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THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

**ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE CASE OF
GRAPHIC IMAGES IN KENYAN PRINT AND ONLINE NEWSPAPERS**

By

**PATRICK GATHARA
535153**

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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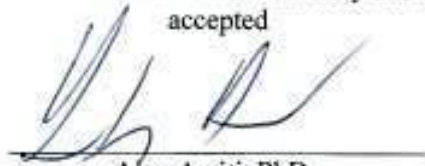
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APPROVAL PAGE


The Aga Khan University
Graduate School of Media and Communications

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
PATRICK GATHARA-535153 found it satisfactory and recommended that it be
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30/01/2020

DECLARATION PAGE

I, **PATRICK GATHARA-535153**, 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 wife Catherine, and to my parents, Davidson and Jane.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I am grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Rhonda Breit and Dr. Erneo Nyamboga, whose scholarly advice, help and constant encouragement have contributed significantly to the completion of this study. I wish to thank my Thesis Committee members for their critical input for my study. I also wish to thank the management, staff, faculty members, and my fellow students for their invaluable input and for being a great source of support to me during my study. I am also appreciative of the invaluable advice of Hesbon Owilla, Dr. Sam Kamau and Dr. Wambui Wamunyu. My gratitude to the library staff as well as for their support. I would also like to thank Catherine, Ashley and Alex, but for whose sacrifice, encouragement, support and perseverance, this thesis would never have been written.

ABSTRACT

This study examined how the online environment has influenced ethical decision-making in Kenyan print and online newspapers with regard to graphic images. A review of the literature showed scant academic attention has been paid to the role ethics play in the selection of images for publication despite acknowledgement of the increasing power and cultural diversity of audiences. The theoretical framework of the study was based on Gatekeeping Theory and Spiral of Silence Theory. Through in-depth interviews with senior editors and a review of internal and external guidelines and policies, the research revealed that audience demands for ethical decisions from editors are transmitted mainly through the corporate hierarchy. However, media houses have developed few effective internal systems to guide newsroom decision-making, relying mostly on vague prescriptions buried in editorial policies and ethics codes, which in practice are rarely consulted by newsroom decision makers. Further, the systems developed for the cycle of print production, including scheduled editorial meetings and the use of photo editors to filter images, have proven to be inadequate for the fast-paced world of online news production. The research also revealed that when confronted with graphic images, editors' resort to their own intuition and experience as well as consultations with colleagues rather than on methodical ethical reasoning. This creates geographical and cultural blind spots which, when coupled with the internet's expansion, diversification and empowerment of audiences, as well as the lagging development of a media ethics for the digital age, can have potentially serious adverse consequences for editors and the media enterprises themselves. Recommendations from the study include training of editors in the use of methods such as the Potter Box model of reasoning in day-to-day decision-making as well as the development of practical procedures for fast sourcing and selection of images for online publication especially as relates to breaking news. The study also contributes to the literature on Network Gatekeeping Theory, suggesting the need to take into account the hierarchical nature of networks, and demonstrates how the Spiral of Silence Theory can also account for the effect of online audiences on newsroom decision-making. Finally, the study emphasizes the role of ethical decision-making in image selections and recommends that news values research takes more cognizance of ethical considerations.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- MCK:** Media Council of Kenya
- CCPJ:** Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism
- NMG:** Nation Media Group
- SMG:** Standard Media Group
- RMG:** Royal Media Group
- NYT:** New York Times
- NGT:** Network Gatekeeping Theory
- NACOSTI:** National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation