the UK media's legal and regulatory system to be "very" or "highly" significant. This sentiment echoes the general concerns faced by journalists

in Africa. Many journalists have voiced their concerns regarding editorial policies on limiting their working space, thus dictating on what should be covered in news reporting.

On the continental level, African countries have faced the rule of dictatorship from their leadership and journalists have been muzzled on issues that were reported that did not please the ruling government. For example, in Uganda, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) put down a stringent requirement on the registration of news websites and online broadcasters, necessitating all providers of media services to register by 5 October, 2020 (Muhindo, 2020). The target media services were blogs, online televisions, online radios, online newspapers, internet-based radios and TV stations, streaming radio and TV providers, and video on demand providers (Muhindo, 2020).

In Tanzania, the impact of organization policy and the government on the work of journalists is above average, although an outsider may site brain washing (Ramaprasad, 2001). Similar issues have been experienced in Kenya. On various occasions the government through the National Security Advisory Committee (NSAC) has tried to limit the coverage of news touching thorny issues. This has led to political polarisation and ultimately unbalanced news reporting by creating differing assemblies.

In South Africa the media law states that ‘the media must be a progressive force, supporting human rights and shaping ideas in an open society through informed and impartial reporting and analysis’ (Limpitlaw, 2013). In conclusion, both Uganda and South Africa were trying to put in place measures to streamline media policies on the regional level for news content sharing in Africa which might general reflect on many countries on the continent.

According to Awolowo (2009), editorial policy refers to the overall ethical standpoint or principles under which news media houses conduct their operations. It could be viewed as the media house's mission or vision statement. Awolowo goes on to say that a media house's editorial philosophy or culture has a big influence on the quality of their reporting. Media outlets, regardless of ownership, have editorial policies that outline the organization's mission and vision (Awolowo, 2009). The policies elucidate the operating theory of media companies and guide journalists on what they should report, how they should cover it, and how they should show it.

Every media house has a concept that is defined as a written or unwritten statement that guides the output of managers, editors, reporters, presenters, and programmers (Asemah, 2011). It specifies the appropriate performance standards that each station employee must adhere to in order to comply with the station's rules and codes. It includes the mission statement as a way of achieving the station's objective. It also includes the house style, which defines how the station's programming will be created. Instead of serving to create unity of purpose, these policies have truncated news items, leaving out the core of the issue and instead presenting a sanitized position in an area that may be overrun with labels, inequalities and violence.

In regard to the foregoing, the Nation Media Group (NMG) operates radio broadcasting, TV, and newspapers in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda. It has an editorial policy which provides rules to be followed and the style of the organization, as well as obligations of its workers and associates in news reporting. It is pertinent therefore to note that as posited by (Butler, 2009), some of these laid down editorial policy by NMG may not augur well with journalists because of the conflicting values.

Additionally, editorial policy conflicts, prejudices, political sycophancy and editorial policy control continue to plague media houses such as the NMG (Obuya & Ong’ondo, 2019). In journalism, editorial policies are the guiding principles for investigative practices, challenge journalists with a plethora of ideals to follow; some of which are at odds with one another, putting journalists in a disconcerting state of serving two or more contradictory editorial standards.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the Transformative research world view (Creswell, 2014). In order to address social inequality at all of its levels, the transformative worldview, Creswell (2014) posits “that research inquiry needs to be linked with politics and a political change agenda” (p. 9). According to Mertens (2014), this paradigm enables focusing on the requirements and viewpoints of marginalized groups in order to incite some social change in local communities (Mertens, 2014). In understanding the role played by editorial policies on news coverage in social transformation, the transformative worldview suffices. It provides a platform for examining the role that editorial policies could play in mainstreaming issues that could contribute to transformative social change.

This study targeted journalists, editors and sub-Editors from NMG. All the 60 journalists, 30 editors and 20 sub-editors from the media house were targeted (NMG, 2021). This makes a total target population of 110 persons. NMG has 6,000 employees in its service across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda. About a third of these employees, work in Kenya, traversing the forty-seven counties. They are distributed over seven main bureaus across

the country and incorporate two major divisions which are print and broadcasting divisions. Majority of these employees are located in Nairobi which is the headquarters of the media house. The journalists at the headquarters, located at Nation Centre, are targeted since they are responsible for news gathering as well as editing and determining what is covered or not. It is from this hub, that news is disseminated, not only in Kenya, but also in its key offices where its products are consumed.

Using purposive sampling technique, this study sampled at least 60% of the targeted study participants in the study. Data was collected by use of Questionnaires distributed to 56 journalists, editors and sub-editors physically and collected after three days. Focus group and interview guide was used to collect data from 10 journalists, 5 sub-editors and 5 editors. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 was used for the analysis of quantitative data. The findings were presented in tables and figures. Selected descriptive statistics were used in data analysis. These included frequencies, percentages and means. At the same time, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to test the relationships between the study variables as well as the level to which media house coverage of news can be predicted by the independent variables.

## IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Response Rate

The study's response rate was 82.1%. Given that a response rate of greater than 60% is regarded adequate for analysis, this was deemed sufficient (Fincham, 2008).

**Table 1**

*Response Rate*

Category	Sample	Responded Rate	Response
Total	56	49	82.1%

### 4.2. Editorial Policies on Demand for Comprehensive Research and News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya

The first objective of the study was to examine the effects of editorial policies on demand for comprehensive research on news coverage in print and social media channels in Kenya.

**Table 2**

*Editorial Policies on Demand for Comprehensive Research and News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels*

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
The media house requires news items to be thoroughly researched according to policy before being published.	4	0.51
I personally know a news item I was forced to leave out due to challenges related to research and verification of its sources and authenticity.	4	0.51
Researching news items is often faced with time constraints and some worthwhile items are left out.	4	0.68
Some news items become redundant within the process of research and are overtaken by other irrelevant but appealing items.	5	0.50
Journalists are faced with financial constraints when researching news items and often opt to leave some leads.	5	0.50
There is lack of sufficient human resources to thoroughly research all news items and this affects the media house coverage.	5	0.47
There is lack of well-equipped and up-to-date repository of information to support research on all contemporary issues affecting the society.	5	0.50
Journalists have access to a lot of news but due to policy limitations, they cannot research all of them and this restricts news coverage.	4	0.51
Researching some issues of societal importance require approval from State agencies and this may delay or completely restrict research efforts due to government bureaucracy.	4	0.67
There are no clear policies on how a well-researched news item should look like and this creates ambiguities that limit coverage of important news to society.	5	0.50
N=49		

Table 1 shows a summary of responses to items on editorial policies scale in the form of mean and standard deviations. Of the sampled participants, majority of the respondents agreed (M=4) with the statement that the media house requires news items to be thoroughly researched according to policy before being. Therefore, editorial policies condition journalists to carry out thorough research, often with financial and time constraints, before submission of the articles and going to press. They also condition the news items, failure to which they risk their work being thrown out by editors. The foregoing findings underline the importance of editorial policies in media houses. These findings concur with the findings by Shoemaker and Reese (2013) which states that every day; journalists make professional decisions based on a range of internal and external factors.

The respondents also agreed (M=4) that they personally know a news item they were forced to leave out due to challenges related to research and verification of its sources and authenticity. They noted that researching news items is often faced with time constraints and some worthwhile items are left out. In line with extant literature, it is worth noting that the importance placed on various items of societal importance may possibly contribute to institution measures aimed at checking their negative influences; affecting social transformation as a reporter is required to do extensive research before sharing a news item (Thurman et al., 2016; Asemah, 2011).

Sometimes journalists are faced with financial constraints when researching news items and often opt to leave some leads (M=5). As a result, editorial policies require a reporter to do extensive research before sharing a news item (Thurman et al., 2011). Research is an integral part of news coverage and needs money to be executed. Lack of sufficient resources means that reports cannot cover stories adequately; affecting abilities to present some news on time due to financial constraints. A number of news items that could affect social transformation are consequently omitted.

The respondents strongly agreed (M=5) that media houses are often constrained and cannot adequately deploy reporters to cover all stories. Literature shows that the manner in which journalists work has an effect on the news material that they produce. The effect of "patterned, repetitive procedures, forms, and rules that journalists use to do their jobs" is regarded at the routines (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

The respondents further agreed (M=4) that some news items become redundant within the process of research and are overtaken by other irrelevant but appealing items. These findings align with the study by Agu (2015) that shows that most news story headlines often have nominal or verbal ellipses. The study noted (M=4) that journalists have access to a lot of news but due to policy limitations, they cannot research all of them and this restricts news coverage. These findings align with the literature reviewed. For example, Brownlee and Beam (2002) found that 30% of reported cited commercial restrictions, 25% cited news organization policies, procedures, or customs, 20% blamed outside agents such as government agencies, and 10% believed professional practices restricted their journalistic independence (Brownlee & Beam, 2012).

Indeed, literature shows that journalist autonomy and space to work was limited (Brownlee & Beam, 2012). Journalists faced diverse restrictions while performing their duties, including those imposed by the government, media regulations, editorial policies, media owners, politicians, and advertisers. This push to lean on policy restrictions meant that pursuing some news items remained largely untenable for most journalists. As a result, these findings show that editorial policies affect demand for comprehensive research on news coverage in print and social media channels in Kenya companies. Journalists are greatly influenced by the confines of research demands (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Their ability to use stories to advance social transformation roles is consequently thwarted.

#### **4.3 Word Cloud Produced by the Analysis**

The word cloud produced by the analysis as tested against the first objective is displayed in Figure 1 below. First of all, it is obvious that "research," "policy," "journalists," "news," "media," and "findings" are the words that stand out the most in the highlighted text. This result does match the objective's goal. Both the keywords "information" and "constraints" emerge as major terms, again emphasizing the objective's purpose. According to the data, "government," "media houses," and "journalists" are their intended audiences. These findings are a pointer to the pertinence of demand for comprehensive research policies on news coverage in Africa.



**Figure 1**  
*Word cloud on effect of Editorial Policies on Demand for Comprehensive Research and News Coverage*

**4.4 News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya**

The study wanted to determine the level of News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya. In this light, the study required the respondents to reply to a series of statements in order to determine the extent to news is coverage in print and social media channels in Kenya as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3**  
*News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya*

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Media houses do not thoroughly cover all issues of societal concern.	2	0.60
I have not been able to cover all the news items I intended throughout my career due to editorial policy limitations.	5	0.39
There are tangible limitations posed by editorial policies in the coverage of news items and media houses cannot cover news as they wish.	5	0.41
Editorial policies often contribute to sieving out some important societal news.	5	0.28
Editorial policies affect the quality of the news covered.	5	0.31
Editorial policies lead to differences in the coverage of particular news items in print and social media platforms.	5	0.49
Media houses have contributed to tangible social transformation by informing and educating citizens on pertinent societal concerns.	5	0.00
The morale of reporters and editors is often affected by editorial policies demands which impact their dedication to cover news.	5	0.00
Some reporters and editors have faced punitive actions due to lack of strict adherence to the requirement of editorial policies and this has affected their dedication to cover news.	5	0.47
<b>N=49</b>		

The respondents disagreed (M=2) that media houses do not thoroughly cover all issues of societal concern. However, the respondents agreed (M=5) that they have not been able to cover all the news items they intended throughout their career due to editorial policy limitations. The reporters went on to agree (M=5) that there are tangible limitations posed by editorial policies in the coverage of news items and media houses cannot cover news as they wish. The respondents also agreed (M=5) that editorial policies often contribute to sieving out some important societal news and that editorial policies affect the quality of the news covered (M=5). In addition, the respondents agreed (M=5) that editorial policies lead to differences in the coverage of particular news items in print and social media platforms. The respondents agreed to a high extent (M=5) that media houses have contributed to tangible social transformation by informing and educating citizens on pertinent societal concerns. Furthermore, the reporters agreed (M=5) that the morale of reporters and editors is often affected by editorial policies demands which impact their



dedication to cover news. They went on to agree to a great extent (M=5) that some reporters and editors have faced punitive actions due to lack of strict adherence to the requirement of editorial policies and this has affected their dedication to cover news.

When asked about the level of News Coverage in Print and Social Media Channels in Kenya, the journalists pointed out that social media has affect transformed the society. They noted that citizen journalism has resulted from the rise of social media, de-professionalizing journalism. To this end one of the respondents said:

*The rivalry for news distribution is fierce due to the proliferation of various news organizations, each with their own websites, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages etc. What is happening is that the internet is displacing newspapers in terms of market share and classified advertising (Respondent 5, August 2022).*

Another respondent went on to say that:

*Online firms are prospering because they are not viewed as an extension of traditional media outlets and because they open up new markets and revenue streams. This has made many individuals to cancel their newspaper subscriptions. As a result, layoffs, bankruptcies, and compensation reductions are increasingly becoming the standard in the majority of media houses (Respondent 6, August 2022).*

When asked to share ways in which print and social media houses contribute to social transformation in Kenya, the respondents said that:

*They cover news that brings to light an atrocity committed and help bring the culprits to book. For example if a girl has been molested by a teacher and the person is still teaching the same pupil (Respondent 5, August 2022).*

### 5.5 Pearson Correlation

Pearson correlation was carried out to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent study variables. The findings show that there was statistically significant relationship between media house news coverage and compressive research policy ( $r=0.527, p<0.05$ ). Based on these findings, the research hypothesis: **H<sub>0</sub>**: Demand for comprehensive research policies has no significant effect on the coverage of news in print and social media channels in Kenya. **Decision: Reject**

**Table 3**

*Pearson Correlation*

Correlations		Media House News Coverage
Compressive Research Policy	Pearson Correlation	.527**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	49
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).		

### 4.8 Regression Analysis

The study sought to examine the level to which media house news coverage could be predicted by editorial policies. As presented in Table 4 on model summary, the findings show that compressive research policy could explain 22.7% of the variability in media house news coverage.

**Table 4**

*Model Summary*

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.527 <sup>a</sup>	.277	.262	2.32780
a. Predictors: (Constant), Compressive Research Policy				

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) as depicted in Table 5 shows that all compressive research policy could statistically and significantly predict media house news coverage ( $F=18.036, P<0.05$ ).



**Table 5**  
*Analysis of Variance*

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	97.732	1	97.732	18.036	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	254.676	47	5.419		
	Total	352.408	48			
a. Dependent Variable: Media House News Coverage						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Compressive Research Policy						

The study went on to carry out t-test to examine the relationship between compressive research policy and media house news coverage. The findings show that compressive research policy ( $t=19.955$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) could statistically significantly predict media house news coverage. Based on these findings, the regression model which was fitted as follows:

$$\text{Media House News Coverage of News} = 74.831 + (0.175 * \text{Comprehensive Research Editorial Policy}) + 3.750$$

The findings were presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
*Regression Coefficients*

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	74.831	3.750		19.955	.000
	Compressive Research Policy	.175	.041	.527	4.247	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Media House News Coverage						

## V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

The findings show that journalists are forced to work within a constrained framework by editorial norms in media organizations, particularly when it comes to obtaining, developing, and disseminating news information. This might result in some news stories being excluded, which would reduce the tendency of media outlets to support social change. This study demonstrates how editorial policies severely restrict journalists. In the wake of social media where news can spread quickly and the constraints occasioned by the editorial polices, the editorial polices have to be modified to reflect the current scenario of a gatekeeper. Thus, the interaction between editorial policies and the spread of social media necessitates that we reconsider what gatekeeping is and how to modify the editorial policies. Thus this study suggest that the Gatekeeping theory be improved to reflect a relative concept in a context where news diffuses through networks of curating actors, where a user's likelihood of coming across specific content depends on both mass communication by news providers and the interest in this content from people in the user's social circle.

Furthermore, the study shows that editorial policies affect societal transformation in Kenya. Media has the ability to alter social capital and individuals, without a doubt. Deep public awareness is raised by it. However, the findings show that NMG's coverage of particular news items differs between print and social media platforms. This means that the contribution of new items to social transformation is affected by the coverage.

### 5.2 Recommendations

The editorial policies should be reviewed to enhance their ability to cover news that can have implications on social transformation. Print media house should ensure that policies on choice of words are expanded and explained well to remove vagueness in their interpretation which would go on create room for social transformation.

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