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THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

**ONLINE AUDIENCE FEEDBACK AND MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY
IN KENYA'S MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

By

ANNE ADHIAMBO OKUMU

535167

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Digital Journalism

Nairobi, Kenya

30/01/2020

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APPROVAL PAGE

The Aga Khan University

Graduate School of Media and Communications

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Journalism

Members of the Thesis Evaluation Committee appointed to examine the thesis of **ANNE ADHIAMBO OKUMU-535167**, found it satisfactory and recommended that it be accepted.

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DECLARATION

I, **ANNE ADHIAMBO OKUMU-535167**, declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. The editorial assistance provided to me has in no way added to the substance of my thesis, which is the product of my own research endeavours.

Signature

30/01/2020

Date

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving mother Caroline Adhiambo Okech.

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I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Aga Khan University - GSMC faculty for the continuous support and motivation throughout this study and research. I would like to especially thank my supervisors Dr. Sam Kamau and Dr. Wambui Wamunyu whose guidance helped me in the time of research and writing of this thesis. The AKU Vice Provost East Africa and the Interim Dean of The Graduate School of Media and Communications Dr. Alex Awiti provided tremendous support in the completion of this study. My gratitude also goes out to Aga Khan University – GSMC’s Director of Academic Affairs, Dr. Nancy Booker for her support in the entire process of this course. I thank Mr. Hesbon Owilla, Mr. Augustine Gitonga and Mr. Henry Kibira for their help in making this thesis a success. I would also like to thank my colleagues at GSMC for being great fellows throughout this study, for all encouragement and support in the completion of this study. Thank you for being great motivators. A special thanks to my family, my mother Caroline Okech, and my siblings Ian Okumu and Josephine Grace and my niece Reign Cary for being my biggest support system throughout this study. Thank you for being there for me through to the finish line and always encouraging me. I could not have imagined having a better support system for my study.

ABSTRACT

This study sought to find out if online audience feedback in terms of engagement, correction and criticism of news stories produced by the media, leads to certain decisions by the media that amounts to accountability. The objectives of this study were; (a) to examine the nature of audience feedback to news stories in Kenya, (b) to determine how media responds to audience feedback on news stories, (c) to examine how the engagement, correction and criticism of news stories by online audiences leads to more accountability in the media, (d) to establish whether prompt reaction by online audience has led to a responsive media. Online audience behaviour was gauged through the active audience theory. The researcher conducted interviews with 15 respondents from five media houses, namely BBC Africa, Nation Media Group, Standard Group, Royal Media Services and Radio Africa. Content analysis was also done using stories extracted from online platforms of the media houses on the coverage of the NYS II Scandal for NMG, SG, Radio Africa Group and Royal Media Services and the night runners for BBC Africa. This study found out that online audience feedback has led to more accountability on the part of the media. Also, that the media takes issue with the nature of audience feedback. Media noted that feedback is mostly harmful to their characters personally and professionally. It is at times subjective, based on feelings and emotions rather than facts that could be used to improve on the profession. This study recommended the need for media literacy skills for the public which in turn will help improve how feedback is given to improve on calls for accountability. The study recommended further inquiry on the mental health of journalists in the wake of constant criticism, trolls and backlash on their personal and professional lives.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASNE:	American Society of News Editors
BBC:	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAJ:	Canadian Association of Journalists
CNN:	Cable News Network
IFJ:	International Federation of Journalists
KoT:	Kenyans on Twitter
KII:	Key Informant Interviews
MCK:	Media Council of Kenya
NMG:	Nation Media Group
RMS:	Royal Media Services
SG:	Standard Group

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines background to the study, the problem statement, research objectives, and the purpose of the study, the scope and limitations of the study, its significance and the definition of terms used in this study.

1.2 Background to the Study

In journalism, accountability is identified as a fundamental standard underlining professionalism in the field. Established journalistic bodies and associations such as the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), American Society of News Editors (ASNE), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and locally the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) identify accountability as an important tenet in maintaining a professional image and being accountable to the public. In fact, MCK spells its visions as fostering a professional and free media accountable to the public (MCK, 2019).

The aforementioned bodies outline the scope of media accountability including a regular range of practices like placing public interest at the forefront, cheering the public to put forward their grievances, revealing instances of unethical practices in journalism and other media players. These practices and roles are geared towards promoting fairness and reliability of reporting, highlighting errors promptly and transparently and gaining consent where appropriate.

In Kenya, the ethical and professional responsibility of the media is adequately stipulated under the MCK code of conduct, that among other demands requires journalists in Kenya to be accountable to the people they disseminate information to (MCK, 2019).

The emergence of the Internet and proliferation of social media has largely been considered a positive aspect in ensuring media accountability (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2013). While it has made it more possible for the mainstream media to share news stories with audiences online and improve production, it has also led to the emergence of the fifth estate, who are the active online audiences. In journalism or in the media world, the internet has added to the available platforms of news reportage and dissemination (Babcock, 2014). Zuckermann (2009) notes that the internet wave was set in Kenya during the coverage of the 2007/08 post-election violence. The highlight was the emergence of citizen journalism. The audience took to digital platforms to highlight issues on media coverage of the events that year. This was then used in the Kreigler report in which the media was faulted for having fuelled the violence in part of the country by allowing hate speech on vernacular stations.

In the recent years, the online audience has grown more vigilant closely watching the media for errors and gaps in the coverage, production and packaging of news stories. Kenyans on Twitter have become the loudest voice, demanding for accountability from the media through corrections, engagement and criticism. In 2018 Kenya was hit by the National Youth Service (NYS) scandal dubbed NYS II. The country lost over 10 billion shillings in a scheme that involved individuals in power. There was however an outcry from online audience on twitter and Facebook on how the four main media houses in Kenya namely Nation Media Group (NMG), Standard Group (SG), Royal Media Services (RMS) and Radio Africa covered this story from naming of suspects to analysis and investigations done on the stories. Also, in May 2019, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Africa Eye produced a story on the night

runners of western Kenya. However, the story received a backlash from Kenyan audiences online over how the filming was stage managed.

Pritchard (2000) defines media accountability as the process by which media could or should be expected or obliged to report a truthful and complex account of the news to their constituents. Further, it also outlines the desire of the media to answer for what they do by their acts of publication, including what they do to society at large, and the feasibility of securing accountability where there is unwillingness. BBC Africa Eye was called out for the Night Runners story and it in turn gave a statement on how the coverage of the story was done following due process. All this, was as a result of complaints issued by the active online audience.

Pritchard (2000) refers to the stages in the accountability process as naming (a constituent identifies a media problem), blaming (the constituent holds a media organization responsible for the problem), and claiming (the constituent demands some form of reaction on the part of the media organization; these may range from an explanation of the rationale behind a decision to publish to economic compensation for the damage or trauma that publication caused).

The Kenyan online audience today is able to express its grievances and dissatisfaction against the media, by pointing out mistakes and correcting them promptly, exposing unethical practices of journalists and the news media, and ensuring they abide by the same high standards to which they hold others (Cheruiyot, 2019). Neil Nemeth (2000) states whenever someone asks a news organization to explain or justify one of its decisions, the media accountability process has been set into motion.

The online platform has enabled audiences to give feedback on news stories demanding in-depth new analysis and productions, better packaging of news stories,

better choice of photos, they make corrections, raise concerns over misreporting and unreported issues and poor conduct by journalists (Mabweazara, 2011).

1.3 Problem Statement

The media is being monitored by the audience, paying close attention to how news stories are produced and packaged; the levels of trust from the audiences have gone down (IPSOS 2019). The monitoring of media is done in the comment sections of the various social media platforms enabled by the internet. This has given a platform for media and the audience to engage on their digital platforms giving more power to the audience (Cohen, 2013) to criticize and question how media produces and packages news stories. The digitization of news has given rise to new forms of audience feedback that use personal blogs and other social media platforms like twitter, Facebook and YouTube to engage in media criticism, questioning news accounts and calling out any behaviour that they deem unprofessional in the journalistic practice. (Vos, Craft & Ashley, 2012).

Studies have been done in India, North America and Jordan on how criticism, engagement and correction of news stories has helped achieve media accountability leading to more professionalism (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Fengler, 2012; Friend & Singer, 2007; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011; Krogh, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012; McQuail, 2003; Singer, 2005).

When audiences question the media, the media to responds either by giving clarification, retraction or implements and formulates policies that ensure better production that is tantamount to accountability. Kenya boasts as one of the countries in the African region with a vast internet penetration and which has enabled the active audiences on twitter to engage online media content (Hootsuite, 2019). Kenyans on

Twitter are known to be a very vibrant community, always keeping media in check by criticizing and engaging with news stories online. They ask questions over gaps, missing information, biasness, lack of truth and accuracy that they see in stories. In some instances, they also provide additional information that could be used to further improve and follow up on a story. They call out journalists and media houses to advocate for change and professionalism (Ekdale, 2014).

This study sought to find out how this feedback from online audiences in Kenya in the form of engagement, correction and criticism leads to certain decisions by the media that are tantamount to the media being accountable.

1.4 Research objectives

The main objective of this research was to determine how media is held into account by the audience in Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were:

1.4.1 Specific Objectives

1. To examine the nature of audience feedback to news stories in Kenya.
2. To determine how newsroom editors, respond to audience feedback on news stories.
3. To examine how the engagement, correction and criticism of the media content by the online audiences lead to more accountability in the media.
4. To establish whether increased feedback, prompt reaction by online audience has led to a responsive media.

1.4.2 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions: -

1. What is the nature of audience feedback to news stories?
2. How do media organizations handle audience feedback?
3. How does audience feedback ensure media accountability?
4. What is the impact of audience feedback on journalism?

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focused on the role online audience play in ensuring media accountability, and not on the traditional modes of enforcing. It focused on how audience reacted to news stories published on twitter and Facebook by five media houses namely BBC Africa, Standard Group, Royal Media Services, Nation Media Group and Radio Africa Group. The research was conducted for a period of seven months. This included a month of data collection and two months of analysis and interpretation.

1.6 Limitations of the study

The study was limited to journalists with editorial responsibilities online. It was limited to five media houses namely BBC Africa, Standard Group, Royal Media Services, Nation Media Group and Radio Africa Group. The study also focused on stories published on online platforms that are Twitter and Facebook.

1.7 Justification of the Study

The current study is significant because of two main functions; firstly, it contextualizes the vibrant Kenyan digital space. Ordinarily, Kenya's online audience are assumed to be the most vibrant. Whereas this has been used to look into the excesses of the media, there are not enough studies that have studied their role in improving and growing Kenya's media.

Secondly, the current study sought to understand media accountability in Kenya. Whereas there has been a longstanding culture where Kenya's media is monitored internally as well as through MCK, the role of the public has not always been noted as key players holding the media accountable.

Ultimately, if this happens, the current study identifies an admissible way to further improve the credibility of Kenya's media, at least in the eyes of the Kenyan public.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The study will be used to give a further understanding of the evolution of audiences as the media industry continues to advance. It will help learning institution in improving knowledge for aspiring journalists to better understand their demands.

Other than helping improve accountability and professionalism in the media the findings of this study will help journalists gain more credibility and trust which they need to run their businesses.

It will also help media policy makers in devising new policies on how to handle audience needs, how to better their work to ensure no backlash on social media, how to handle the backlash in case they happen and how they can leverage on audiences in production of news stories.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

Media: Business dictionary defines media as the communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated. For this research, media refers to organizations that disseminate information to the public.

Mainstream media: Mainstream media outlets refers to media organizations that target the largest share of the public (Turow, 1997). In this study mainstream media refers various traditional or established broadcasting outlets that influence a large number of people

Online Audiences: Merriam Webster dictionary defines audiences as spectators, listeners, reading, viewing or listening public. Online audiences in this research are defined as readers, listeners of media content on social media platforms.

Journalism: Fraser (1954) defines journalism the process through which news and the comments on the news reach the public. For this study, journalism is the activity of gathering, processing and presenting news information to a mass audience.

Journalist: Merriam Webster defines a journalist as a writer aiming for the mass audience. In this study, a journalist is a person who writes news for newspapers, magazines, and on digital platforms or broadcast the news on the radio, television and online platforms.

Media Accountability: McQuail (2005) defines media accountability as “voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answers directly or indirectly to their society for the quality and/or consequences of publication.” For this study it refers to the act by which media answers for their acts of publication.

1.10 Summary

This chapter outlines changes in audience behavioural patterns from passive to active through engagement with the media and their content and how this impacts journalism, leading to accountability. It provides the background to the study and defines the research problem.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents review of existing literature to examine audience evolution patterns, media accountability trends over the years and the linkages between these two in ensuring accountability in the digital age. Further, it outlines the theoretical framework, active audience theory and how it relates to this study.

2.2 Media Accountability

McQuail (2005) defines media accountability as the voluntary or involuntary processes by which the media answers directly or indirectly to the public for the quality and/or consequences of publication. Claude-Jean Bertrand (2000) defines media accountability as non-governmental means of making media responsible towards to the public. These two definitions of accountability describe the responsibility the media has towards its audience. They describe accountability as the media being answerable to the public who expect them to conduct themselves professionally. With the advancement in technology, there are more innovative measuring instruments of accountability that are being used by the Kenyan online audience to hold the media to account. These platforms include the online audience who engage, criticize and correct new stories that are published on the online platforms like twitter and Facebook.

The main aim of media accountability in Kenya is to demand for better services from the media, restoring the prestige of media in the eyes of the population while protecting and upholding the freedom of speech that is outlines in the constitution (Bertrand, 2000). The Society of Professional Journalist (SPJ) notes that journalists should allow the public to share its complaints against any media houses and expose

unethical practices of journalists and the news media (SPJ, 1996). The media house must in turn own up to the mistake made correct errors promptly and abide by the same high standards to which they hold others. In addition, scholars (Friend & Singer, 2007; Joseph, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; Singer, 2003) note that media accountability can be achieved through accessibility of media platforms to concerned audience members.

Accountability is linked to certain responsibilities (Glasser, 2009) which include normal regulations required by the profession, restrictions given by the law, legally binding agreements in contracts and oaths of office. In Kenya, media accountability is outlined in the constitution in chapter 33 under freedom of expression which is limited to hate speech, propaganda for war and advocacy for hatred (Kenya Constitution, 2010). The MCK also outlines calls for accountability under the codes of ethics. Other media houses like the BBC, NMG, Royal Media Services, SG and Radio Africa have accountability as part of their editorial standards.

Bertrand (2000) posits that accountability has improved the nature of service the media offers to the public. They have become more vigilant and cautious in how they carry out search for stories, sourcing and packaging. While at it, the media redeems its image in the eyes of the public for not being credible or trustworthy. In the Kenyan scene, there is lots of questioning and criticism is happening because trust between the media and the audience is low. NMG, SG, BBC, Royal Media Services and Radio Africa Group were questioned and criticised over how they covered the NYS II and the Night Runners story. This was after the audience engaged with the content and noticed gaps and errors they thought the media made.

Hirst and Patching (2000) notes that it is however hard for the media to be accountable to its audiences when there are competing factors. William Babcock (2014) further states, when interests compete the public takes priority when it comes to choosing who they ought to answer to. When advertisers and politicians put pressure on journalists to write stories in a way that does not put them in bad light and questions are asked as to why it happened, the public interest takes priority. Likewise, in Kenya, when organizations like banks are involved in scandal like the 2018 NYS Scandal, the public interest to know about it and which banks were involved takes precedence over the banks affiliated with certain media houses in advertisements. Naming of people in government that are involved in the scandal takes precedence over affiliation to political parties.

Cheruiyot (2015) notes that in South Africa, media critiques are more worried about bias reporting and sensationalism in the way media writes stories. He compares the situation in Kenya where the public takes issue with lack of professionalism, biasness and poor-quality reporting and interviewing by journalists which in turn fails to bring out the issue being investigated as clear and as factual as it should be.

Several journalistic codes of conduct including accountability and independence are violated when parties are involved in a story and there is biasness, misinformation, omissions and no facts in the stories. Hodges (1986) says:

It is possible to have a press that is both free and responsible but that it is impossible to have a press that is both totally free and completely accountable Such a press could not be free to choose voluntarily to behave responsibly because any authority who could “call the press to give an account of itself could require responsible performance. (p.14)

In democratic societies like Kenya, to uphold a free and independent media, accountability comes in as a means to check the excesses and failures of the media (Carey, 1974; Marzolf, 1991; Hayes, Singer & Ceppos, 2007).

2.3 Accountability in the Digital Era.

Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) posits that online platforms like websites and social are more favourable to public accountability than traditional media formats, and that this trend has increased over time. Hashtags and blogs like Kenya's Journalism Dry Cleaner have been used to inform the audience of the mistakes made by the media through engagement, corrections and criticism. Fengler (2012) argues that blogs:

Expose mal-practice in the media, i.e., they monitor whether journalists are acting according to their professional standards. (p. 177)

In Kenya blogs have been used to criticize the media on the manner in which they cover stories especially in politics. Social media however is the most common platform used to publish articles of discontent towards the media. According to Cheruiyot (2015) Kenya and South Africa have been ranked as the best in Africa in terms of online freedom and freedom of the press. The two countries have media councils, ethical codes and news ombudsmen. But in the past years criticism through the internet has gained an increasingly important role. In recent times, there have been cases that point to the heightened power of digital platforms in holding journalists and media houses to account. In Kenya, one of the stories that attracted audience backlash was the second Nation Youth Service Scandal in 2018.

2.3.1 The NYS II Story

In May 2018 Kenya lost 10 billion in the National Youth Service Scandal (See *Appendix A*). Kenyans on Twitter (KoT) and the media dubbed this the NYS II scandal after the first one in 2015. The scandal involved individuals in power, private individuals and banks. For the first few days as the story broke and developed, the audience felt that the media the story, focusing on a few individuals, while naming the banks generally instead of identifying them individually. There was then a hashtag ‘Name the Real NYS Thieves’ that was used against the media because the audience online felt that the media concealed identities of some individuals and bank because of political affiliations, advertising and personal agendas. Four media houses in Kenya namely Nation Media Group, Standard Group, Royal Media Services and Radio Africa were on the receiving end from the audience on how they covered this story.

2.3.2 The Night Runners story

In May 2019, BBC Africa Eye published a documentary on twitter on night running practiced by the Luos of East Africa (See *Appendix B*). The network came under fire from Kenyans on twitter who questioned the validity and reliability of the sources used in the report which they deemed to be untrue. According to a section of audience who claimed to have been from the Luo community, what was portrayed in the story is not what actually happens and that it is difficult and to some extent impossible to come face to face with night runners. BBC in turn responded, defending the whole process and standing by its journalists and denied allegations of stage management. In 2015, online audience vigorously called Cable News Network (CNN) to account for terming Kenya as “hotbed of terror”.

Other references of accountability practice by online audience include the coverage of the former U.S. President Barack Obama planned visit to this region. The report by CNN carried under the headline "Mr. Obama is not just heading to his father's homeland, but to a region that's a hotbed of terror", provoked most Kenyans, who cited the peace prevalent in the country. Following the backlash on social media demanding retraction and an apology, a CNN boss flew to Kenya to apologize for referring to Kenya as a "hot bed of terror".

In this case, the KoT community under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN, held the media house, and the journalist, to account, as the facts on the ground suggested otherwise. In retrospect, Kenya had invested overwhelmingly in curbing terrorist attacks and had succeeded in securing the country against these attacks; it was therefore misleading to term the country as a "hotbed of terror".

In Acharya (2015) words, the hashtag #GitheriMedia, #NMGOFLies, #FakeMedia, #FakeNewsKe, and so on indicate public discourse on journalistic performance. In these, the public was calling the media house to account, the public felt they were subjected to wanting standards which on a different occasion could suggest a deep in the quality of preparing and disseminating news.

However, this criticism pits these media consumers against journalists (Craft, Vos, & David, 2016) Journalists' think that the quest for media accountability enabled by the use of internet has an impact on their journalistic independence (Fengler, 2014). As Brants and de Haan (2010) observe, engaging and being responsive to audiences is not such a good idea. Media has to: deal with the question of how new technologies can be integrated into the journalistic production process, and second is the fact that journalists seem quite uncertain in coming to terms with their own roles.

The fact that innovative instruments of (online) media accountability are adopted with such great hesitance may illustrate that journalists and media organizations are still sceptical towards these new principles. Hope remains that media organizations are not using online media accountability in a strategic way or as a form of window dressing or for minimizing regulation (Phillips, Couldry & Freedman, 2009).

Before the internet age audiences gave feedback and criticism through letters to editors, through SMS platforms which were rarely made known and through complaints with the media council (Eberwein & Porlezza, 2014). Today the internet has offered avenues through which media can participate freely without fear of being reprimanded for asking questions on issues that are not clear to them. These avenues include public discussion forums like WhatsApp groups, blogs, comment sections on social media pages like Facebook and twitter.

With the inception of internet, the criticism, questioning and the vast knowledge of the surrounding that the audience has; McQuail (2003) notes that media now has to win the trust of the audience therefore accountability is unavoidable. However, according to White (2009), media accountability must balance the rights of the individual and the community and the rights of the press to free expression.

But with the advent of technology and the rise of internet age, questions have been asked as to whether the traditional measurements of media accountability still hold ground McQuail, (2005). The consumption patterns of audiences have advanced with the growth of the internet and related technologies such as social media (Tombs, 2014). Online audiences have a direct connection with the media in the comment sections where they engage and seek clarification. In some instances, the media replied, some

ignore comments but the overall bid of this is to have a responsive media (Newman & Nielsen, 2015; Hachten & Scotton, 2012).

Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) note that digital platforms which include, blogs, social media pages like twitter and Facebook offer audiences the best opportunities to hold media accountable than traditional media formats and that this has been on the rise. In Kenya, the online space is where freedom of speech is exercised without fear of repercussions. The traditional measurements of accountability like the press council and the ombudsman are no longer vigilant (Cheruiyot, 2017). Like Bernier (2013) states, continuous engagement of content online characterized with monitoring and criticizing the performance of traditional media proves the press is no longer the sole gate-keeper of public discourse.

The internet through social media and blogs has attracted immense participation of citizens engaging in criticizing of media content and operations of the legacy media who is now more visible online. As a result, journalists and media organizations are now daily targets of criticism over what is perceived by audiences as poor-quality journalism. The development of the Internet and various levels of interactive media technologies have profound effects on the forms of and possibilities for media accountability (Fengler, 2008; Eberwein, 2011, Heikkilä & Domingo, 2012).

Media users' participation is facilitated as well as media transparency, while at the same time global flows of online media content and anonymous online comments may make lines of accountability more difficult to manage. However, Zelizer (2010) argues that the notion of media accountability is old-fashioned and not suitable for an evolving scene filled prosumer news where information is constantly and readily available. He argues that:

We need to strive for accountability in a way that is sensitive to a variety of political regimes, public uses, media cultures and traditions of political engagement in various places, for accountability that can intelligently decode noise, messiness, contradiction, hesitation, brutality, multiplicity and unrequited expectation. (p.69)

2.4 Audience Participation

Painter and Hodges (2012) note that media institutions may have multiple constituents to whom they are supposed to be accountable and one of these is the public. One of the ways the audiences hold media accountable is by asking questions in areas where they think there is a fault or a gap. This also happens when clarification, truth and trust hang on the balance. Journalists are morally accountable to anyone they can harm through their work and this entitlement should be demanded and given regardless if those people have the power to demand accountability (Forman, 2010).

Digital accessibility has enabled the audience to participate more in making media accountable through the monitoring and critiquing of whether media productions follow ethical standards and journalistic values, and whether it honours audience interests (Fengler, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012). For instance, BBC Africa Eye was called out and was trending all day on twitter in Kenya over the Night Runners story with audiences criticizing the production. The audience argued inaccuracy and manipulation of characters in the story and sought clarification on how the production resolved to publish the story as it was. The comments on twitter and Facebook pressured the BBC to release a statement defending their journalists and their work. McQuail (1997) notes that media performs its roles by:

Publishing full, fair and reliable information; assisting in the expression of diverse and relevant opinions, including criticism of government; giving access to significant voices in society; facilitating

the participation of citizens in social life; abstaining from harmful propaganda. (p.514)

Ward and Wasserman (2012) also recommend that:

Meaningful participation of the audience can be ensured if media houses and monitoring agencies create an environment in which audiences can participate in: (a) criticizing the practices of journalists and media, (b) discussing ethical principles, and (c) modifying or updating the principles of ethics. (p.21)

However, Gunter (1987) argues that audiences misinterpret news topics if television news segments are poorly packaged. This problem raises the question of to whom the media should be accountable regarding an audience whose members could have widely different impressions of a message. The question of who further define accountability is a volatile one.

In a rare effort to quantitatively assess media accountability, researchers were met with suspicion and hostility from journalists. They argued that journalists do not like the idea of being accountable, sensing it as a threat professional freedom (Sanders, 1975).

Bertrand (2000) placed the audience on the receiving end of media accountability, noting that media accountability shall improve the services of the media to the public and restore the prestige of media in the eyes of the population. However, the audiences' actual opportunities for assuming such a role is most often highly constrained when it takes place within the framework of established news websites.

Here, audience participation is primarily possible in the shape of audience comments and similar interpretational categories where ordinary people react to the news that has already been produced (Domingo, 2008; Hermida, 2011; Kammer, 2013).

Bowman and Willis (2003) define participatory journalism as:

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. (p.9)

However, there is also criticism of this approach to the concept. Carpentier (2011) asserts that participation is used in so many different ways that it is conceptually empty:

Participation is still used to mean everything and nothing remains structurally under-theorized and its intrinsically political nature remains unacknowledged. (p.14)

Audience participation in Kenyan online sphere entails giving feedback in the comment section through corrections, engagement and criticism. This way, the audience feels part of the production process. Elliot (1986) posits that:

As the holders of and dispensers of a great wealth of information, the news media is powerful and with that power comes obligation to use that power in a way that is in the interest of the people they affect. (p. 36)

McQuail (1997) concluded that journalism is facing potential crisis of media accountability to society. This then essentially means a breakdown in the systems by which the media have been led or constrained in the past to put the interests of society on a par with their self-interest. According to McQuail (2003):

The general rationale for accountability is to achieve some repair, improvement, or return to normality, although in practice this is sometimes lost sight of. Accountability tends rather to focus on the allocation of blame and punishment rather than on encouraging, or contributing to, better performance. (p.199)

The rationale behind liability for the media is that the society would be protected against the harm the media may cause by, for instance, damaging reputations of individuals or inciting sectarian violence (McQuail, 2003).

2.5 Media Criticism

Demands for the media to be more socially responsible became more vocal among media critics and a subject for consideration among governments during the 20th century (Marzolf, 1991; Christians, 2009). This has been influenced mostly with the rise of fake news, lack of trust in the media and the diminishing quality of news. Marzolf (1991) makes a long list of qualifications. He states that:

Critics should not only have thorough knowledge about the history of journalism, but also understand the daily routine of journalists, and the ideals of the best practitioners in the field. The critic ought for instance to have a journalistic experience and a thorough understanding and familiarity with journalistic codes, news values and the realities of deadlines. Furthermore, media criticism should be realistic and coherent. (p.208)

When online audiences in Kenya give feedback, the media decides on the action it takes based on the analysis of all these facts. The media either uses criticism to improve on their profession or ignore feedback depending on the outcome of what they find in the comment sections. Brown (1974) adds that criticism should be realistic in that, response is possible and guidance is offered. Its values must precede the criticism; both must be public. It should mediate actual and ideal values of the press and the public. It must be coherent and systematic relative to both.

Cooper (2006) notes that, the criticism of traditional media by bloggers is improving fast making online platforms a tool for legitimate criticism. He adds that there are numerous platforms that have drawn the attention audiences to errors in the media over the years. These blogs include Germany's Bildblog, the UK's Tabloid Watch, Kenya's Journalism Dry Cleaner, and Craig Silverman's (US) Regret the Error.

In the opinion of Fengler (2012), such blogs call out the media by exposing their mal-practice for example by monitoring whether journalists are acting according to their professional standards and upholding journalistic values.

Current studies on media criticism such as Cooper’s (2006) have however hyped the growing influence of the blogosphere on traditional news media and paid little attention to how online criticism could be impacting on conventional regulatory frameworks. Vos, Craft and Ashley (2011) argue that the citizens on the blogosphere are contributing to media accountability by giving their expectations for media performance.

Following the scholars understanding on media criticism, *Table 1* below outlines the nature of audience feedback that will be used for this study.

Table 1: Nature of audience feedback

Engagement	Where the audience member is simply seeking clarifications, more information or adding more information on what the media presents.
Criticism	Where the audience is against what the media has presented in the content or left out or how the content is packaged and calls out the media for its actions or lack of it.
Correction	Where the audience is correcting what the media did or did not do in the story.

The subject of critics should be this journalism language. And if it is to be heeded, and to serve to transform journalism then it should not only address the language but the pre-established values of the practice (Brown, 1974). Thus Carey

(1974) concludes that quality media critique should contain factual detail(s), unemotional language and articulate (journalistic) values. Carey further argues that:

In the process of truth production, journalism is guided by a “language of description and observation, against the background of accepted norms and values. (p.229)

Everywhere, critics note that the public is not aware of the Press council’s existence, even after many years of operation or, if they know it exists, they do not know what it’s for and, if they do know, they don’t believe it can improve the media, largely because the council has ‘no teeth’, lacks the power to punish. So, it seems useless. The good media don’t need it and the bad ones pay no attention to it. Media criticism may start a substantial media accountability process if the discontent is widespread and not countered by market approval or political inertia.

The process is facilitated if the critique is connected to more than one frame of accountability and if stakeholders see opportunities for dual objectives. Very strong and widespread media criticism may be difficult for media organizations to neglect.

A press council is meant to improve the news media. Existing councils keep a very low profile. A true press council should not shy from seeking publicity, taking stands, establishing case law, taking initiatives when no complaint comes in. All that work cannot be done by press councils alone.

A press council should encourage the creation of other ‘media accountability systems. McQuail (2005) underlines that:

The media is watched as much by society as the media itself watches society; the scrutiny can be divided into issues concerning media structure, conduct or performance” (p.166).

This study focused on the role of citizens in ensuring accountability, and analysed how this role is changing when new media forms enter the media market. The recent wave of social media (participatory journalism, social media like Facebook and Twitter and content sharing sites like YouTube etc.) has set a worldwide debate in motion, and also provided new forums for citizens to discuss media critically.

Ideally, criticism of the media should help the media improve the quality of their work, stipulating that media-criticism should use journalistic standards as a basis for critical assessment. Wyatt (2007) writes that media criticism is an important act of judging the qualities of the news media. Further, Carey (1974) defines press criticism as:

The ongoing process of exchange of debate among members of the press and between the press and its audience over the role and performance of the press in a democratic society. (p.7)

In the culture of participation that is emerging, it is often pointed out that audiences no longer tolerate to be reduced into passive receivers - they want to interact, customize, and be taken seriously, they want to be able to influence, and they have the means to pool their resources in collective efforts (Jenkins, 2006).

Traditional journalism is getting competition from ‘participatory journalism’ - where the audience is invited to interact with the journalistic products, submit content and have a say in the interpretation of news events (Domingo et. al., 2009).

2.6 Media Accountability Mechanisms in Kenya

Kenya leads the East African region in internet connectivity, mobile phone use and social media engagement. Mobile devices are the main means of access. There were 43 million internet users by June 2019, comprising 83% of the population (InternetWorldStats report, 2019).

Majority of Kenyans use social media for news consumption at 31%, for entertainment at 28% and social interactions at 24% (Hootsuite, 2019). Online media platforms have facilitated public discussions on socioeconomic and political issues being talked about in the news. Twitter is the seventh most used website globally. Twitter has grown significantly because of its ease of use and accessibility. Li and Bernoff (2011) describe Twitter as “free and open, connects people, and gives them power.” Twitter users in Kenya account for 9.36% of social media users as of February 2019 (Stat Counter, 2019).

With technological advancement, the ease of adaptability and its mobility in the second half of the 19th century through to the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of the “New Journalism.”

Consequently, the advancement has altered the function of the media and its operations from how they source for stories to how they package content. It has enabled the public to contribute to news stories, share information, criticize the media via virtual network, and to participate in news production (Jarvis, 2006). The internet changed the functions and nature of journalism; it has done away with the media’s role of gatekeeper.

Audiences are no longer passive consumers of the news stories. Earlier theories of communication have been rendered irrelevant due to a complete change in the scope

of giving feedback. In the modern communications theories that are heavily influenced by social media and the internet, the audiences and their feedback have been given the centre stage (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

Castells (2012) however notes that these advancements could have an impact on the profession most especially on the quality of journalism. Studies show the change in the nature of audience from passive to active may in fact, be paving the path towards better journalism accountable to the profession and the public. “For instance, audiences largely ignored by traditional media in the past, have their own digital platforms today for expressing their concerns. In addition, audiences can take part in news production as contributors as well as gatekeepers. Therefore, it can be argued that news media tend to be more accountable to professional and public stakeholders on digital platforms owing to constant monitoring by global audiences” (Acharya B, 2015).

Social media has made it possible for audience to engage with the media in the comment sections available on social media platforms like Facebook, twitter and YouTube. It has also made it possible for user to share information with each other (Rosen, 2006). The media is no longer the disseminator of information and likewise, the audience is no longer just a passive consumer. When questions are asked online about how media settled on producing a news story the way it did, the audience expects an answers and clarifications. By doing this, the audience feel part of the process.

Like Pew Research Centre (2009) notes, that media credibility is at its lowest in Kenya. This was mostly fuelled by the increase in number of fake or fabricated stories produced at the time of research lowering media credibility and trust in the eyes of the media. A research by The Kenya Media Program shows that the level of trust in the media in Kenya is not any different. This has been characterized with the increasing

cases of criticism and questioning on the quality of content which were somewhat unethical, biased and inaccurate (HIVOS, 2011). Continuous criticism and the fall in the level of credibility of the media resulted in discussions on how to make the media more accountable and responsible (de Haan & Bardoel, 2011).

2.7 Digital Media in Kenya

This study used four media houses in Kenya as part of the study on how online audience feedback helps in holding them account. These media houses are; NMG, SG, Radio Africa Group and Royal Media Services.

2.7.1 Nation Media Group

This is one of the oldest media houses in Kenya. According to their website, the media house boasts of a vibrant digital platform with 28 million followers. It also has various digital desks spread across different divisions which include print and broadcast. For the media house, the platforms popular for sharing content and engaging with audience were Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

2.7.2 Standard Group

From their website, this media house reaches over 21 million. Like Nation Media group, its digital desks have staff that monitor feedback from online audience is spread across its departments. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are among the main online platforms used in populating and publishing content.

2.7.3 Royal Media Group

RMS has the largest following in the Kenyan digital space. From their website, Citizen Digital has grown massively to become one of the biggest digital brands in the East

African region with a combined audience of over 13 million monthly visitors. Facebook and Twitter are its major online platforms for audience interaction.

2.7.4 Radio Africa Group

This is one of the latest arrivals in the media environment in Kenya. Like other media house they leverage on feedback from audiences on Twitter and Facebook.

2.8 Theoretical Framework

2.8.1 Theory of Active Audience

Stuart Hall (1980) introduced the theory of the active audience which notes that the audience has evolved from a very passive one to who information was relayed to unmediated and without feedback (1920) to the now active one who decodes message according to their understanding and decides on what to do with the message afterwards.

Scholars (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2004; Groenhart, 2012; Joseph, 2011; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012) agree that active audiences can have an influential role in making media accountable to the public. Equipped with their portable information devices and logged into their social media accounts, audiences can now share to other audiences' newsworthy events and pieces of information they come across first hand outside the control of traditional journalists (Hermida, 2011). Audiences use social platforms as tools to measure media accountability and are thus referred to as the fifth estate (Cooper, 2006; Jericho, 2012). Their work is to monitor mainstream media for inaccuracies and misreporting in a similar way to that in which traditional media are seen as a fourth estate that keeps the various government arms in check.

They are bolder in highlighting and calling out issues that mainstream media which have strict gate keeping processes are likely to shy away from (MCK, 2016). The audience is more aware of the information the media injects into them and they react differently to it while not only constantly trying to understand what the media is communicating but also trying to point out things they deem as errors of omission or commission in their publications.

Audiences are keen, inquisitive and more knowledgeable. They know their surroundings, cultures, political arenas and economic standings. When questions were raised about the nature of sourcing by the BBC in its publication 'Meet the Night Runners', the audiences were expecting them to explain how they settled on the subjects in the video which audiences in Kenya thought was misleading, and to defend themselves from accusations that the story was stage managed.

However, in an environment where new technologies often outpace professional practice, interpretation of how production is done may be different from what the media thinks it should be and this causes backlash online over interference by people who do not understand the profession. The nature of feedback offered by the active audience in the comment section has made journalists sceptical about online media accountability and criticisms of journalism practice. While the audience would expect the media to be more accountable by constantly interrogating their actions, the media is put on spotlight and many see this as interference in their profession. Journalists' admittance that media accountability has an impact on their work is seen as an acknowledgement of weaknesses in journalism and accountability mechanisms favoured by media workers in general (Fengler et al., 2014).

There are currently few studies that attempt to investigate the influence that active online audiences have on media practice. Additionally, the increasing advantages as well as challenges that online media technologies pose in media accountability are still largely unexplored. In the wake of the 2013 terror attack in Nairobi, media houses were forced to exercise caution on how they use photos in their publications. This was after an online uproar on twitter and Facebook against Nation Media Group who used a gory image for their front page which did not sink in well with the audiences. What followed was an apology letter by the then CEO. This goes to show that new audience feedback mechanisms, such as web analytics, have also strengthened audiences' influence over journalists (Tandoc, 2017).

However, the understanding of how engagement manifests has also evolved. While the active audience theory explains how audiences engage with content, very minimal has been said on the repercussions of audience feedback to the profession and the viability of the measuring instruments of media accountability and to a larger extent, the importance of online feedback.

2.9 Summary

This chapter looked at various arguments made by scholars on the role online audience feedback plays in ensuring media accountability in Kenya mainstream media. It looked at the relationship between technology advancement and the evolution of audience using the active audience theory. The theory explains how audience has changed from dormant to active who in turn play the role of watchdogs, watching the excesses of the media.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the various procedures that were used in carrying out the study. It highlights the research design, the target population, sample size that was used, the data collection. It also outlines the data presentation and analysis techniques used in this study.

3.2 Research Design and Approach

3.2.1 Research Design

This study used a descriptive research design to investigate how engagement, correction and criticism of the media by online audiences lead to accountability in the media without manipulation of variables. Orodho (2005) defines descriptive research as a design of gathering data with the intention of describing the nature of the existing conditions, to determine the relationship that exists between specific events. This study looked into the online audience feedback and how it impacts the media in terms of accountability. This research design was deemed appropriate because it was used to describe two phenomena, the online audience feedback and the media, how the two relate to each other leading to accountability.

3.2.2 Research Approach

The researcher used qualitative research method. Qualitative research involves looking in-depth at non-numerical data to explore, understand and interpret social phenomena within its natural setting (Creswell 2002; Pope & Mays 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, data was collected using in-depth interviews with

journalists with from the five media houses; NMG, BBC, SG, Royal Media Group and Radio Africa Group. Data was also collected using qualitative content analysis of audience feedback to get the message inferred after analysing language and tone to determine the nature of audience feedback.

3.3 Population

Kombo and Tromp (2008) define population as an entire group from which samples are taken for data collection. In this study the population was journalists in the newsrooms and in the digital departments of SG, Royal Media Services, NMG, BBC and Radio Africa Group. For content analysis, the population was online feedback on stories published on the five media houses' online platforms.

3.4 Target Population

Oso and Onen (2011) define target population as the total number of subjects or the total environment of interest to the researcher. The target population of this study was journalists with power to make editorial decisions who include social media editors, managing editors and editorial directors of the five mentioned media houses. It also involved journalists in populating, publishing and monitoring content online who include online producers or digital sub editors and online reporters (depending on job titles in respective media houses). It also targeted specific journalists who covered the NYS II scandal. These journalists were used as KIIs to give an in-depth understanding on online audience and media accountability.

For content analysis, researcher focused the first ten comments of the NYS II scandal stories published on twitter and Facebook pages of SG, Royal Media Services,

NMG, and Radio Africa Group. Also, the first ten comments on the Night Runners story published on BBC Africa's twitter handle.

3.5 Sample Size

The sample size used in this study was 15 journalists from SG, Royal Media Services, NMG, BBC and Radio Africa Group. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) recommend 50 per cent of the target population as an adequate sample for a study. The study therefore sampled three journalists per media house, in the newsrooms and digital departments to be used as key interview informants. In getting the sample size for editors to be part of this study, the researcher noted that journalists with editorial decision that is managing editors/ editorial manager relevant to this study (different media house have different titles for this post) were very few in the five media houses, ranging between one and two for each media house.

Therefore, the researcher picked only one from each media houses as a representative of the whole. In sampling reporters from SG, Royal Media Services, NMG, and Radio Africa Group to be used as part of the study the researcher considered the coverage NYS II Scandal. From inquiries with media editors, the researcher found out that different media houses had specific journalist(s) who covered the scandal. Most of them had two reporters taking turns in the coverage therefore the researcher settled on one reporter per media house. For the BBC Africa Eye story, the researcher sampled the specific journalists (producers and editor) who were involved in the production of the story. In sampling digital editors, the researcher chose one editor per media house, focusing on those in charge of publishing and monitoring of feedback from online audience. The sample size is summarized in the table below.

Table 2: Sample size used in the study

Participant	Job titles	Number of Subjects
BBC Africa	Editor, producer, reporters	3
Nation Media Group	Online Sub Editor, Digital Editor, Reporter	3
Standard Group	Digital editor, Social Media Manager, Reporter	3
Royal Media Services	Editorial manager, Digital editor, Online Sub Editors,	3
Radio Africa Group	Online Sub Editor, Digital Editor, Reporters	3

3.6 Sampling Techniques

Orodho and Kombo (2002) define sampling as the process of selecting a number of individuals from a population such that the selected group contains elements representative of the characteristics found in the entire group. Therefore, to give a broader understanding of the research problem and adequately analyse the impact of audience feedback on the media in terms of accountability, the researcher used purposively sampling. Purposive sampling was based on the researcher's judgement that the participants chosen have the right information that the researcher is looking for to adequately give answers and findings to the research objectives. The researcher purposely sampled editorial managers who have editorial responsibility to weigh in on the feedback and make decisions on for instant feedback that is critical to media accountability practices. The editorial managers were used to adequately give

information on how media responds to feedback, if it has led to accountability and how feedback impacts journalism

The researcher also sampled specific reporters, producers, online subeditors/ reporters who covered the NYS II scandal and the Night Runners stories to look into how media responds to feedback, how online feedback has led to more accountability in the media and the nature of audience feedback. The media houses SG, Royal Media Services, NMG, BBC and Radio Africa Group were selected based on online presence and online activities in terms of traction that the specific stories generated online and share of voice at the time of publishing. The NYS II story was selected as part of this study based on the backlash, call to action and the interaction that it elicited after it broke. BBC Africa Eye's night runner story was selected based on the interaction and the share of voice it elicited from KoT.

3.7 Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using in-depth interviews with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and content analysis of online feedback on social media post of the NYS II stories for the local media houses and night Runners story from BBC Africa Eye.

KIIs are qualitative, in-depth interviews of 15 to 35 people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic of interest (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 1996). In this study the KIIs were chosen based on their knowledge on media accountability, online audience behaviour and their interaction news stories and feedback. Showkat, Nayeem and Parveen, Huma (2017) describes in-depth interviews as the most efficient methods of collecting primary data with an intention of uncovering in-depth details of interviewee's experience and perspective on

a subject. In-depth interviews were conducted to find out how they media respond to feedback, to examine how engagement, correction and criticism of the media through online audience feedback amounts to accountability and how online feedback impacts journalism.

The researcher also used qualitative content analysis to collect data on the nature of online audience feedback. Schreier (2012) notes that qualitative content analysis is used in analysing data and interpreting its meaning. It is a method used to classify written or oral materials into identified categories of similar meanings (Moretti et al., 2011). In the study of the nature of audience feedback, the researcher used directed content analysis from the participants to further categorize feedback into the predetermined nature of audience feedback which is correction, engagement and correction (See *Table 1*).

Feedback was categorized as correction where the audience was deemed to be pointing out errors made by the media. Where the audience was against what the media has presented in the content or left out, gaps or how the content is packaged and calls out the media for its actions or lack of it will be categorized as criticism. Where feedback was simply seeking clarifications and more information on content, this was categorized as engagement. This was arrived at while looking at message value which the participants of the study first categorized as objective, subjective or unfounded, based on language and tone used.

3.8 Data Collection Instruments

Because the study used KIIs, interview guides (See *Appendix D*) which included a list of open-ended questions were used to collect data from the editors, producers and

reporters. Follow up questions that emerged from the conversations with participants were also used in this study. Interviews were conducted face to face with participants at their respective media houses. Those who were not available for one on one interviews, conference call was used. All conversations were recorded for analysis.

For the content analysis, feedback from online audiences was analysed using a document review (See *Appendix D*). It (document review) was labelled according to date of publishing of content, headlines of each publication, source of story, information given whether it is factual or not, source of feedback whether it was from an anonymous or identifiable audience and language used. From these labelling, the participants categorized feedback as objective, subjective and unfounded. This was further used by the researcher based on similarities of message value, language and tone used to categorize feedback into correction, engagement or criticism to give an analysis on the nature of audience feedback.

3.9 Techniques of Data collection and Analysis

3.9.1 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher extracted feedback from the social media platforms of the five media houses to be used for content analysis. The researcher captured the first ten comments, that is, feedback from NYS II scandal stories on the NMG, SG, Radio Africa Group and Royal Media Services on Facebook and the Twitter comments on Night Runners story from BBC Africa Eye.

The researcher then used these comments in interviews with participants to find answers to the first objective which was to examine the nature of audience feedback.

Firstly, from the message value media got from analysis of feedback by reading through them, participants categorized feedback as objective, subjective and unfounded based on the tone and language used. Then from this, the researcher further categorized the nature of feedback into the predetermined categories that is correction, criticism and engagement.

The researcher then conducted interviews seeking answers on the other three objectives on how media responds to feedback, to investigate whether engagement, correction and criticism has led to media accountability and the impact of online audience feedback on journalism. Interview guides (See *Appendix D*) were used in gathering this information, and recorded for later analysis.

3.9.2 Data Analysis

For content analysis, data was analyzed in a document review sheet to determine the finding of the first objective. The researcher analyzed the first ten comments in the selected stories, looking at language, tone to infer the message value contained in the feedback.

Information gathered from in-depth interviews with KIIs was transcribed according to specific media houses on Microsoft word document and analyzed in a narrative and descriptive format to find out similarities in practices by media houses, which was then used to get trends and emerging themes on the role online audience feedback in ensuring accountability in Kenya mainstream media.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This research was guided by the following ethical considerations:

Before beginning the collection data, the researcher obtained authorization from Ethics and Review Committee from the Aga Khan University Graduate School of Communication and NACOSTI research license. Appointments were made prior to the day of interview with participants using emails and phone calls. Before starting interviews and recording conversations, permission was sought from the participants and informed consent forms signed. The researcher ensured that participation was voluntary. Participants were informed of the research topic, the purpose and to which institution it is intended for.

To ensure that no harm or embarrassment comes to the participants as a result of their contributions to this study, anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to. This was also done to ensure that the information gathered is not used in any other publication or for any other intention other than the research. Honesty and integrity, while recognizing and protecting the rights of respondents and all involved in the study was upheld.

This was avoided at all costs. The finding of the research was analysed according to the information collected without withholding or distorting any information.

The researcher works as Digital Journalist at BBC Africa whose Night Runners' story was the motivation of doing this research. The researcher is also well known to some of the participants used in this study. To avoid any conflict of interest, the research remained objective throughout the study analysing and giving finding based on the participants' answers to interview questions.

3.11 Summary

This chapter outlined the methods of data collection. This study used descriptive research design and a qualitative research approach. The researcher used in-depth interviews with KIIs and content analysis of online audience feedback on specific stories to collect data.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents results and findings of the study. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with KIIs and content analysis on feedback on social media accounts of the selected media houses, BBC Africa, NMG, RMS, SG and Radio Africa Group. The interviews were conducted on reporters, editors, online sub-editors and producers. The interviews were transcribed and a process of close reading and data coding done looking into emerging themes, trends and patterns. The findings section was discussed within the research objectives of the study and theoretical framework, the active audience theory.

4.2 Respondents Overview

All participants identified for the study were interviewed. This gave the researcher an opportunity to address all the questions and gather a valid opinion on the same. It provided the current study with the desired level of in-depth. The participants were as shown below.

Table 3: Participants' response rate

Media House	Participants
Nation Media Group	Managing editor, Senior political reporter, online sub-editor
Standard Group	Managing editor, Digital editor, Senior reporter
Royal Media Services	Digital editor, digital Subeditor, News editor
BBC Africa	Producer, Reporter, Editor
Radio Africa Group	Digital Editor, Online reporter, Online Producer

4.2.1 Profile of the Participants

The criteria used for choosing the media houses to participate in the study was determined by the presence of digital departments in various media houses, strong online presence and the traction the media house has to stories published that will enable good content analysis. Choice of media house to participate in the study was based on the amount of activity their online platform has, the frequency of publishing and the share of voice.

The participants were interviewed about their practical experiences interacting with audience online with regards to media accountability. They were gauged on their understanding of audience, the use of online platforms to engage with content, their understanding of media accountability and the role of audience in making news media accountable.

4.3 Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to answer and get findings to the first objective is to examine the nature of audience feedback. It was carried out using the feedback by audiences on the media houses social media pages. The researcher presented the comments to participants in the media houses who gave their perspective on nature of audience feedback and other follow up questions. The analysis focused on how the media houses covered the NYS II story in Kenya and how BBC Africa produced the Night Runners story filmed in Kenya. Various platforms were sampled as tabled below:

Table 4: Platforms sampled for content analysis

Media House	Platform sampled
NMG	Twitter
Standard Group	Twitter
RMS	Facebook
BBC Africa	Twitter
Radio Africa Group	Facebook

The feedback was analysed per comment on a document review sheet (See *Appendix C*). In analysing the comments, the researcher categorized feedback under using the date of publishing or posting, headline used, language of posting, audience identification whether it was anonymous, using a pseudonym or identifiable. The researcher also categorized feedback under the message value, what the audience pointed out from the stories and the response media gave. For the coverage of the NYS

II scandal, the researcher used stories covered between May and June 2019 when the story broke. From the findings and answers from participants, the researcher finally placed feedback under the predetermined categories; correction, engagement and criticism.

4.4 Interviews

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with KIIs. The interviews were guided by the objectives of the study which are: to determine how media is held into account by the audience in Kenya; to examine the nature of audience feedback to news stories in Kenya; to investigate how media responds to audience feedback on news stories published online; to examine how the engagement, correction and criticism of the media content by the online audiences lead to more accountability in the media and to examine whether increased feedback, prompt reaction by online audience has led to a responsive media. These objectives were anchored to the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of audience feedback to news stories?
2. How do media organizations handle audience feedback?
3. How does audience feedback ensure media accountability?
4. What is the impact of audience feedback on journalism?

Interviews were recorded, transcribed on a Microsoft word document and analysed in a narrative form checking for similarity patterns in media houses, emergent themes and trends. The findings of this study were presented according to the objectives of the study.

4.5 Analysis of Objectives

4.5.1 Nature of Audience Feedback

This first objective sought to determine the nature of feedback received by Kenya's mainstream media from their online audience. This objective was used against the content analysis as of the NYS II scandal as covered by NMG, RMS, SG and Radio Africa group and the night runners' story as covered by BBC Africa.

It looked into the comments to find out what audiences liked or disliked about the stories covered, the gaps, the tone of feedback and their final call to action. From interviews on the nature of feedback given by the audiences, the participants categorized feedback as objective, subjective and unfounded. For subjective feedback, participants noted that the comments were mostly based on feelings, emotion and did not contain any valuable information that the media could deduce to act upon or help in making improvements on content. For some of the journalists, on such feedback language used is demeaning and times abusive. One respondent noted:

We can never try to test how genuine the online audience is that is why hashtags come up and it is sponsored nonsense. It is directing or misdirecting the story. If I want to attack so and so all I need is to create a fake parody a count and harmer throughout.

Another responded noted that because of this kind of feedback, they have blocked some of their online platforms like the websites from comments that do not add value. The respondent said:

We stopped it because it is not honest. In fact, it only helps to polarize, to confuse. And where they are they start war, you write a story and you do not even want to go back to twitter.

With regards to objective feedback, participants noted that they are clearer in the message being put across, based on facts and are valuable in improving journalistic

work. For the media, this is the type of feedback they hire digital journalists to look filter from a large number of comments coming in from content published online. Here is what they said:

Some of the best questions we here on live TV is from audiences online. If you want to research, the audiences will sort you out. Even within the questions there are those who will provide you the best backgrounds.

Another who agreed with the same sentiments noted:

There are instances we have used the feedback and published some. Where we know for sure we got it wrong and someone pointed it to us and given evidence. Feedback can be used to make decisions on corrections.

Another also added:

People will try to tell you, you missed this. If it is a newspaper of course it is hard. If it online you will be forced to take it down. If everything is overwhelming you look at it and you realized we missed this one, you pull it down or add something and continue because it is the same people we go to for Vox pops, the same people we call sources, it the public. Not everything comes from them is right so it is up to you as a publisher to sieve and see this is right, this cannot work.

For the unfounded feedback, participants noted that they were unrelated to the topic. Comments of this kind were unsubstantiated with falsehoods. Like the subjective comments, they are not actionable.

After getting interviewees' perception on online audience feedback, feedback was then analysed according to the researcher's predetermined categories which are criticism, engagement and correction.

4.5.1.1 Criticism

In this category of feedback, the audiences were calling out the media and demanding for action to be taken on what the media had omitted in their stories, the gaps pointed out, poor analysis and reporting of stories and insufficient information provided. Out of the tweets sampled from the NYS II story, majority of them were meant to criticize the media for ‘poor’ coverage of the scandal. Majority of the audiences were calling out the media for leaving out the names of all the suspects involved in the scandal while naming a few. It was their belief that the media had withheld that information because of their own motive to protect the suspects while leaving others to roast. Some of such comments were:

Twitter user: 1 lady in front page! You are using this lady to cover this mess. Have the courage to name all the banks that allowed money to be deposited in the accounts without following the set guidelines. Name the procurement and finance officers. #NYSscandal

Facebook user: Why is media emphasising too much stories about Anne Ngirita who only took 60 million shillings which is 0.667% of the money lost? Is it because they were poor family and they have no right to be rich? The story about this family is getting petty. Please for once stop being cheap and petty and inform us about the other big fish with the rest of billions.

Carey (1974) describes quality media criticism as factual, with unemotional language, but in this case the media thought criticism was unfounded and subjective. Interviewees noted that at times criticism of their stories was without fact, based on anger and did not seek to add any value to their story hence not actionable. The criticism was mostly offensive to journalists and the media houses with hashtags like #GitheriMedia and #NameTheRealNYSThieves used to demean and hurt their reputations. One comment read:

Twitter user: The Githeri media now focusing their attention to this lady to divert us from the real thieves who we know they know but are afraid to expose them. (NYS II)

Twitter user: This is untrue and the woman seen in the picture has reiterated that she was coerced to do so. (Night runners)

On their part, the interviewees noted that they had duty of care, to verify information before publishing. While the media is accountable to the audience, it remains accountable for its actions. Failure to which could lead to legal actions like defamation suits hence at the time, interviewees noted that they had to get their facts right despite the uproar from the audience. Other participants also noted that they had done their research before commencing production hence some of the feedback given lacked basis. One participant said:

It will be a dangerous affair because the pressure on social media is guiding us. Editorial decisions are not made based on what people are saying on social media. They are based on the information we have and whether we can defend it in a court of law. So, whether we have doc evidence or not will determine whether we will run the story or not and how we will run it. Corruption stories are running stories so we have information today that we will not have today and it is possible that you will take your story forward based on that.

Another said:

For the stories we do, we have some quite significant resources in the research for this. And go through a long process of verifying their credibility and we consult with local authorities as well. We go into the process to make sure these people are credible.

Participants also noted that the tone used in criticising the media according to the interviewees was harsh, personal and unnecessary. This has made some of the participants very sceptical and afraid of reading reader comments online. One respondent said:

I have been trolled before, so much. In fact, I don't read comments anymore. When I read them, I will die. I have a soft spot so I avoid them. They are not very nice guys.

However, participants agreed that there was constructive criticism to some extent that informed how they carried the story forward the days that followed. These were some of the comments they rated as being objective and actionable. Such criticism was used to further and improve news productions. Here are what respondents had to say about objective criticism.

Sometimes you will click on a hashtag and find that there is a lot of content there. You will find that it is content you know and you cannot say because you will be sued, there are conservatory orders.

Another respondent said:

They are knowledgeable. We are conveyers as journalists. They help me get a good product. Most important is their feedback. I am not ground in everything. I have seen people clarify facts. The question is do we listen to our audiences?

Another noted that media is to blame for all the criticism that comes from online audience because of issues that they report on. Participants noted that at times media is faulted for giving priority to less significant issues over the most important ones.

I think sometimes it is the things we do as media. We are not badly off and sometimes we sit down and there are things you read online and you will be left asking yourself why we set ourselves. I don't know whether it is emotions but sometimes we say things and end up looking stupid and that is why they come after us with the hashtag githeri media. That is what happened when we are covering elections and we just focus on someone who was just holding a githeri yet there were deep issues like there were guys bribing, there were guys having tribal talks, there were police killing people after the elections.

4.5.1.2 Correction

In the coverage of the two stories (NYS II and Night Runners), the interviewees established that there were instances where the audience seemed to be correcting what

they believed media got wrong or omitted in the story. This was the form of feedback that journalists embraced because it helps build and improve on stories. In such instances, all interviewees noted that this feedback gives them more information and angles to cover the story extensively. Corrections pointed journalists to errors in news, typos, spelling errors, error in facts and inconsistencies they should have focused more on. Some such comments are:

Social media user: I beg to disagree and at the same time hold Monica Kanari liable and part of those in the “genuine” list of dozens who received similar payments. She must be investigated thoroughly. First question: How did NYS get her bank account? They don’t have mine. Second question: Where did KRA get the information of Kanari receiving payments close to 56 million from NYS, calculated and demanded tax of 10 million shillings?

Twitter user: Those are not real night runners. Real ones will not let you follow them.....plus they are very fast😊

Facebook user: Stupid reporting... Biting poverty yet they lived in a concrete walled house with electricity... Their mum was selling Cereals and hence had a good income compared to other peasant farmers within Naivasha or country... you reporters, you haven't seen biting poverty... Stop sensationalising news.

For the interviewees, corrections are used to gauge how best they did their work. However, they also noted that not everything the audiences points out as a correction, is true, journalists still have to look into what has been posted, verify before acting on it. BBC Africa was corrected in many instances with audiences pointing to them what they thought they got wrong about the ‘*night runners*’ story.

Trust me this is so cooked actual night runners would never let their identities known let alone be filmed actual night runners will make you pee on yourself seriously.

Interviewees noted, corrections made in such manner are mostly subjective, made out of emotions rather than facts and are hence not actionable.

4.5.1.3 Engagement

This form of feedback allowed audiences to give their opinion on a story. While engaging with content audiences mostly used humour and sarcasm to interreact with the stories online. For the media, such interaction is used to gauge the feeling of the audience towards the story and informs on how then the story is carried forward. Such feedback needs no scrutiny because they are mostly people's feelings to a story. Most of the comments simply asked rhetorical questions on how to handle issues like corruption, scandals in the case of NYS scandal. For the BBC story, audiences engaged with memes, humour while making fun of the entire situation.

Twitter user: Those are not real night runners. Real ones will not let you follow them.... plus, they are very fast 😊

Twitter user: Why use beautiful words like Night runner this is not athletics. The word is WITCH CRAFT

From the interviews carried out, journalists did not like or agree with the manner in which feedback was being relayed, the tone, and some of the content of feedback. Some journalists believe the feedback given online is full of negative criticism, mean and at times personal to tarnish their image. Most of them termed the feedback as subjective in nature, mostly influenced by their emotions, feelings, personal opinions and interpretation. The interviewees noted that the tone and wording of the feedback was very harsh towards them.

They go personal. They do memes about you. If you are not big on social media or if you have not used those things then, I personally do not get affected. I ignored them after all they will move to another item after 6 hours.”

Another said:

Sometimes it is negative sometimes they are trolls and sometimes people bad feelings and they want to say some things just to feel nice. So, it is how you sieve it. What is important and what is not important.

Another added:

Normally what happens is, of course, the hashtag is picked and we read what the sentiments are and normally we would decide, is it somebody who has felt offended? Especially if you publish highly volatile political stories. You find that Leader X will be the one who will start the attack. We watch what the words are and understand where this is coming from. Of course, by the time a story is published it has gone through some due diligence. So most of the times, the trolls or the attacks are based on feelings. I've read a headline and I feel you are attacking me.

However, they all affirmed that despite the nature of feedback being harsh on them personally, the resulting factor was beneficial to their work. In most cases, the negative criticism originated from aggrieved parties in a story. The participants noted that there is a tendency by aggrieved individuals to enlist the support of online influencers to react to a story or attack the credibility of the actual story, the journalist who did the story and the media house that carried it. From such call, hashtags and mentions are used. One respondent said:

A lot of feedback we get on social media appears to be sponsored. It is the people affected negatively by the stories who have bloggers that tweet about the stories we have done. Sometimes people use social media to take us to directions that we might have missed and then we take up those leads then we follow the stories.

Another added:

For people like me who do political stories, we are in a very delicate situation because, more often than not people judge you by your surname. So, if you do certain stories and people don't like it, they will look at your surname and say you are affiliated or you wrote that story because you don't like this other political side or you have done it because you have been persuaded by your ethnic affiliations. More often than not that is not the case. Or even the sometimes you do a story and they affiliate to the ownership to editorial content they will

tell you your chairman supports ODM that is why you have the story or you guys have done this story because your chairman is married to a sister to so and so is your in-law. All manner of allegations but very many times, they do not make a lot of sense

Interviewees also noted that, in some instances feedback becomes not actionable when they (media) is sure that all facts were gotten right in the story, when all the information was relayed and packaged in the right manner and when all relevant procedures in producing a story were followed. In some instances, interviewees noted that feedback is demeaning and abusive. For some media houses, such feedback is filtered, at times blocked and deleted because such feedback does not point out the problem in the story hence it does not help in improving their work. While the audiences are at times known to carry additional information to a story, not all information they put out in the comment section is true, at times the information is biased. The media then has to go through the process of verifying the information before using it to beef up the story.

Although most journalists do not agree with the way feedback is given, a large number of the interviewees affirmed that there are sections of audience who give meaningful or objective feedback that works to improve the profession. Objective feedback is based on facts, and provides information that can be used in holding the media accountable. The respondents said:

They increase the pressure but also, they make you alert to the fact that you need to get your fact right because when they get small things whether grammatical or a date or fact if it is something that is not right, they ride on that and they use that to discount, to dismiss the entire story. If they can point out where you got it wrong, they will succeed.

Another one affirmed:

Today, it is not possible to hide anything. Previous years people would say you know you have been influenced to kill a certain story. It is not very possible now to kill a story. You may not consume everything that is on social media because at the end of the day because the difference between mainstream media and social media is accountability. But for us we have to verify and eventually make an editorial decision on how this story will be treated. Social media has brought a lot of accountability in our practice.

While the media is keen on observing how audiences are commenting on their stories, interviewees noted that there was the rise of the audience's interactivity enabled by the internet. This has in turn enabled immediate feedback on news items and action taken to make corrections and amendments from the feedback given. This has prompted the media to rethink its mode of operations to remain relevant in the profession. While this has been seen as a threat to the agenda setting role of the media, interviewees noted that the immediacy of feedback enables them to act promptly on issues they might have overlooked or gaps that the audience might have seen to make their work better.

For the media, audience interactivity makes it easy for them to know what the audience likes or dislikes, what the audience thinks of their bulletins even as they go on and from the feedback, they make adjustments that suites the needs of their audiences. This they said is one way of showing their audiences that they are paying attention to what they are saying in the comment sections.

You will often see us on the phone (on-air). We often go through comments, because their (audience) interaction is also something we ask them to do. I will see what people are saying, how they are responding to certain things. Sometimes they give you very important facts. Sometimes they will correct you instantly what you miss a fact which is great. It shows that there is an interaction between us and the audience on social media.

The length of time it took to receive feedback before social media delayed reactions to areas that the readers would desire to see changes. If the changes were corrections, the

mistakes would persist. However, most interviewees acknowledged that this is no longer the case. Immediate feedback means that editors and reporters are able to receive instant feedback and execute changes immediately, where correction is warranted, for online content.

The interviewees acknowledged that although there is guaranteed and immediate feedback, subjectivity has affected media houses response and reliance on such feedback. This is not to mean that social media has no place, or the audience is unimportant.

All interviewees agreed that irrespective of whether feedback is actionable or not (subjective or objective), it is progressive in the sense that it helps demonstrate matters of public interest.

There are instances we have used the feedback and published some. Where we know for sure we got it wrong and someone pointed it to us and given evidence. Feedback can be used to make decisions on corrections.

Another said:

Feedback we say helps us improve, helps us know what we are doing right and especially what we are doing wrong. I mean, we thrive on feedback. When, say, we are not streaming news people complain we know a lot of people actually watch us on stream, online. So, it's very good. So, we decide consciously to invest in better streaming equipment. Yeah, so it actually helps make a lot of decisions especially on the user experience.

Largely, the interviewees admitted that online feedback is important in gauging how the public reacts to news items.

For that particular story, it was progressive comments of people saying, oh, it happens in my village, I've seen this before. So, I think the criticism was actually limited but we always take comments, some

people were a bit comical, and sometimes comedy makes the world a better place. So, yeah. Of course, we learn from it as well.

For the media, participants said it is very important that the audience reacts to published content. In this regard, these reactions do not have to be positive, but any reaction is a marker that the readers have taken note.

In this field of journalism, the little experience I have in the years I've been around, criticism is good. Negative or positive, you take it. If you work on a piece and nobody talks about it means you've done zero. You're better off getting negative comments or positive but where you've worked on something and it just passes like nothing happened it means you've not created any impact.

4.5.2 How newsroom editors respond to audience feedback on news stories

The second objective focused on determining whether newsroom editors respond to audience feedback on news stories, and if so, what form does such response take. The nature of audience feedback has shown how media houses have varied approaches to managing feedback. From the participants' interviews, all the media houses participating in this study have established dedicated desks to skim through and determine actionable feedback. They have Digital editors and online reporters who are in charge of populating and monitoring content and also engaging with audiences online. One said:

We monitor feedback and numbers using google trends and google analytics. The monitor individual statements for example like yesterday when someone posted there was content that was published that had certain words like sex and things so now we had to respond as a company and say this was untrue. It's difficult to say whether this was a paid blogger

Almost all media houses have a mechanism such as Google Analytics or a customized organizational solution, to package feedback in a manner that informs

journalistic work and which sectors to improve on. The variety of approaches or methods applied to filter feedback was adequately addressed by one of the respondents;

We have many tools to do that. Facebook analytics, social media, Instagram and Twitter, tweet deck and of course we have our own internal methods what we call DMP, a Data Management Platform, now that is very, very detailed in terms of behaviour.

Deployment of different methods and mechanisms to filter feedback is evidence that although a majority of online feedback is subjective there is objective feedback trapped in the otherwise dismissible feedback. Interviewees were of the view that online feedback, although overly subjective, still has value, therefore it is the responsibility of the media house to determine how such value will be derived.

In recognition that not all feedback is actionable, as is the case with subjective feedback, a considerable amount of feedback from social media is ignored. Although a large number of media houses have invested in advanced systems or dedicated staff to derive value from the feedback and criticism offered by the online audience, there are some who view this as unnecessary. The view is that social media is a volatile place incapable of providing any meaningful feedback.

The online audience is overrated. It is anonymous. Some kind of a militia you cannot even trust it. It is a mob with a mission. We can never try to test how genuine the online audience is that is why hashtags come up and it is sponsored nonsense. It is directing or misdirecting the story. If I want to attack so and so all I need is to create a fake parody a count and harmer throughout. May be trying to develop alternative facts. The online audience it not genuine because we do not know them. It is alike a lynch mob. Even the genuine ones are swallowed up in that.

Their ability to call out the media for mistakes largely depends on the knowledge, experience and interest of the audience on the story that has been published.

Interviewees noted that the informed and active audience the media faces today informs how they handle feedback.

There are genuine ones that they will point out. We are dealing with a very enlightened society or citizenry. We are dealing with professionals, students, people that have their exposure at certain level, persons who are people of interest in whatever you're doing. There are those ones they will genuinely call you out for a mistake that you did and, in some cases, we will be gracious enough to apologize because somebody will prove to you this is the position and then there's some that will just come out to attack you for the sake of discrediting whatever you put there. For instance, if you do something scientific, medicinal or anything to do with health you will find people who have an idea. Medics or paramedics they'll just tell you this is not the position or they'll tell you the factual—or they'll even tell you how you can take the matter further so that is the kind of citizenry that we have because people are enlightened.

From the interviews, one of the most recurrent concerns from the respondents was that the prominence of online audiences, underlined by real-time updates, are a threat to media, especially in regard to its agenda setting role.

There was an obvious agreement among the respondents that media houses/journalists must be responsive to the threat by claiming their place in the digital space. This allows journalists and media houses to capture areas of public interest and also objectively react to issues, which is a major challenge for a majority of the online audience.

Every so often I see we are very keen to see what people are saying on social media because it affects and informs what we say on social media". Nonetheless, there is great need to ensure that journalists do not solely rely on social media feedback or the audience to dictate content as this threatens the media's status as the agenda setter. There is a heightened risk for the media to lose its agenda setting role. It would mean the media is handed to a particular common. So, people say this is what we want and we want it this way.

Online feedback has become a progressive means of determining subjects of public interest. Resultantly, a majority of the interviewees acknowledged that feedback generated by the audience does play a major role in shaping content, one interviewee noted that it “*informs rather than determines*” news content.

In this regard, feedback is applied to determine issues that are drawing the public’s attention and from that journalists focus on producing or generating congruent content, but objectively. At the end of the day, journalism must respond to social, economic and political issues and there is no better platform to understand issues close to the public’s heart than listening and keenly following their sentiments through their feedback and reactions. This was adequately captured by one of the interviewees;

Are we just going to publish anything, everything or are we going to see that our readers are actually reading this, spending more time on this content because data tells us in the business pages people spend as long as three, four, five minutes. So, we know this information on investing is actually what is engaging readers. Engagement meaning, they are spending more time, and they are commenting, so we know people are really invested their emotions in that content. And on the other side, yes, sometimes we do. We get a lot of comments and tips, this has happened, an accident has happened. We’ll actually follow that and bring it to the audience.

Evidently, the study indicated that online audience and the feedback generated by the audience is important in informing journalistic work. However, it must be applied in the right manner. If not, there are concerns that the increasing power of the audience, if not applied by the media to augment journalistic work, will soon see media lose its relevance.

However, there is need for the media practitioners to know how to engage with audience when feedback is given. One of the main observations was that the media must

differentiate between trolling, backlash and objective feedback. Evidently, this has happened, a majority of respondents were able to distinguish between valid feedback and ‘witch hunt’.

You need to make sound distinction between constructive criticism and trolling. If people come with solid observations on work, if they highlight factual inaccuracies or places where we’ve made mistakes then they are corrected. That kind of feedback is always welcome. With trolling-- it’s just the nature of the biz but like I said, there’s a big difference between constructive feedback, including criticism and trolling.

One of the main interests on the subject of trolling and backlash was determining the journalist as well as the media houses reaction to this. The main question being, does journalistic work suffer by shying off certain subjects that are likely to elicit sharp audience reactions? On the other hand, how do media houses safeguard journalists, or their own reputation in light of the reactive and subjective audience. The researcher adequately observed that the most dominant safeguard was reliance on facts and sound practice and whenever the media gets it wrong, and apology or correction would be given.

Practicing journalists have come to terms with the fact that online audience will always react, and this reaction is largely negative and subjective, however, the facts will always be applied as a basis of supporting the journalists or the production. In support of this view, one respondent detailed a full proof method on how the respective media house ensures they have credible content and only present facts, which in practice waters down or backs up the work of journalists.

We went through a long process of verifying their (sources) credibility and consulted people. And as a safeguard against the kind of backlash that we had, our team had to film the discussions about it

so for example, what we do that's standard now is to get video release forms from contributors. Traditionally in the media, you get people to sign a document saying I would like to take part in this film. It's a legal document. I think it's much more authentic if you get people on camera where you explain to them what the project is clearly, which platform it's going to go out on, and to make it clear that they understand it's a documentary, it's on this subject, it's not feature film, and also to be very clear that they are not being paid or anything like that. And that's what we did with all of the contributors.

Although this alluded to the practice of one media house, there was adequate reason to believe that every media house has full proof methods and in-house guidelines that ensure that only factual content is published. Ideally, this has also improved journalistic work, there is greater quality and there is even a greater show of professionalism by journalists and across media houses when it comes to getting sources and interviewees for stories.

Audience feedback has prompted media houses to look inwards and develop adequate media policy and guidelines that ensures objective production. Obviously, this remains the only safeguard, and an adequate one, against an audience that can often be described as, overzealous. The researcher was interested in knowing whether audience reactions lead to policy changes, or do media houses continually adjust their in-house guidelines to respond to the audience demands. Ultimately, the overall view was that this would be dangerous.

The researcher also not that media responded to feedback mostly by giving clarifications on how they covered stories, correcting errors they made by publishing apology statements online or by withdrawing stories from online platforms. For the BBC Night Runners story for example, a clarification on the issue of stage-managing was offered. The statement read:

The BBC's editorial standards and commitment to accuracy mean that we would not feature dramatized footage without clear labelling. We stand by our journalism and will continue to highlight social issues that are relevant to our African audience.

For the media, owning up to mistakes, clarifications and apologies go a long way in building trust between them and the audience. Journalism as a profession is based on basic tenets and irrespective of the trolling, backlash or an increasing audience power; these tenets cannot be altered as it is tantamount to altering what has served the profession. The predominant or representative view on policy influences was adequately captured by the following reaction by one of the respondents;

Journalism has basic guidelines so for the main media because for the media houses I have worked for, we have not had policy change because of the response on social media what has been is may be the extension of the policy. Say like how do we examine, how do we operate in this new ecosystem and this has evolved around how we respond.

4.5.3 How engagement, correction and criticism leads to media accountability

The third objective was bent on determining whether constant engagement, correction and criticism of the media by the online audience have enhanced media accountability. For this, the interviewees unanimously agreed.

Absolutely. Journalists don't get everything right all the time and if somebody points out any factual error that you've made I think any credible media outlet will print a correction. I mean, what it does, that correction makes the story more factually correct. It means that readers or viewers have got a more informed picture, more accurate picture and I think that can only be a good thing.

Another respondent said:

It does. To a great extent it does. I believe social media has brought lot of accountability to the mainstream media or our day to day

interactions with the media. Why, because it is now clear in 2019 moving forward that if mainstream media kills a story for certain interests.

The research looked into how online audience's engagement leads to certain decisions that are tantamount to the media being accountable. In this regard, a theme emerged on media's responsibility towards its content. For the media, it is important that the audience interacts with its content. Feedback was a crucial measure of how they performed and also a measure of audience attitude towards a particular story. Hence while producing, greater care is taken while conducting interviews, sourcing for characters, deciding what topics to discuss on TV show, which hashtags to use online to drive conversations. Their aim is also to drive audiences to their online platforms. One respondent said:

I think our interactions with people on social media better us. The questions that we are now forced to answer in our bulletins every day is why. The shift in audiences has also been necessitated by the expansion in social media and a more enlightened audience means a better interaction for the entire environment in terms of how we do our business.

Another said:

From the feedback, you need to make sound distinction between constructive criticism and trolling. If people come with solid observations on work, if they highlight factual inaccuracies or places where we've made mistakes then they are corrected. We do that routinely right across the board and that kind of feedback is always welcome. With trolling-- it's just the nature of the biz but like I said, there's a big difference between constructive feedback, including criticism and trolling.

During the interviews, some of the most prominent words used by interviewees included "backlash, criticism, trolling", all of which form part of the feedback loop. Whereas all interviewees acknowledged that they have at one point or the other been "trolled" or faced backlash from online audience, not all regretted or viewed it as a

major cause of alarm, the resulting factor from it which is professionalism and accountability is what counts. Participants noted that criticism, engagement and correction made them cautious of how they produce content to minimize on errors so as to ensure that they do not become topics of discussion online. Feedback helps them to correct mistakes and do stories better. One of the interviewees noted that;

I consume the reactions with my head rather than my heart. These things come and go especially if you study and see it is a sponsored troll, then you come back and say, Okay, fine, when you do this, these guys react, why? And then all the building blocks you now start joining the dots and understand where you are operating from. So next you do the story in a different way ensuring that you have all the voices in it but your truth is still there.

Another respondent agreed saying:

At the end of the day all you know is that irrespective of the merit of social media attack, whether false justified or not, they have a lot of impact in improving accountability. Now you know you will be called out somewhere where fact does not matter, your point does not matter. It will be what the dominant view matters. What is the prevailing mood. So, if the prevailing mood will be built on the gaps in your story you have lost everything. It has made us more conscious about getting it right.

A majority of interviewees alluded to the fact that the element of accountability, which is tested on a daily basis through hashtags, should always start with full knowledge on whom and what the journalist is accountable to. In reference to the audience, the interviewees affirmed that they are indeed accountable to the audience but the extent to which they are accountable to the audience is tied to the availability of facts. One of the interview questions focused on a recent scandal, the NYS II scandal, all media houses reported the scandal but initially failed to mention the culprits, or whom the audience referred to as “*the actual culprits*”.

In that case, interviewees stated that although they felt and agreed that they feel accountable to the audience, in reference to supply of information, the media is also accountable to the persons the audience alleged as the *actual culprits*.

Resultantly, journalists and the media houses had to be accountable by balancing all interests and only oblige to the audience when all facts became available. Even then, the response is not by publishing names that the audience desires but those provided by the official authority. One interviewee said:

We got accused of hiding names. We release names when we have them. These leaks come in staccato. You only go public when you are sure that if I name you I can defend the story. So, when you have not spoken to the person who has been implicated, you will be reckless as an editor to quote names. Social media is like a group. Once they sense blood, at times people push. We have learnt to ignore them so you publish when you are comfortable.

Another interviewee who agreed on the need to get facts right than bow to public pressure noted;

There is always this fear of being sued for libel and defamation and unless you have documentation to bail you out then no matter how much pressure social media puts as a responsible journalist/ editor, I would rather be last on putting in out on social media than be first and do it wrong.

Even with all the pressure which is at times ignored, the power of Kenya's online audience has raised the bar for journalism. The immediacy and rampancy of feedback from the online audience has forced or is increasingly pressuring journalists to practice professionally as they are held to account on every single item.

Audiences have become the most powerful tool for checks and balances for journalists because the feedback is instantaneous. They hold you to account. If something is a lie they will tell you off. If something is they feel you are not doing it well they will tell you off. There is that instantaneous. Before the era of TVs and newspapers, reaction would come like a month or so later through letters. Social media is instant you post it reaction is instant if there is an error you

correct it instantly. Which is better for the media because you know someone is fact checking you.

All interviewees acknowledged that the margin of error has significantly reduced. This is prompted by a number of factors; firstly, no journalist or media house is willing to be the target of the online audience or get exposed due to obvious reportage errors, misrepresentation of facts or even duplication of news items.

Secondly, there is an increased awareness among practicing journalists of the possibility of libel, especially because news or content consumption levels is unprecedented.

There is always this fear of being sued for libel and defamation and unless you have documentation to bail you out then no matter how much pressure social media puts as a responsible journalist/ editor, I would rather be last on putting in out on social media than be first and do it wrong.

A majority of interviewees indicated that they are now more obliged to get it right in terms of facts and their representation. In other words, there is greater urgency and a renewed call to be accountable. Every journalist must now observe every rule in the book and keep with the journalistic guidelines developed by the respective media houses as this is the only fall back when the audience raises its voice.

One thing I have learnt with online is do not publish before you verify. The worst thing you can do is be trolled for not verifying not being legit and that tag follows you for a very long time that even when you do a legit story, they do not trust you. The audience are fickle. If they smell unverified news, they carry that tag with you. Every day you are put on a pedestal. If you do not do your due diligence, they go ham on you. They unleash receipts on you.

Notwithstanding, all interviewees acknowledged that although the reaction and the response by the audience can be draining and is quite emotive, it has to a large extent prompted them to be more diligent and to improve their research on news items as well

as presentation of the same, which is a major gain for journalistic practice in the country and a major aspect in media accountability.

Further, the researcher also gathered that there is greater accountability under the watchful eye of the online audience as compared to past days when media regulation was solely the responsibility of statutory bodies, such as the MCK. The interviewees explained that the MCK extensively relies on complains by news consumers.

At a time when it took longer to report or raise concerns on items or issues addressed by the media, the MCK was also slow. Today, MCK is also benefiting from a proactive audience, when there is concern on the ethical conduct of media houses, the audience is fast to tag MCK, and the response, through investigations and call to account is able to monitor, albeit more efficiently, the practice of different media houses and journalists. Ultimately, the interviewees clearly demonstrated that statutory bodies and audience occupy different spaces but are both important in having an accountable media.

4.5.4 How increased feedback and prompt reaction has led to a responsive media

The last objective focused on determining whether the new operational environment, characterized by an efficient feedback loop, has indeed influenced or made Kenyan mainstream media, or media operating in Kenya, more responsive to their audiences.

The overriding observation was that due to the changes in the digital space, and the existence of comments sections in all social media platforms that have allowed feedback, media houses have introduced new ways and roles to ensure the audience is

accommodated in a story and duty of care to ensure balance and credibility of stories (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). Most media houses agree there is need to encourage more audience interaction in the comment section to know what the audiences think and want from them.

In the chaos that ensue over a particular story, there are men and women who make important points and they at times do not appertain to the issue at hand but apply largely to the practise of journalism or how you will work as an editor or as a journalist. You get new people, you get new ideas, you get nuisances that you would never have gotten and that are why I think at the end of the day, I would rather have trolls than not have them.

Another respondent said:

We do 20 documentaries a year and it's very important for us to get feedback from the audience. And how we do that is, we have a guy who actually goes through stuff whether it's YouTube, all social media platforms.

The interviewees noted that feedback has helped improve media accountability in the Kenyan media sphere. They added that media responsiveness allows for feedback and criticism; engaging in constructive conversations with users, corrections that seek to make productions better and responses that make the exchange between the media and the audience more meaningful to the public and the profession. Interviewees also noted that responsiveness involves, managing errors in the news promptly and professionally, encouraging tips for potential stories and possible follow ups.

There are instances we have used the feedback and published some. Where we know for sure we got it wrong and someone pointed it to us and given evidence. Feedback can be used to make decisions on corrections.

All media houses, represented here, have policies in place that ensure audience feedback is enlisted. Admittedly, media cannot exist in a vacuum and its responsiveness to issues is central to establishing audience relationship and this is critical to its survival.

Being responsiveness helps in maintaining relationships with the audiences, it allows them to be part of the production process. Respondents agreed that some decisions are made from the conversations going on in the comment section with audiences.

If you don't take criticism or feedback from your audience then it means you don't consider what they say. And for us we're different, for example 100 people commented on this story and 80 of them are talking about the same thing, which has to be taken seriously. Sometimes the feedback favours us sometimes it doesn't so we have to see under the guidelines of the company's editorial rules, what can we take and implement? So yeah. Feedback is important. It's crucial in any production and it also gives us ideas for the next project.

The researcher was intent on understanding the importance of responsiveness. The overall view was survival; the media must serve the cardinal purpose; educate, inform and entertain. However, the only way it will do this is by understanding what the audience is yearning for, it is for this reason that today media is constantly updating content, improving its infrastructure and so on, since it wants to provide the right content and in a proper manner. Some media organizations have resorted to establishing new departments that they intent to leverage on to make productions better. These include factchecking desks that will be used to look into sources and stories before publishing. This was similar for BBC Africa and Standard Group. This view is well represented by the following verbatim from one of the respondents;

In a couple of weeks, we'll have a section on fact-checking where we publish corrections, where people will come and give us and we'll say, Okay, fine. We are wrong, we are right, we have since established so that is in the works, because we realize, yes, we do get a lot of—sometimes some things wrong, contexts wrong it is now open you can come read and it's going to be 24 hours. Now we are going to use the online platform, the web, for an open—you feel this should have been done like this, you have a voice to put it there and for us to pick now, view communication, follow up with the person, and do a developing story.

Editors noted that feedback is monitored every time a story is published to get a feel of what the audiences are saying about the story and how they are interacting with it. This the media uses to gauge the general perception of a particular genre in news reporting, they gauge on how audience engage with a particular niche over other and look for way to make improvements or do away with certain news segments that do not really interest the audience. In cases where there is no link that provide platforms to give feedback in the comments, interviewees noted that the inboxes are always monitored, to look out for audiences who have corrections and observations to make.

Media responsiveness, which echoed what a large number of respondents voiced, is now constantly being applied to improve user experience which in turn keeps the business going. Every media house is investing an overwhelming amount of resources to gather, filter and improve, where needed, services, infrastructure and content. Underlining the fact that today's media is now more responsive, than any time in the past, to audience feedback.

4.6 Summary

This chapter presented results and findings of the study. Data presentation and analysis was done based on the four research questions. The study established that the internet has given the online audience platforms to criticize, correct and engage with news stories online in a bid to hold media accountable. However, findings also show that media takes issue with how feedback is relayed in as much as it has helped improve on accountability. The next chapter discusses these findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings on online audience feedback and accountability in the mainstream media. Based on the findings, it gives recommendations for the media houses and further study that can be done to look into issues arising from discussions.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.2.1 State of Media Accountability in Kenya

From the interviews conducted, all participants agreed that media accountability to the public and professional stakeholders has been improving because of online audience feedback. With the advent of technology, many Kenyans have access to internet, hence it is easy to log on to the online platforms and interact with content online and demand for accountability from the media (Acharya, 2014). Because of; the corrections audience give on the errors made by the media, engagement with content that shows how audience feel about news stories and criticism that tell the media what they missed out, stories they need to focus more on, investigations they need to do, follow ups to work on, all these actions have made the media more aware of the online audience (Cheruiyot, 2015). Participants agreed the margin of error in news stories has gone down in recent years because of the increased interaction with new content on the online platforms. The media no longer wants to be part of a backlash; it does not want to lose its audience because of mistakes they could have easily taken care of through verification.

Online audience feedback has had great impact on journalism. Because of their vast knowledge of their surroundings, their interactive nature and how they decide to consume and engage with content, it has made the media more attentive to their demands (Miller & Philo, 2001). This study conforms to the findings by Mabweazara (2011) that indeed the onset of digital media, the internet age and social media are changing how online audiences in Kenya engage with news. They are more active, asking questions, seeking clarification and calling out the media for any unprofessionalism. Jericho (2012) terms them as the fifth estate whose work is to monitor mainstream media for inaccuracies and misreporting in the same way they keep government in check.

Participants noted that one of the ways through which the online audience hold them accountable is by calling them out when the media seems to be giving priority of some news over others. They said that the media has been called out a couple of times for highlighting some issues that are less important in society while focusing on others. In this, the participants noted that some of their media houses change tactics on how media coverage is done like in news bulletins. One of the respondents noted that they at times change order of bulletins and others what appears on the front page. They at times focus less on politics and more on human interest stories when the audience calls them out online. They also want to remain relevant by covering issues that are relevant by listening to what the audience is saying on the online platforms.

In a bid to ensure accountability, some media houses have also developed new policies in their respective organization. The BBC for example has accountability as one of its editorial policies and to ensure this, accountability reports on how complaints

from audiences are handled are supposed to be filed. Other organizations like NMG and Standard Group have set up digital departments which have dedicated staff that sift through feedback to determine what is actionable or not and giving procedure for sourcing, doing interviews and packaging stories.

Online has also made media more accountable through calls for verification of facts before publishing. In curbing this, some media houses like BBC Africa and Standard Group have set up Fact Finding desks that will be use to cross check stories before publishing. Some of the journalists interviewed noted how they have become more cautious when looking for information and fact finding.

The media in Kenya has been under a lot of pressure from the audience who are constantly questioning the values and ethics that they stand for. Audiences believe that the media should always act in their interest by being accurate, free, fair and objective (Obuya, 2019). Just like Vos, Craft and Ashley (2011) argument on the impact of audience expectations of journalists that amount to accountability, interviewees acknowledged that media accountability is a result of professionalism by individual journalists as well as continuous and uncompromising focus on quality by everyone involved in the news life-cycle which includes the audience.

While seeking to conform to audiences viewing and reading habits and demand for quality work, the interviewees noted that the media must now strive to produce deeper content, one that resonates with the audiences, produce more compelling stories that drives change and sets the agenda for the Kenyan demographic.

5.2.2 Media takes issue with nature of feedback being posted.

Contrary to arguments made by Carey (1974), participants felt that feedback made by audience does not articulate journalistic values. Journalists agreed that feedback was harsh, insulting, and personal and was at times harmful to their characters. This type of feedback participants noted was one of the main causes as to why some journalists shy away from engaging with their audiences online. To some extent news editors have also noted how these types of comments have an impact on how some journalists do their work. Participants noted how these types of feedback interfere with their journalistic professionalism, making them afraid to handle issues like politics that make them targets to audiences who use such opportunities to attack their families and characters. Here is what they had to say.

We are all humans. You cannot isolate yourself from what is happening. When you are hammered once or twice, thrice, it affects how you do your job, you get scared. I don't go. I am insecure, I doubt myself. I do not want people reminding me that I am short. I fear. That is because of the experience I have had because of the stories I write.

Participants also noted that such feedback is mostly posted under pseudonyms. This type of feedback was not actionable; objective based on personal feelings rather than facts and did not help in improving the profession. The participants noted that with this type of feedback, it is hard to know who one is engaging with therefore most of the media houses do not act on such feedback. For some media houses like Nation Media Group, this was one of the main reasons they shut down the comment sections on some of their online platforms.

Because of this type of feedback journalists pointed out the need to protect journalists and to keep them from audiences, who are out to trash, tarnish and destroy

the characters of specific individuals. Participants noted the impacts that such feedback has on their work and day to day life. Some are scared to engage with audiences.

Some organizations like the BBC have however put in place measures that protect its journalists from online attacks from the audience. In tackling online abuse against BBC staff, the organization has provided a platform onto which staff can report any form of abuse leveraged against them, the organization then follows it up. The BBC Information Security provides guidance and support for staff who wish to act.

5.2.3 Political stories elicited for more accountability calls compared to other genres

This study found out that media was called out mostly when covering political stories. Such stories elicited more emotions and interaction compared to other genres. Interviewees noted that people paid close attention on how media covered political issues, how stories were framed, how headlines were written, how facts were relayed and how analysis in politics was done. Also, it was from these stories that more subjective feedback came from because audiences who were mostly affiliated to political parties reacted on their emotions rather than facts. Interviewees explained that audiences engaged mostly with stories of power and corruption and calls for them to answer for how they covered stories came mostly from such stories. Respondents said:

There is no such bullying in sports it is more on political stuff. If you did a good human-interest story the audience is fantastic, they start a hashtag to provide more information and more follow ups. The feedback is very nice. They can engineer change. There is life on social media in health stories but not in politics.

Media however says, in such subjective feedback where the audience expects media to respond to their claims, such feedback is put aside because of issues of morality, fact checking, balance and objectivity.

Hirst and Patching (2000) pointed out that it is hard for the media to be accountable to its audiences when there are competing factors like political stories taking centre stage. From the interviews, the researcher also found out that while audiences took interest in how political stories were covered, they also did not like it when the media dwelt so much on politics and ignoring other societal issues. The interviewees noted that at times the audience called them out online because there were too many political stories published online, when there were up to five top stories on politics when there are issues like health and big stories on sports that the media could have highlighted. Like William Babcock (2014) states, when interests compete the public takes priority when it comes to choosing who they ought to answer to. In this case, interviewees noted that advertiser and political parties take back seat. As a result of this, editors noted that they respond by changing tact in the publishing of stories.

They change the priority they give to political stories and focus on features. For some media houses Royal Media Services, on some days especially weekends, they focus strictly on feature stories, highlighting other issues like health and cultural taboos and do away with any political story. For some running orders of stories are changed to accommodate other stories. However, they pointed out that political stories are important and have to be told as the media strives to hold people in power to account.

One of the respondents said:

Every so often I see we are very keen to see what people are saying on social media because it affects and informs what we say on social media. Sometimes you here our viewers telling us our bulletin is too hard it has too many political interviews we need to soften it we need to tell human interest stories. You will see all kinds of reactions and sometimes we deliberately decided part one of the bulletin will have no political story. We will have social stories very many human-interest stories and we gauge how our viewers react on social media.

Another responded said:

Sometimes they will demand certain things that you can't implement. For example, if they say no, I don't want to see political stories, because we are tired of politicians that are one facet of our viewers who are saying that they are tired of political stories on social media. But on the other end these political leaders have their support base and we owe it to their supporters to tell them who was where, doing what with who and why. So, it a fair balance.

5.2.4 Drivers of Media Accountability in Kenya

The online platform has enabled audiences to give feedback on news stories demanding in-depth new analysis and productions, better packaging of news stories, better choice of photos, they make corrections, raise concerns over misreporting and unreported issues and poor conduct by journalists (Mabweazara, 2011). This study found out that because of the vibrant audience found on these online platforms, media is able to leverage on the feedback to better itself.

Media knows it might not necessarily get everything right so they use feedback to check on gaps. Most of the journalists have social media accounts on which they monitor mentions and engagement to their stories. From these conversations, they gauge on how best they did their stories, facts they missed and how best to carry their stories forward. They respond to questions, participate in discussions on issues the audience this requires better analysis and understanding. By doing these, journalists believe helps make them more accountable to the audience compare to muting comments or not being available on social media for fear of being scrutinized, which in turn does not inform them of how their stories performed and what improvements they can make because then, they do not answer to anyone. (Singer 2005).

For those journalists that have no social media presence, they rely on fellow employees in their organization's digital departments to give them feedback from

audiences online which they use to gauge performance of their stories and what to act on. Interviewees noted that technology and the internet have by far changed how they view audiences. They are careful not to lose their audience trust and, in some case, they turn to the audience for answers on questions they have.

True to the words of interests (Fengler, 2012; McQuail, 2005; Ward & Wasserman, 2012), Digital accessibility has enabled the audience to participate more in making media accountable through the monitoring and critiquing of whether media productions follow ethical standards and journalistic values, and whether it honours audience

5.3 Summary of Key Findings

The findings suggest that media agrees that constructive criticism and corrections work to improve the profession and eventually hold media accountable. Accountability practices in Kenya media sphere have improved. Online audience feedback points media to journalistic weaknesses which interviewees agreed when worked on, makes their productions better. The objective call outs lead to actions on the part of the media that is tantamount to them being accountable to the profession and to the audiences.

This study established that online audiences through objective feedback have made the media keener in their productions to ensure that what is published meets the threshold of standard journalism. The media is more aware of the environment they operate in and it is doing it with caution and lots of consideration for the audience who have high expectations from the media. Despite their perceptions of the nature of feedback on social media that is intended on making them accountable, the media notes

that audiences need to be knowledgeable of news processes and at the same time understand the pressure to get accurate, balanced and fair. Like Bertrand (2000), notes in his research, the push by audience to make the media more accountable in Kenya has made them strive to improve their services, to be better and stand out from the competition while they work to protect their image and prestige in the eyes of the public.

Like Deuze (2016) notes, online audiences in Kenya are no longer simply reading and watching what is given to them by the media; they are increasingly engaging and becoming an important part of the production process themselves. The internet has enabled them become agents of journalistic accountability by raising legitimate concerns in news stories, filling gaps, pointing biasness and errors. Such criticism and correction, interviewees noted holds the media to account.

The study also agrees with (Newman and Nielsen, 2015; Hachten and Scotton, 2012) that indeed online audiences are more interactive and involved in journalistic processes. Frank Biocca (1999) outlined five characteristics of an active audience which from this study is similar for the active audience in Kenya. First, they are selective on the type of media and content they consume. Based on their knowledge and understanding of a given phenomenon, audiences in Kenya select what content to consume and on which platforms they prefer depending on what need they intent to satisfy from it. Secondly, they are utilitarian in nature.

They are always quick to point out errors made by the media using threads, social call outs, and hashtags and mobilized mentions to call out a media house for mistakes. Thirdly they are intentional in whatever type of feedback they give to the media while demanding for action to be made and adherence to professionalism.

Fourthly, they are impervious while refusing to let the media become the sole agenda setters when they feel there are bigger issues to be focused on. This they do by engaging the media in conversations on what could be discussed more in interviews, what should take precedence in news, giving leads and tips to stories they think should be highlighted. Lastly, they are involved in media production processes through engagement, corrections and criticism in a bid to hold media accountable.

Unlike (Fengler et al., 2014) states in his work, media accountability in Kenya is seen as an acknowledgement of mistake made and some sort of a promise for a better work in future. But this only works when feedback is objective and has basis to it. From the findings of the study, journalists in Kenya though against the way comments are made, are always willing to own up to mistakes, make corrections, clarify rather than ‘tweef’ and engage with online audiences in altercations. Therefore, as McQuail (2003) notes that media now has to win the trust of the audience therefore accountability is unavoidable.

5.4 Conclusion

The rate at which the online audience comments and shares media content online helps journalists become more accountable to the public. This is made possible by ensuring that the media takes responsibility for what they publish, correcting errors promptly, and focusing and reporting on issues that matters to the public, making products that make it easy for the audiences to engage with them and being professional.

The study findings show that indeed the active online audience plays a role in ensuring media accountability through corrections, engagement and criticism. The development in technology has enabled the audience to become a greater part of media

production closely following coverage of events on live streams on social media, following hashtags and conversations in the comment section.

The internet has given a platform to a very active audience that is constantly fact checking to assist journalists in their efforts to remain accountable in the digital news age. For the media, there is no room for mistakes. They have to answer to the audience and ensure they remain credible and become the media house the audience can trust for information and still remain relevant.

The Kenyan media houses have long enjoyed the monopoly of being the agenda setters and the watchdogs of society, but the active audience is changing this status quo by asking questions and spearheading conversations online on how they want things covered, why and when the media should cover and the media is paying attention to this.

The study also showed that trolls did not deter journalists from doing their work, in fact, it made them curious to know what audiences are saying about their stories and pick up follow up and new tips from the comments. For journalists, it showed them that audiences were engaging with their content; the only thing they would strive is to get their facts and sources right, grammar and balance to their stories.

5.5 Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions, this study makes the following recommendations:

- i. For the media to develop and adopt policies or mechanisms that will ensure more responsiveness to audience feedback to enable better filtering of objective feedback that is useful for journalism (Domingo, 2008; Hermida, 2011;

Kammer, 2013). This was because the study noted that some organizations had their comment sections blocked from audience feedback because of the nature of feedback which was mostly subjective, not actionable and tedious to filter for the objective and actionable ones.

- ii. For the media to address issues of the welfare and safety of journalists who are trolled by audiences to ensure it does not negatively affect their work and morale and so that journalists who shy away from online platforms for fear of being trolled or bullied to enjoy the benefits of objective audience feedback that seeks to help improve the profession.
- iii. For more media literacy on the public to understand journalistic values and way of doing things. This will help the audience know how to give constructive feedback that will be useful for the profession. Marzolf (1991) posits that for proper and meaningful criticism, the audience has to understand how media works.

5.6 Suggestions for further study

The study has shown that while the audience feedback is justified, and leads to more media accountability, some are uncalled for and unrealistic. The study found that feedback can be an intrusive on the personal lives of journalists. This is done by audiences who post about personal lives of journalists, attacking their families and in turn driving them away from social media. In some instances, interviewees noted that journalists have had to be protected in safe houses, away from audience who track them down to attack them. Based on these findings, further studies can be done to look into the mental health of journalists in the face of negative criticism online and how it impacts their work and even personal lives.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A NYS II Synopsis

National Youth Service Scandal II famously known as NYS II is the second corruption scandal in Kenya's Ministry of Devolution that saw the country lose over 10 billion shillings. The scandal was unearthed in May 2018 and the alleged people at the centre of the scandal were government officials, banks and private citizens. When the story broke, there were a number of stories that were published by the media to try and decipher what happened and who exactly were involved, how much was stolen and which transactions were made. There was however an outcry from online audience on twitter and Facebook on how the four main media houses in Kenya namely Nation Media Group, Standard Group, Royal Media Services and Radio Africa covered this story from naming of suspects to analysis and investigations done on the stories.

Appendix B BBC Africa Eye Night Runners Synopsis

In May 7, 2019, BBC published a story on the 'Night Runners' which read: The people of rural Kenya have spoken of the night runners for generations. They're said to be villagers possessed by a demonic spirit which compels them to scare and terrorise their neighbours at night. But no-one really knows who the night runners are or what motivates them. For BBC Africa Eye, reporter Tom Odula investigates the enigma of the night runners, shining fresh light on the reality behind the myths, and revealing exclusive footage of night runners in action.

The story however caused uproar from audience who accused BBC Africa Eye of stage-management and misleading the public in the findings of their story.

Appendix C Document Review Guide

Story Headline	Meet the night Runners – BBC Africa	Ann Ngirita, the air supplier to NYS who pocketed Sh59m – Nation Media Group	PS Omollo reveals how Uhuru kin pushed for NYS payments – Standard Group	Unmasking Ngirita - Royal Media Group	Banks will face charges for handling lost NYS money, says DPP – Radio Africa
Date published	May 3, 2019	May 24, 2018	June 16, 2018	June 25, 2018	June 28, 2018
Source/Platform	Twitter	Twitter	Twitter	Facebook	Facebook
Readers opinion/ Errors pointed out comments	Stage-managing Inaccurate reporting Manipulation of facts.	Insufficient information Poor analysis No facts Bias	No facts Bias Insufficient information Appreciative	Insufficient information Poor analysis Bias	Issue focused
Objectivity	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES
Subjectivity	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
Acknowledgement of mistake	Clarification of production	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Appendix D Interview Guide

Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a study designed to find out how online audiences feedback leads to certain decisions that are tantamount to media being accountable. About 15 journalists (digital editors, reporters, news editors, editorial managers and online sub editors) will take part. The study will be used to give further understanding of the evolution of audiences, help learning institutions improve knowledge of aspiring journalists to better understand audiences and improve accountability and professionalism in the media industry.

This research is in partial fulfilment of the Master of Arts in Digital Journalism course I'm undertaking at the Aga Khan University Graduate School of Media and Communication Studies.

Your response will be confidential.

QUESTIONS

REPORTER(S)

1. Have you or your media house been a victim of backlash/trolls/tweetstorm on social media over an article you posted? Tell me about the article and what the conversation was all about.
2. Describe your response/ feeling/ attitude after the feedback that came after your story was published.
3. Did that experience have an impact on how you do your stories today? How?
4. What was the impact of that feedback, did it lead to anything, and did it change a thing?
5. What is your opinion on audience criticism of media content, has the internet given them too much power to probe journalists?

6. Do you monitor audience feedback on stories you do? How do you produce your content while keeping into account the nature of audiences that are on social media today?
7. What do you think about the latest participatory technologies like social media with regards to holding media organizations to account?
8. What is your opinion on the role of audiences in holding the media accountable? What are the potentials and pitfalls?

DIGITAL EDITOR(S)

1. Do you monitor audience feedback on stories you do, why?
2. On which platforms do you monitor feedback?
3. What do you do with feedback?
4. Does the feedback influence how you do other stories?
5. Do you think feedback improves journalistic practice, how?
6. How do you categorize audience feedback?

7. How do you handle trolls/tweetstorms, do they have an impact on your productions?

8. How do audiences' feedbacks impact editorial decisions for online content?

9. What are some of the aspects that trigger audience criticism online?

10. Do you encourage audience feedback, how?

11. What is your opinion on audience criticism of media content, has the internet given them too much power to probe journalists?

12. Do you think audiences have increasing control over content, does it interfere with journalistic independence and other values, explain?

Appendix E Ethics Review Committee Approval Letter



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Media and Communications

REF: AKU-GSMC/ERC/2019/002

Date: October 30, 2019.

Dear Anne Okumu (Student No. 535167)

**RE: MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY: THE ROLE OF ONLINE AUDIENCE AS MEDIA
WATCHDOGS IN THE DIGITAL ERA**

This is to inform you that Aga Khan University – Graduate School of Media and Communications Ethics Review Committee has reviewed and approved your above research proposal. Your approval period November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020 and your application's approval number is AKU-GSMC/ERC/2019/001.

This approval is subject to compliance with the following under the supervision of your two supervisors:

1. Only the approved documents including the informed consent form and the data collection instruments will be used.
2. Any changes, made on the approved documents, that may increase the risks of affect the welfare or safety of the participants or compromise the integrity of the study must be reported to GSMC within the shortest time possible. The amended documents will be taken through a fresh review and the due process of approval.
3. In the event that the research cannot be completed within the one year approved period, the researcher will request for renewal of approval 30 days prior to the approval period.
4. The researcher will be required to submit a comprehensive progress report when applying renewal of approval.
5. Submission of an executive summary report to the GSMC's Ethics Review Committee within 90 days of completion of the study.
6. Produce all the data collected using the approved tools as and when required by the Ethics Review Committee within the 90 days of completion of your study.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be required to obtain a research permit from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). The process is and you can access the application portal from the website on <https://www.nacosti.go.ke/>.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Dr Nancy Booker
Director- Academic Affairs
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

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