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Ethical decision-making in the digital age: the case of graphic images in Kenyan print and online newspapers

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

By

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535153

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

Nairobi / Kenya.

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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

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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.
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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.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE ..................................................................................................... iii
DECLARATION PAGE ................................................................................................ iv
DEDICATION ............................................................................................................... v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................... vi
ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................. vii
LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................... xi
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS .................................................................... xii
CHAPTER ONE ............................................................................................................ 1
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ..................................... 1
  1.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 Background to the Study ...................................................................................... 2
    1.2.1 Newspapers and the Digital Environment ............................................... 3
    1.2.2 Images of Death and Dying in the News ................................................. 5
    1.2.3 Effect of the Internet on Ethical Decision-Making .................................. 6
    1.2.4 Ethical Controversies ............................................................................... 7
    1.2.5 Graphic Images in Kenya Media ............................................................. 9
  1.3 Problem Statement ............................................................................................. 11
  1.4 Research Purpose ............................................................................................... 12
  1.5 Research Objectives ........................................................................................... 12
  1.6 Research Questions ............................................................................................ 13
  1.7 Rationale of the Study ........................................................................................ 13
  1.8 Significance of the Study ................................................................................... 14
  1.9 Assumptions of the Study .................................................................................. 15
  1.10 Limitations and Delimitations .......................................................................... 15
  1.11 Scope of the Study ............................................................................................ 16
  1.12 Operational Definition of Terms ...................................................................... 16
  1.13 Summary .......................................................................................................... 17
CHAPTER TWO ......................................................................................................... 18
LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................. 18
  2.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 18
  2.2 Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................... 19
    2.2.1 Media Ethics .......................................................................................... 19
    2.2.2 Gatekeeping Theory ............................................................................... 22
    2.2.3 Network Gatekeeping Theory ................................................................ 23
    2.2.3 Ethics and Gatekeeping .......................................................................... 25
2.2.4 Ethics as News Values ................................................................. 26
2.2.5 News Values in Images .............................................................. 28
2.2.6 Spiral of Silence ......................................................................... 29
2.3 Conceptual Framework ................................................................. 30
2.4 Moral Reasoning and Ethical Behaviour ......................................... 33
2.5 Ethics and Graphic Images ............................................................. 34
2.6 Audience Influence on News Selection .......................................... 37
2.7 Impact of Audiences in the Digital Age .......................................... 38
2.8 Decision-Making in the Newsroom ................................................ 40
2.9 Culture and Media Representations of Death ................................. 41
2.10 Africa Media Ethics .................................................................... 43
2.11 Death Images in Kenyan Media .................................................... 46
2.12 Summary .................................................................................... 51

CHAPTER THREE ................................................................................. 53

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 53
3.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 53
3.2 Research Approach ....................................................................... 54
3.3 Research Design ........................................................................... 54
3.4 Population .................................................................................... 55
3.5 Target population ......................................................................... 55
3.6 Sampling ..................................................................................... 56
3.7 Data Collection ............................................................................. 57
3.8 Data Analysis ............................................................................... 58
3.9 Validity ....................................................................................... 59
3.10 Ethical Considerations ................................................................. 60

CHAPTER FOUR .................................................................................. 62
DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION .................. 62
4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 62
4.2 Data Analysis, Presentation, and Interpretation ............................... 63
4.2.1 Theme: Editors largely rely on their own discretion as there is no standardized definition in the various documents meant to guide them in decision-making ............................................. 63
4.2.2 Theme: What makes an image potentially disturbing is a function of both the content of the image and the context in which it was taken. .................... 64
4.2.3 Theme: Editors used graphic images for their shock value .......... 66
4.2.4 Theme: Media house systems were better suited to print rather than online news processing .......................................................... 67
4.2.5 Theme: Editors do not employ methodical reasoning processes when resolving ethical dilemmas ................................................................. 68

4.2.6 Theme: Kenyan editors do not feel they have ethical obligations to non-Kenyan online audiences ...................................................................................... 72

4.2.7 Theme: Online audience effects are channeled through the corporate hierarchy ............................................................................................................... 73

4.2.8 Theme: Editors believed the internet had both positive and negative effects on ethical behavior ................................................................................... 75

4.2.9 Theme: Flagging by online platforms is standardizing media ethics online ................................................................................................................. 76

4.3 Summary of themes and patterns ........................................................................ 76

CHAPTER FIVE ......................................................................................................... 80
DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .......................... 80

5.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................ 80

5.2 Discussions of Key Findings .............................................................................. 80
  5.2.1 What is a Graphic Image? ...................................................................... 80
  5.2.2 Ethical Considerations in the Publication of Graphic Images ............... 81
  5.2.3 Ethical Reasoning and Decision-Making ............................................... 85
  5.2.4 Impact of Online Audiences ........................................................... 86
  5.2.5 Media Ethics in the Internet Age ........................................................ 89

5.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 90

5.4 Recommendations .............................................................................................. 91

5.5 Areas for Further Research................................................................................. 91

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................ 93

APPENDICES ........................................................................................................... 105
  Appendix A List of Accredited News Processors ............................................. 105
  Appendix B The Star Newsroom Personnel ..................................................... 106
  Appendix C List of Participants ........................................................................ 107
  Appendix D Interview Guide ............................................................................ 108
  Appendix E Coding Sheet.................................................................................. 111
  Appendix F NACOSTI Research License ........................................................ 112
  Appendix G Ethics Review Committee Approval Letter ................................. 113
  Appendix H Introductory Letter from AKU ..................................................... 114
  Appendix I Informed Consent Form ................................................................ 115
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual Model ................................................................. 32
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