



Aping the West: Local News Media and Northern Kenya

By Osman Osman



Almost a decade ago, I penned an op-ed arguing that the coverage of northern Kenya by the mainstream media is lazy, limited and lacks thematic framing. Conflict and terrorism thus become the predominant lens through which the region is viewed. I argued that the news media — which commands a large viewership and readership — turns its attention to northern Kenya when terror and other forms of conflict occur. But this framing has rich historical precedent.

From the *Shifita* war in postcolonial Kenya to the al-Shabaab attacks in the last decade, the Kenyan media has systematically constructed an image of the region as conflict-centric without wrestling with the historical and contextual underpinnings.

In the traditional sense, the news media plays a critical role in informing citizens on diverse issues. As a primary agenda setter, news media possesses the essential power of telling its audience what to think and how to think about health, conflict, poverty and development, among other issues of national and international importance.

In their assessment of the mass media, Maxwell McCombs, and Donald Shaw — the fathers of agenda-setting theory — argue that mass media owns the attribute of influencing “the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda.” News media assemble issues for the public and, through

the order of presentation, have the unique ability to tell the public what to think about. Therefore, journalists are not just leaders in information dissemination; they control the framing of these issues.

Robert Entman, who conceptualised framing in journalism, affirms that media gatekeepers select “some aspects of perceived reality, making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.”

Kenyan mass media has prominently covered conflict and terror in northern Kenya, informing the public about the wars and the terror experienced in the region. It has framed these incidents in such a way that those Kenyans who have never visited the area, assume that these events dominate the region.

Coverage of Northern Kenya and Africa

Framing in the news media dictates how the public makes sense of how and why issues occur. In his seminal studies on framing types in the news media, Shanto Iyengar introduces two framing types in the news media: episodic and thematic framing.

Iyengar postulates that episodic framing takes place when media gatekeepers attribute social problems to individuals. This occurs when the media covers an issue as a single event without demonstrating why these societal challenges arise.

Thematic framing is when the news media presents information holistically, with a rich in-depth analysis of why the issues covered are occurring. Therefore, if journalists frame an issue episodically, news consumers attribute the challenges to the perpetrators, ignoring societal factors that have contributed to the challenge presented. On the other hand, if an issue is thematically framed, citizens consuming this information point fingers to broader trends and social conditions.

In an article titled *Media Framing of Westgate Mall and Garissa University College Terror Attacks in Kenya: News Frames, Responsibility and Major Actors*, Kioko Ileri explores how Kenyan newspapers framed the Garissa University and Westgate mall attacks. Ileri concludes that 70 per cent of the sampled news articles received episodic framing. This is consistent with studies on the intersection of conflict in Africa and the Western press.

When al-Shabaab started carrying out large-scale attacks across the country, the media demonstrated clearly how it views attacks depending on where they occur. For instance, prominence was given to the Westgate terror attack, leading to quick coverage. The same treatment was not extended to the Garissa University incident, the worst attack by al-Shabaab in Kenya.

While this can be attributed to the proximity of Kenyan reporters to Westgate, the slow reaction and negative portrayal of the episode in Garissa demonstrated that the location of an attack establishes disparities in how Kenyan mass media covers terrorism in northern Kenya.

Coincidentally, the relationship of the Kenyan mass media with northern Kenya mirrors how mainstream media in the West portrays African countries. It is common knowledge that western press coverage of Africa is awash with negative portrayals of the continent and mainly involves parachuting in white men to cover complex issues.

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Kenyan mass media is a replica of news outlets from the global north. It has been argued and established that the only time Africa is given attention is when events are dominated by negative issues such as poverty, conflict, and natural disasters.

American news organisations send in their journalists to cover news events in Africa. This culture leads to media frames that construct a negative image of Africa and presents the West as a saviour, hence the criticisms. Furthermore, as Lauren Kogen argues in her article [*Not up for debate: U.S. news coverage of hunger in Africa*](#), American news media organisations largely ignore issues in Africa, and the few that grab the gatekeepers' attention are dominated by "negative and sensationalist aspects of African politics."

Similarly, and just like their global counterparts, editors in Nairobi normally parachute in prominent Nairobi-based journalists to cover these conflict stories. The absence of local voices in the construction of narratives from northern Kenya makes it difficult for the rest of the country to have a standard, positive image of this region that other areas enjoy.

This explains why reporting on significant issues in counties like Mandera, Garissa and Marsabit takes longer than when similar issues occur in counties like Nairobi and Mombasa. News outlets employ prominent reporters to cover the latter counties, while the marginalised ones are left to a pool of reporters parachuted in from the capital. Because of a lack of contextual knowledge on the complexities of community-government relations, they submit reports that end up either misrepresenting the issues or framing them in a bad light.

Okari on the Garissa attack

Take the case of Dennis Okari, the prominent Kenyan investigative reporter who has presented some of the best investigative pieces in the country. Okari was deployed to cover the Garissa University attack.

In a follow-up story, Okari travelled to Dadaab, the refugee camp dominated by Somalis, to interview locals and get a sense of what should be done to curb these attacks. He filed a story titled "Children of a Lesser God", implying that locals in Garissa County viewed Kenyans from other parts of Kenya as inferior to themselves and therefore deserving of death. The title itself defeats the purpose of accurately informing the public on what transpired. Furthermore, the journalist strongly relied on official sources and some victims, leaving out local voices to paint a picture of why such attacks occur in the region. The framing of this particular story cements the argument that parachuted reporters often fail to inform Kenyans holistically on why northern Kenya continues to face conflict and other key challenges.

Moreover, such careless reporting has an impact on the image of these marginalised counties. It also has an economic impact: Kenyans from other parts of the country living in these counties have been forced to leave, leaving a gap in sectors like education, health, and government services. Such careless reporting further contributes to the lack of critical services needed to contribute to the advancement of the entire region.

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Another similarity between Western press coverage of Africa and the relationship of the Kenyan press with Northern Kenya is that US mass media has failed to provide fair reporting about issues in Africa, as it tends to magnify official US foreign policy. The foreign policies of Western countries

shaped the Western media's coverage of issues outside their borders after the Cold War and have continued to do so to date.

It has been argued before that the Kenyan government has systematically marginalised communities in the north since independence. This can also be said of the Kenyan media, whose relationship with northern Kenya reflects how successive governments have dealt with the counties of the region. When Kenya became independence, counties in the north were neglected, which explains the region's acute poverty, underdevelopment, and lack of security.

Therefore, Kenyan media's limited and negative coverage of issues in the region accurately symbolises how elites in Nairobi think of places like Garissa, Wajir and other counties in the north.

Correspondents in the north

Others might counter that lack of attention, and negative framing can happen in other regions. However, my argument is that counties in the north continue to face issues that need the attention of the press. While there are indeed correspondents in these counties, their remuneration is often unsustainable as they are paid per story filed.

I spoke to several correspondents from the region in confidence, and they informed me that it is a struggle to file stories that touch on vital issues because of the constraints they face. They are not treated like their counterparts in Nairobi and other counties who are armed with the technical and human resources necessary to produce great news stories. One argued, "We don't have essential tools needed to thrive in filing important reports from this region. This reality makes it difficult for us to file rich stories from this region." This correspondent confessed that they sometimes receive as little as US\$100 a month, meaning it is nearly impossible to lead a decent life as a correspondent in northern Kenya.

Mass media in Kenya has suffered losses that have led to job cuts across Kenya. Mediamax, which owns *K24* and the *People Daily* newspaper, has terminated a significant number of staff contracts.

The Kenyan mass media must also accept these criticisms and prioritise changing how it relates with northern Kenya.

Like elsewhere across the globe, news media in Kenya is market-driven. With the explosion of digital media, advertisers have found cheaper ways of selling their products, pulling out from advertising in the traditional media, leading to more job losses.

However, this should not be a reason to provide limited and war-centric coverage from these counties. Editors should provide the essential tools needed to cover crucial stories from this region adequately. While salaries and upkeep in the mass media remain a challenge across the country, the hurdles faced by reporters in northern Kenya make it difficult to challenge the established narratives.

Under the devolved government, and for the first time, counties solely determine the budget for building schools, expanding hospitals, providing electricity, and constructing road networks, among many other things. The county governments should create an environment that will entice investors to come down and start businesses. However, for devolution to prosper, accountability from institutions within and outside governments is important. Therefore, the media should step forward and play its crucial role of holding county elites accountable for their activities. The Kenyan mass media must also accept these criticisms and prioritise changing how it relates with northern Kenya.

First, it should provide the essential tools needed by local correspondents to cover important stories in the region. Devolution means there is plenty to report about. If the national government can choose to change its handling of this region, so can the mass media. Journalists in places like Marsabit and Wajir can cover more stories that would inform audiences in other parts of Kenya and enable policymakers to propose key recommendations that will lead to the development of this region.

Second, the missing perspectives of local news sources with an in-depth contextual knowledge of the region further reveal why terror coverage by the Kenyan press is often episodic and lacks in-depth analyses of why these attacks occur. Perhaps incorporating more local voices will contribute to achieving a more thematic and balanced reportage of terror in the region, and indeed in Africa.

Third, citizens from this region should establish their own media spaces where they can construct their own stories. There are several media organisations owned by wealthy businesspeople and politicians in the north. But these outlets tend to reach only locals and operate primarily in local languages. This limits other Kenyans from being exposed to stories coming out of this region since they command a smaller audience than their national counterparts.

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Mainstream national media that operates in the national languages would be an opportunity to produce fair, balanced, and holistic news items that create a fresh image of northern Kenya. We should also be careful about news outlets owned by politicians. With devolution, reporters in these counties should work on stories that inform the public on how their leaders are using public resources. Having these leaders own news outlets is dangerous since they have the power to influence the content that is published.

Moreover, in order to challenge the narratives constructed by the traditional media, it is essential to point out that digital media allows us to create a different image of northern Kenya, Twitter and Facebook enable users to counter narratives pushed by the elite Kenyan outlets within a few minutes. However, it is also important to highlight that while social media provides this unique opportunity, most Kenyans still depend on traditional media for information. The existing digital divide across the country is a reminder that narratives pushed by mass media in the capital still dominate the country.

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