

Climate Change News Reporting in Kenya: Journalists as Curators

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Abstract

The media's increased coverage of climate change has raised global climate change awareness. However, limited resources, and low access to information and scientific expertise have constrained climate change news coverage in Kenya. Competing news priorities and the perceived complexity of climate change issues have further contributed to this limitation. This study investigated the role of journalists in reporting climate change news in Kenya. The study employed a mixed research design where 50 questionnaires were administered to practicing journalists from four media houses based in Kenya; namely, NTV, Citizen TV, Nation, and Standard newspapers, who were purposively selected. Additionally, the researcher collected qualitative data from ten journalists from the 50 surveyed. Descriptive and thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the data according to the research questions. The findings revealed a shifting media landscape in climate journalism, highlighting the necessity for journalists to undergo specialized training in climate reporting. The findings of this study will contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 13 on climate action.

Keywords: *Climate journalism, Climate change, Media*

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1.0 Introduction

Schäfer and Painter (2021) describe climate journalism as collecting, assessing, selecting, and presenting climate change information. It also entails covering climate change features, causes, and impacts and disseminating the information to the public via media. Climate journalism also focuses on reporting and analyzing climate change's economic, environmental, and social impacts, as well as strategies for mitigation and adaptation. Climate journalism covers various subjects beyond the traditional environment or science desk. It covers a broad range of subjects, including exploring the scientific dimensions of climate change, assessing its financial consequences, and investigating its impacts on diverse sectors like agriculture and health (Schäfer & Painter, 2021). The media ecosystem surrounding climate journalism is characterized by difficult economic conditions, increased communicators entering the climate change debate, false information about climate change, a lack of specialized training in climate change reporting, and competing news priorities. (Barkemeyer et al., 2017)

Furthermore, the complex nature of climate change subject makes it challenging to simplify essential messages for the public. This results in superficial coverage of climate change news which fail to convey the urgency of climate action (MCCIP, 2017). As a result, promoting meaningful discussions about climate change becomes more challenging, hindering efforts to involve the public in climate solutions. This is compounded by the evolving social media landscape, where user-generated content is becoming a predominant source of information. Ultimately, it is vital to adapt climate journalism to these changes to offer precise information to the public and enhance

climate literacy in Kenya. The following research objectives guided the study to address these emerging issues: to establish the challenges journalists face in reporting climate change news, and to determine the role journalists play in enhancing climate change literacy in Kenya. The core theoretical framework for this study was agenda-setting and framing theories. The study utilized these two theories to underscore how the media shapes public perception and understanding of climate change issues.

Agenda-setting focuses on the media's ability to highlight specific subjects, influencing what audiences consider important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing theory indicates how media presentation affects interpretation, guiding audience perceptions of climate change (Goffman, 1974). Together, these theories underscore the need for media to select and frame climate change agenda consciously. This approach fosters a more informed public discourse, encouraging proactive engagement with climate-related challenges. By crafting narratives on climate change, the media can leverage its platforms to mobilize communities and policymakers effectively toward sustainable solutions and climate action initiatives. This drive for awareness can lead to better community resilience and informed decision-making. Ultimately, it supports the evolution of climate literacy, enabling the public to understand the implications of climate change on their lives. This informed citizenry can hold leaders accountable and demand effective climate policies and initiatives.

Furthermore, as journalists establish credible narratives, they can bridge the gap between scientific data and public comprehension. This transformation encourages a culture of environmental stewardship, where

individuals perceive the importance of their role in addressing climate issues. Enhanced awareness has the potential to drive community-led initiatives. These initiatives can promote sustainable practices at local and national levels, thereby reducing the impacts of climate change.

Role of journalists in reporting climate change news

Extensive research on journalists' roles in covering climate change and their journalistic practices have been conducted in the past. According to Brüggemann (2017), media debates surrounding climate change are shaped by journalists' interpretations and professional norms. The traditional practice of providing balanced coverage of climate change has transitioned to a more interpretive approach of journalism. Transnational climate coverage still includes the practice of quoting contrarian voices, but these quotes are presented in a way that dismisses climate change denial. However, there are niches of denial that persist in specific contexts, and a significant amount of journalistic coverage is dedicated to the conflict between those who issue warnings and those who deny climate change while neglecting the more pertinent debates about climate change. The rise of online news media and niche sites specializing in climate journalism is evident through the increasing readership and engagement with climate-related content, showcasing a growing public interest in more climate-conscious reporting. These platforms offer in-depth analysis and coverage of climate-related issues, offering comprehensive data resources. These platforms serve as indispensable resources for individuals seeking to stay informed on the latest developments in climate change.

“In Kenya, climate journalists play a crucial role in highlighting the local impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather, water scarcity, crop failures, and rising temperatures”

Traditional media outlets are also increasing their climate coverage, giving the public a wealth of sources for reliable and up-to-date information on climate change. Climate journalists are currently taking more interactive roles by curating user-generated content, moderating online discussions, collaborating with readers to shape climate narratives, and moving beyond traditional 'gatekeeping' duties. Climate journalists now interact with a broader range of stakeholders, including elite sources for climate, to get climate change information. Stakeholder public relations significantly shape climate journalism through tactics such as sponsoring research studies, providing exclusive access to information and, organizing media events (Schäfer & Painter, 2021).

Recently, several scholars have also examined how climate change-related extreme weather has been reported in the media and how journalists daily handle such media events (Burgess et al., 2020; Hopke, 2020; Anderson et al., 2018; Cordner & Schwartz, 2019). Studies indicate that the mainstream media has poorly linked the relationship between climate change and extreme weather events. Considering the fact that climate change is increasing, the

frequency and intensity of specific extreme weather events, journalists and the media should educate the public on climate change impacts (Vautard et al., 2020).

This can be achieved through accurate reporting and elucidating the attribution of extreme events. This enables journalists to report the severity of specific weather events by attributing them to anthropogenic climate change, highlighting the link between the events and their underlying causes. For example, heat waves frequently experienced in Europe, droughts experienced in the northern parts of East Africa, and floods experienced in the Middle East are undeniable effects of climate change. Climate journalism includes various forms of media, including print, television, radio, broadcasts, mobile applications, and online platforms. It also includes specialized websites, YouTube channels, and blogs that report on climate change. Climate journalism must account for changes in the media ecosystem. This includes the structure and organization of journalistic media, the diverse communicators involved, and their usage patterns (Painter et al., 2016).

The news media industry is facing a crisis due to digital disruption, affecting traditional news business models in the USA, Canada, and Europe. Traditional platforms' viewership and advertising revenue have decreased, leading to financial challenges. This crisis is exemplified in Kenya, where digital platforms like social media and online news websites have also impacted traditional news organizations. As a result, many traditional media outlets in Kenya have been forced to adapt to the changing landscape by shifting their focus to digital platforms to remain competitive. This shift has not been without its challenges, as these outlets must now compete with a plethora of online news

sources for readership and advertising dollars. In addition, fake news and rapid spread of misinformation has further exacerbated the situation, as traditional media outlets strive to maintain their credibility and reputation in the digital age. Despite these challenges, some traditional media organizations in Kenya have successfully embraced digital technologies and have seen an increase in online readership and revenue. This shift towards digital platforms may be key to ensuring the survival of traditional news organizations in Kenya and beyond, in the face of ongoing digital disruption.

Media organizations are cutting costs by downsizing their workforce, reducing salaries, and shifting to online platforms, causing deteriorating working conditions for journalists. They face resource scarcity and must produce more content for various platforms. Digital-born news media organizations aim to balance editorial autonomy with economic strategies, operating exclusively on digital platforms. They use social and mobile media to generate content, user engagement, and income. Alternative models like audience donations, philanthropy, or crowd funding are being explored, but their effectiveness is challenging to evaluate (Dunwoody, 2015).

Online news media platforms have expanded their global reach and diversified significantly. Social media platforms have revolutionized communication structures by diminishing the influence of traditional gatekeepers, such as media corporations and political parties. They allow individuals to reach a broader audience through extensive and interactive communication, allowing more participation in conversations and user-generated content. This shift has transformed media environments, with journalists transitioning from gatekeepers to "curators"

of information, blurring the lines between senders and recipients (AbdelGhaffar, 2024). Their main responsibilities are to supervise and regulate distribution of news and provide direction. Moreover, an increasing number of individuals are turning to digital platforms like Facebook, X, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Google for news consumption, highlighting a significant shift in information sources. In various countries including Kenya, these platforms have surpassed the popularity of news organizations' websites and apps, indicating a substantial preference for digital sources. It is important to note that the selection and display of specific stories on these platforms are algorithm-driven, diverging from traditional journalistic curation practices (Nielsen, 2016). The rise of online and social media platforms has shifted public communication, resulting in a greater number of content creators with varying expertise. This raises concerns about quality control in news media.

Despite increased media coverage of climate change, it still receives less attention due to challenges, such as access to relevant information, misinformation, potential backlash, lack of funding, time, and limited training in climate change reporting, which journalists face. Despite these challenges, journalists' work promotes climate change stewardship and drives positive climate action. Climate journalism has evolved due to technological and economic factors, climate change complexity, and politicized debate. Various news sources have emerged as influential sources, providing investigative and critical perspectives. Solutions journalism, focusing on objective reporting of social problems, may encourage resilience in climate change news coverage (AbdelGhaffar, 2024).

2.0 Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed research design, in which 50 questionnaires were administered to practicing journalists from four media houses based in Kenya; namely, NTV, Citizen TV, Nation, and Standard newspapers, who were purposively selected. Qualitative data was also obtained from ten of the 50 journalists who were key in relaying data on climate journalism. The researcher used descriptive and thematic analysis to analyze data from emerging themes guided by the research questions.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The study found that 40 (90.9%) of 46 Kenyan journalists cover climate change for their organization, while 4 (9.1) do not. 23 out of 46 journalists (51.1%) stated that they have received training in climate change reporting, while 22 journalists (48.9%) have never undergone such training. The study revealed that a majority of the journalists expressed a strong sense of responsibility toward reporting to the public about climate change and its effects. Despite undergoing training on aspects of reporting climate change, only 2 out of 46 journalists (5%) had received specialized training specifically on climate change reporting. The lack of specialized reporters in climate change reporting suggests that there is a significant gap in the media industry in Kenya when it comes to in-depth coverage of climate change. Without journalists knowledgeable in climate change, the public may lack accurate and comprehensive information on this critical topic. Media houses in Kenya must prioritize investing in training and hiring journalists equipped to effectively communicate the complexities of climate change to the public. Through journalists specialized in climate change reporting, media houses in Kenya can ensure the public stays informed about the

latest developments, policies, and research related to climate change. Specialized journalists play a crucial role in bridging the gap between scientific experts and the general public by translating complex information into accessible and understandable content. By investing in training and hiring journalists with expertise in climate change, media houses in Kenya can play a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting informed discussions on climate change.

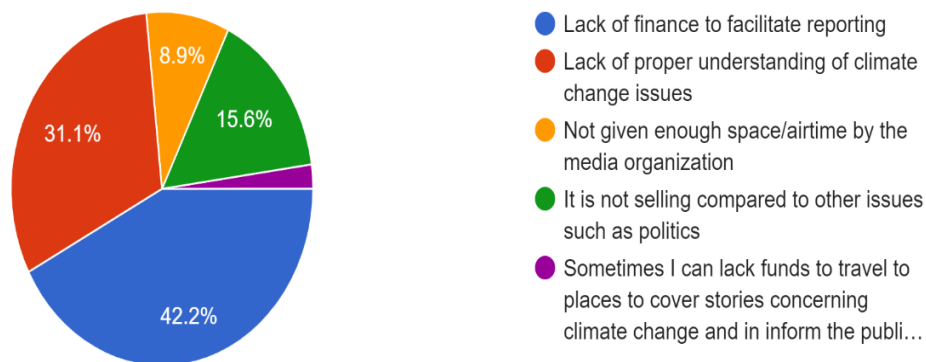
Of the journalists who received training on climate change reporting 67.6% got their stories published/aired, while 32.4% of the journalists' stories were not aired. This illustrates the significant role of media houses in Kenya in selecting news stories for airing/publishing based on their perceived importance and relevance to their audience. This also underscores the specific challenges journalists encounter, such as editorial alignment and newsroom priorities, in getting their climate change stories covered in mainstream media. Gatekeeping involves the process within media houses of determining

the newsworthiness of news stories and selecting those that should be shared with the public. In the case of climate change reporting, this can be particularly challenging as it is often seen as a complex and controversial topic. Journalists may struggle to get their stories on air if they do not align with the editorial priorities of their respective media houses. Consequently, crucial aspects concerning climate change may not garner the necessary attention, impeding public awareness and action on this pressing matter. Despite these challenges, the ability of a majority of trained journalists to have their stories published signifies an increasing acknowledgment of the importance of reporting on climate change issues in Kenya. This trend is promising, indicating a transition towards more thorough and well-informed media coverage of climate change.

Other challenges that were also highlighted by the journalists when reporting climate change are shown in figure 1.

Figure 1

Challenges faced by journalists



The major challenges to climate change reporting based on the study's findings as indicated in figure 1 were a lack of funds to facilitate reporting (42.2%) and lack of proper understanding of climate change issues (31.1%). Lack of adequate funding hinders journalists and media houses in Kenya from covering crucial climate-related stories, leading to a lack of awareness and urgency among the public. Insufficient understanding of climate change and its consequences can hinder journalists' ability to accurately depict the severity of climate change effects and the urgency for action, leading to misinformation and ineffective communication. Specialized training and increased funding for climate reporting can empower journalists to deliver accurate and compelling climate change stories, thereby improving public understanding and driving informed decision among policymakers. Improved climate change literacy also drives meaningful change in response to climate change.

Climate change is emerging as one of the major challenges of our time that demands urgent action. The growing visibility of climate change in the media, along with the occurrence of extreme weather events, has heightened global awareness of climate change. A recent survey across Africa revealed an average national climate change literacy rate of 37% (Simpson et al., 2021). This low level of climate change literacy poses a significant obstacle to effectively addressing its impacts in Africa. It will be challenging to implement the necessary policies and practices, such as sustainable energy initiatives and conservation strategies, to mitigate the impacts of climate change to a public that is not climate literate. African leadership should take concrete actions, like community outreach, educational campaigns,

and school programs, to enhance climate change education and awareness to foster a sustainable future for Africa. Targeted educational campaigns in Kenya, involving collaboration with the media, local schools, community leaders, and environmental organizations, can achieve this.

The study highlights the crucial role of journalists in informing the public about climate change impacts. By increasing awareness, journalists can effectively communicate climate change impacts and encourage action to mitigate its effects. Climate change literacy is essential for developing strategies, implementing policies, and changing behaviors. Journalists can mobilize individuals and communities to adopt sustainable practices and advocate for policy changes. They can empower individuals to become informed and active participants in addressing climate change through accurate reporting and engaging storytelling. Journalists need to maintain balance and accuracy in their reporting, consulting with climate experts, fact-checking information, and presenting a variety of perspectives. They can also shape public opinion and influence decision-makers to take action on climate change, ultimately leading to more informed and effective policies to address climate change in Kenya.

The study found that only 5% of journalists in the study had received specialized training in covering climate change. Effective reporting on climate change is crucial for raising awareness and driving climate action, making this scarcity alarming. The absence of specialized journalists covering climate change may prevent crucial information about the severity of climate impacts from reaching the public, thereby hindering informed decision-making and response efforts. Climate change journalists play a

crucial role in bridging the gap between the complexities of scientific research on climate change and the public's understanding of it. They break down complex information for easy understanding by the public, empower individuals to take climate action, and advocate for change. As the effects of climate change continue to intensify, the need for specialized climate change journalists will become more critical. Media houses in Kenya must prioritize their resources to support climate change reporting and provide specialized training for their journalists.

The emergence of specialized niche sites and online news media platforms in Kenya with regard to disseminating climate change news poses challenges for climate journalists reporting for mainstream media. These challenges encompass misinformation and the widespread proliferation of fake news related to climate change. The online platforms encompass a wide range of mediums, including social media platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube, as well as blogs. These platforms have contributed significantly to dissemination of information regarding climate change. Utilization of these platforms by individuals, non-governmental organizations, and climate change experts that disseminate climate change information, has resulted in a large and engaged audience. These platforms have also fostered discussions, debates, and collaborations among various stakeholders striving to mitigate climate change effects in the country. This has resulted in enhanced cooperation and the development of more effective strategies. This transition expands and diversifies the roles of climate journalists, shifting from the traditional role of 'gatekeeping' to the modern role of 'curating,' thereby reshaping the landscape of climate change reporting (Schäfer & Painter, 2021).

Climate change journalism faces challenges such as high expertise demands, but may not attract large audiences or advertisers (Sachsman & Valenti, 2020). Despite these, news media remains crucial in the interplay of public, scientific, and policy agendas. Most of the public acquires climate change information from news media, particularly mainstream news media. While news media coverage is essential for informing the public about climate change, some critics argue that it may oversimplify complex issues or prioritize sensationalism over accurate reporting, potentially hindering effective communication on this global challenge. Despite the challenges, the importance of climate change journalism in informing and engaging the public is paramount. It is important to note that journalists influence public perceptions of climate policy, its successes, failures, and contexts (Kortenkamp & Basten, 2015). Through framing techniques and selective reporting, journalists can shape public opinion on the urgency and effectiveness of climate policy measures. Therefore, journalists should strive to represent the perspectives of various stakeholders in a balanced manner and offer a range of solutions to address the challenges posed by climate change effectively.

4.0 Conclusion

Climate change is a global issue that has local impacts in Kenya. In Kenya, climate journalists play a crucial role in highlighting the local impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather, water scarcity, crop failures, and rising temperatures. They help the public to understand the urgency of action and hold governments and corporations accountable for their contributions. Climate journalists also act as mediators, interpreting and amplifying climate experts' voices, bridging the gap between complex research

and public understanding. By providing in-depth reporting and analysis on mitigation and adaptation strategies, climate policies, and international agreements, climate journalists shape policy debates and influence decision-makers at all levels of government. They also highlight the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities, raising awareness about social justice aspects of climate change. Through investigative features and community engagement, climate journalists empower individuals to adopt sustainable practices, mobilize communities for environmental activism, and advocate for policy changes to combat climate change. In a world where misinformation and skepticism about climate change abound, their role as trusted sources of information is important in elucidating the impacts of climate change to the public. Ultimately, climate journalism has the transformative power to inspire the public to take action and advocate for broader systemic changes to address the ravaging impacts of climate change.

5.0 Recommendations

Media houses in Kenya should offer comprehensive training programs focused on climate change reporting and solutions. This can be done by collaborating with local universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations to

develop climate journalism curricula and workshops. Partnerships with climate scientists and experts will also improve journalists' access to accurate information and research. Media houses should prioritize allocation of resources, including budgets and staff, for climate reporting initiatives. When reporting climate change, journalists should prioritize reporting on local climate impacts, adaptation efforts, and community-led initiatives. This can be done by engaging indigenous groups, local stakeholders, and affected communities in the reporting process using various media formats such as community radio, print, and digital platforms to reach diverse audiences, including rural and marginalized communities. Climate journalists should not just view climate change as a problem, but they should also play a crucial role in highlighting potential solutions, success stories, and best practices in their reporting. Additionally, climate journalists should establish a Kenyan National Association of Climate Journalists to facilitate the sharing of best practices, resources, and story ideas, fostering collaboration and innovation in climate reporting. Ultimately, climate journalists should proactively engage in global climate journalism initiatives and conferences to gain insights from international experiences and foster collaborations with regional and international partners for cross-border climate reporting and knowledge exchange.

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