

**MEDIA AND AGENDA SETTING FUNCTION:
NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON HUSBAND BATTERING
IN KENYA**

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Abstract

Media houses adopted sensational reporting on the mainstream Newspapers (Nation and Standard) between February 2012 and April 2012 on husband battering in Nyeri County, Kenya. This article answers the question: what is the role of agenda setting on husband battering stories among selected respondents in Nyeri County? In order to obtain a comprehensive answer, the study was guided by the Agenda setting and Critical Discourse Analysis Theories. The researchers adopted a qualitative approach, specifically an Ex-post facto research design with a prospective orientation. The study population was all texts covering husband battering in Nyeri County and all Male and Female respondents chosen to represent readers of Daily Nation and the Standard Newspapers. The study identified agenda setting as a function in the stories on husband battering in Nyeri County. It was found that readers were exposed to content which endured for a relatively short time but that affected their behavior or judgment related to the content they processed.

Terms: Husband battery; Sensationalism; Gender violence

INTRODUCTION

Agenda Setting and sensationalism

Agenda Setting is the argument that the media has the ability to affect what the public is thinking as well as how the public thinks about certain issues through its coverage (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The two terms are closely linked. The mainstream media is responsible for increased attention to entertainment media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Research into second level agenda setting suggest that coverage would inform media users of sensational news and the amount of information and content in which the reader can have maximum effect of the media and give importance to the issues discussed (Azeez, 2009). However audience demands and profits may be the driving force behind sensational news inclusion in the mainstream media.

Gender and Sensationalism

Much of the research on overall interest in news topics suggests that differences exist between the sexes. Mills (1990) suggests that although the general assumption about gender differences with regard to news preferences may be questionable, news preferences among women generally include the four F's: family, food, fashion, and furnishing. Furthermore, Klein (2003) argues that women, regardless of their age, are less interested in violent television news content. A study examining the relationships between sensation seeking and gender role orientations found that men reported higher levels of overall sensation-seeking than women. Sensation-seeking has been conceptualized as involving self-exposure to various novel and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks to engage in them. Sensation-seeking scales contain five dimensions, including thrill and adventure seeking, dis-inhibition, experience seeking, and susceptibility to boredom. Wood (1994) posits that gender is an important predictor of lifetime sensation-seeking and that men are more likely to engage in sensation seeking behavior than women.

Media Representation of Crime

News and fiction stories about crime are prominent in all media. While there is evidence of increasing attention to crime in some parts of the media, overall this fascination has been constant throughout media history. The stories concentrate overwhelmingly on serious violent crimes against individuals, although with some variations depending on the medium and the market. There is a clear correlation between media and crime, and this relationship holds even when a variety of controls are imposed (Wartella, 1995). However, the negative effects of the

media exposure seem to be small compared to other features in the social experience of offenders. Wartella (1995) argues that the question is not whether media violence has an effect but rather how important that effect has been in bringing out major changes.

Brown (2003) argues that the most significant thing is the will of pure media effect. The implicit model was of the media as hypodermic syringe, injecting ideas and values into passive recipients of cultural fixes. Carribbean (2002) puts it clear that audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters in a complex process of interaction with other cultural and social practices.

Selective Reporting

Media houses have the power to cover events selectively. Bernett (2004) Cites Galtung and Ruge's selective gate keeping theory that suggests that news from around the world is evaluated using news values to determine their newsworthiness. This kind of selective reporting is exactly what content analysis studies of crime in the media have shown. The pattern of reporting in the media is perhaps best summarized as "the law of opposites" (Surette, 1998). The pattern we observe in media reports seems to be the inverse of that suggested by social statistics in at least two ways that are important for our purposes. Media reporting concentrates overwhelmingly on serious, violent crimes against individuals, neglecting acquisitive crimes and the demographic profile of victims in the media is older and higher status (Reiner, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

The study used Ex Post facto research design with a prospective orientation. The study populations was all texts on husband Battering in Nyeri County from the Daily Nation and Standard Newspapers and all Male and Female respondents chosen to represent readers of Daily Nation and the Standard Newspapers. The researcher chose 10 women and 10 men who represented the Standard and the Daily Nation readers. The researcher chose this county since there were reported cases from the two mainstream media on husband battering. The researcher identified and selected texts from the two mainstream newspapers between the beginning of February 2012 and the end of April 2012 from library archives. Data was collected during the interview by obtaining data from participants with different experiences and recording them. Data was also collected by giving the participants the Newspaper cuttings to read the selected contents.

This study was guided by the Agenda Setting theory and Critical Discourse Analysis theory. Agenda setting operates through two components of priming and framing of news. Agenda setting theory holds that the mass media creates what the public think is important hence shape public opinion. In Kenya, today, the Daily Nation and The Standard, determine issues that shape public debate on various matters. When they choose and display the news, the newsroom staff is playing an important part in shaping reality. Readers learn about issues and the importance to attach to those issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire Return Rate

All the twenty interviews were carried out with the help of a research assistant who interpreted the questions in Kiswahili for the thirteen participants who hardly understood English. After sorting the obtained data, the researcher found that all were valid therefore representing 100% response rate and this was achieved because the researcher administered the interview carefully in person and was writing down the response from the participants thus ensuring that the sample size as earlier indicated was maintained

Participants Profile

This discusses the participant's age, educational level, the choice of newspaper that they read and the relationship that exist between the newspaper readership and age.

Age of participants

The participants were asked to state their age during the interview. The age factor was significant as it showed the relationship between age and sensational news readership. The respondents' ages were distributed as follows:

Table 1: Age of participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-30 years	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
31-43 years	8	40.0	40.0	70.0
Valid 44-56 years	3	15.0	15.0	85.0
57-69 Years	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The results indicate that majority (40%) of participants were between 31-43 years, (15%) were between 44-56 years, (15%) between 57-69 years, and (30%) between 18-30 years. The results suggest that most of the married couples are between ages 31-43 years.

Educational Level of Participants

Sensational news stories require people who know how to read and interpret it because it uses pictures that engages the audience who can then interpret it as being sensational as compared to issues of politics, business, and sports (Uribe & Gaunter, 2007). Sensational news is widely used by media houses, and it is what the readers want either to get information or to entertain them. Sensational stories like the one on husband battering allows people learn of the wrong doings in the society as the media unveils the evils in which the stories are retained in people's minds for a long time. This requires some knowledge. Therefore, the researcher saw the need of establishing the educational level of the participants as illustrated in the table below:

Table 2: Educational Level of Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Certificate	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
University graduate	6	30.0	30.0	95.0
Postgraduate	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

It can be seen from the tabulations that majority (65%) of the participants had only completed their primary school, 30% were University Graduates, and 5% had postgraduate qualification. Thus the results suggests that majority of married couples in Mihuti village had only attained primary education.

Choice of newspaper read

There are two mainstream newspapers, which are read by the majority of people in Mihuti village. This was the Daily Nation and the Standard. The participants believed that the two dailies gave them information that they believed in. This researcher sought to find out whether they read these two dailies so that they can handle the problem under study. The choice of newspaper read is presented in the table below:

Table 3: Choice of newspaper read

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Standard	7	35.0	35.0	35.0
Nation	11	55.0	55.0	90.0
Both	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Of the responses obtained, 55 % of participants read Nation newspaper while 35% read Standard Newspaper. Those who read both newspapers accounted for 10 percent. This suggests that Daily Nation newspaper is read more by people from Nyeri County.

Age of participants and Choice of newspaper read

There exists a great relationship between the age of the participants and the kind of newspaper that they read. Most readers read one newspaper in a day and the findings are indicated in the table below:

Table 4: Cross tabulation Age and Choice of media

		Choice of newspaper read			Total
		Standard	Nation	Both	
Age of participants	18-30 years	2	3	1	6
	31-43 years	3	5	0	8
	44-56 years	2	1	0	3
	57-69 Years	0	2	1	3
Total		7	11	2	20

Participants from age bracket 31-43 years read newspaper more in which 37.5% are Standard Newspaper readers and 67.5% are Nation Newspaper readers.

Research Information

In order to analyze discourse data for this study, the researcher designed seven separate categories, which were then grouped into three thematic areas to answer the research questions. The researcher grouped the categories “Arousing Content, “Tabloid Packaging” and “Vivid

Storytelling” into one theme “features of sensationalism”. The researcher also analyzed the extent to which the participants supported the theme. The following is a table of the categories:

Table 5: Category labels

Category	Label	Words	Percentage (%)
Category 1	Arousing Content	15/21	11
Category 2	Tabloid packaging	17/23	13
Category 3	Vivid Storytelling	13/26	10.1
Category 4	Power	18/28	14.2
Category 5	Ideology	14/21	11.1
Category 6	Framing	18/20	14.3
Category 7	Priming	19/20	15.1
Total words: 126			100

Agenda Setting

From the foregoing results, 14.3% (18 out of 126) words fit the category priming which included words like “front page” and “top page”. Thus, readers were exposed to content which endured for a relatively short time but also that affected their behavior or judgment related to the content they processed. Moreover, 15.1 % (19 out of 126) words fit the category framing, which included words like “big Space”, “whole page” “Half a page”. This revealed that readers were offered an open platform to make rational choices on the content by the media. Majority (67.5%) of the stories on husband battering were placed on top pages.

Table 6: Agenda Setting

Theme	Degree of Support of The issue		
	Support	Opposes	Uncommitted
Agenda Setting			
A. Priming	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	0
B. Framing	13 (65%)	6 (30%)	1 (5%)

The above results indicate that majority (70%) of the stories on husband battering were placed on top pages, while (65%) of the stories were given enough space. Between the months of

January and April 2012, the stories on husband battering were appearing so often and the amount of space given was large enough to allow readers have a follow up of the stories.

Agenda setting theory as used by the mainstream newspapers focuses on the stories on husband battering in Nyeri County. Pan and Korsicki (2001) argue that the press is successful in telling readers what to think about. The findings indicate strongly that newspapers used priming and framing techniques, which are the pillars of agenda setting. Media is successful in telling readers what to think about according to many scholars. Generally speaking, media impact is limited to some specific issues in which they can influence the public's Saliency. Tan and Weaver (2007) describe the saliency as, "the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important".

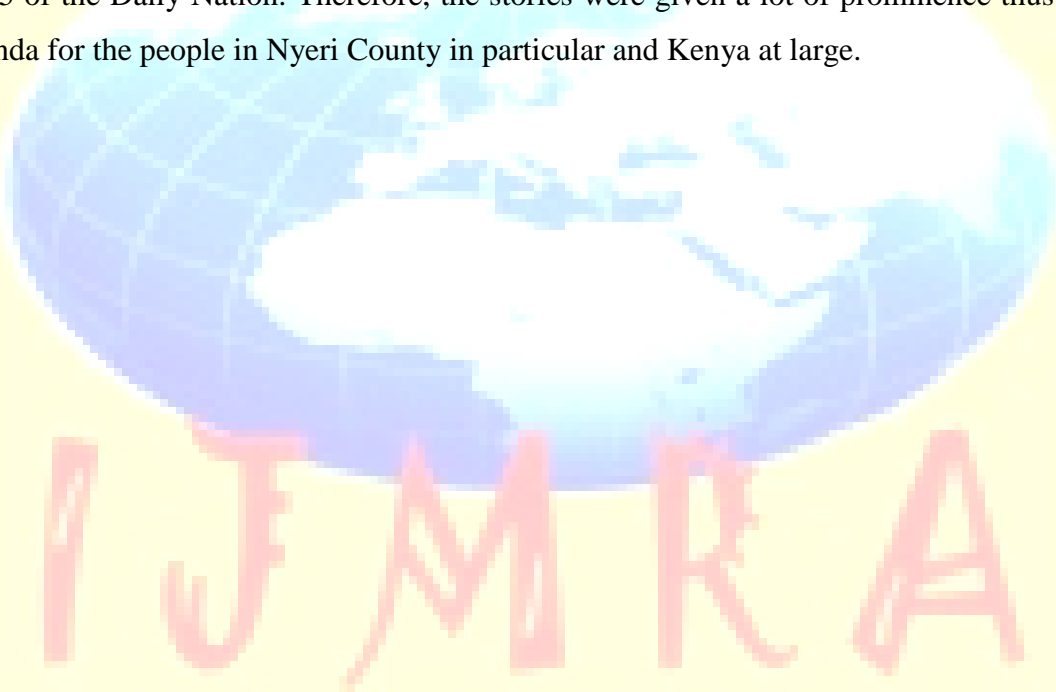
CONCLUSION

The Agenda-Setting function of media" offered empirical evidence that in many ways refuted Lazarsfeld's and Hovland's work of the '40s, '50s, and '60s that pointed to a limited-effects model of media based on their belief that most of the public's contact with politicians was through mediated settings (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Their research established a near perfect correlation between the issues that the public deemed most important and the issues that media were making most salient. Agenda-setting theory (AST) has since provided an unparalleled foundation for both media houses and the readers of the news. In line with agenda setting, Kenya's two leading newspapers set the Agenda for the people to discuss these stories and even informed the society on other cases of husband battering in the area and gave people an idea to deliberate on an issue for some time. The stories increased the survival of the media houses by increasing demand in circulation, especially the Daily Nation which is widely read by the people from Nyeri County.

Agenda setting worked closely with priming and framing of news, and this is why AST works hand in hand with priming and framing. The reasoning behind the decision to use the three theories together lies in the fact that many they consider priming and framing to be synonymous with AST. Priming is considered by some scholars to be an extension of agenda-setting. According to Goffman (2009) "priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of news stories". The reason priming is often considered an extension of agenda-setting theory is because they are both "memory-based models of information processing" (Goffman, 2009: 11). Tan and

Weaver. (2007) add that these models assume that people form attitudes based on the considerations that are most salient when they make decisions. Therefore, the people from Mihuti village considered the issue on husband battering noticeable because of the fact that the stories were mostly on top pages of the two mainstream newspapers and other appeared on second and third pages.

The stories made use of bold headlines and big pictures on top page, which had close-ups of the faces of husbands battered in Nyeri County. These pictures were still memorable to the participant's and the real names of the victims were known. The issue was still discussed at large because news from Nyeri made headlines. The stories on husband battering occupied a lot of space in the mainstream newspaper. For example, on 20th February 2012 the stories occupied page 1-5 of the Daily Nation. Therefore, the stories were given a lot of prominence thus setting the agenda for the people in Nyeri County in particular and Kenya at large.



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