



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

eCommons@AKU

---

Theses & Dissertations

---

5-2021

## The impact of data smog on editorial processes: an assessment of journalists' coverage of Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya

Anita Chepkoech Tesot Ms

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.aku.edu/theses\\_dissertations](https://ecommons.aku.edu/theses_dissertations)



Part of the [Health Communication Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

---

**THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY**  
**Graduate School of Media and Communications**

**THE IMPACT OF DATA SMOG ON EDITORIAL PROCESSES: AN  
ASSESSMENT OF JOURNALISTS' COVERAGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN  
KENYA**

By

ANITA CHEPKOECH TESOT  
543397

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

Nairobi, Kenya

May, 2021  
© Copyright

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2021, Anita Chepkoech Tesot

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  
ANITA CHEPKOECH TESOT-543397 find it satisfactory and recommended that  
it be accepted.

---

Alex Awiti, PhD.,  
1st Supervisor

---

Joseph Nyanoti, PhD.,  
2nd Supervisor

---

Nancy Booker, PhD.,  
Director, Academic Affairs

---

Member,  
Thesis Evaluation Committee

May, 2021

## DECLARATION

### **THE IMPACT OF DATA SMOG ON EDITORIAL PROCESSES: AN ASSESSMENT OF JOURNALIST'S COVERAGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KENYA**

I, **ANITA CHEPKOECH TESOT-543397**, 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 research endeavours.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anita Chepkoech Tesot', is written over a horizontal line.

Signature

May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Date

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents Mr. and Mrs. Magdalene and Richard Tesot, my brothers, and sisters for encouraging me to push on and conclude my project despite hard times. God bless you.

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of data smog on editorial processes with a focus on how journalists' coverage of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya) was impacted by the avalanche of data against the backdrop of misinformation and disinformation. The study was guided by three objectives: (1) to assess the impact of data smog on the sourcing of Covid-9 stories, (2) to examine how journalists covering Covid-19 cope with data smog, and (3) to assess the extent to which data smog impacted the quality of Covid-19 coverage in Kenyan media. The study used two related theoretical frameworks: The gatekeeping theory and the networked gatekeeping theory. Through both theories, the study examined how the data smog affected the selection, placement and quality of stories in the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study adopted qualitative research approach. The target population of the study was journalists and media houses registered by the Media Council of Kenya. The researcher used purposive sampling technique and arrived at a sample size of 15 journalists from five media houses; Nation Media Group, Standard Group, Royal Media Services, MediaMax Network, and Radio Africa. The interviews were conducted on phone. The study established that due to data smog, journalists faced difficulties sieving information while covering Covid-19 and were overwhelmed by the avalanche of data. Journalists therefore adopted some coping mechanisms like ignoring questionable sources and limiting the amount of information for quantity. The study concluded that data smog negatively affected the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemics in Kenya and consequently lowered the quality of stories. It recommended that newsrooms invest in information processing resources and retrain journalists to handle data smog. For further research, the study suggested that investigations be done into how data smog affected the editorial processes in distributed newsrooms.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Let me take this opportunity to thank the wonderful and supportive fraternity of the Aga Khan University – Graduate School of Media and Communications (AKU-GSMC), without whom, this project would not have been possible. My special appreciations go to Dr. Alex Awiti, Dr. Joseph Nyanoti, and Mr. Hesbon Owilla who passionately guided me from the proposal stage through to conclusion of this thesis. Their dedication and rigor are exceptional. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to AKU-GSMC staff members, more so, Mr. Henry Kibira, who volunteered his time and challenged me to put more effort in every stage to make this project a success. I won't forget to thank my family members for their great support and understanding my long absence from home.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |      |
|--|------|
| APPROVAL PAGE .....  | III  |
| DECLARATION .....  | IV   |
| DEDICATION .....   | V    |
| ABSTRACT .....   | VI   |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....   | VII  |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS .....  | VIII |
| LIST OF TABLES .....   | X    |
| ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS .....   | XI   |
| CHAPTER ONE .....  | 1    |
| INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY .....                                     | 1    |
| 1.1 INTRODUCTION .....   | 1    |
| 1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY .....  | 2    |
| 1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM .....   | 5    |
| 1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY .....  | 7    |
| 1.4.1 <i>Specific Objectives</i> .....   | 7    |
| 1.4.2 <i>Research Questions</i> .....  | 7    |
| 1.5 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY .....   | 7    |
| 1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .....  | 8    |
| 1.7 SCOPE OF THE STUDY .....   | 9    |
| 1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY .....   | 9    |
| 1.9 OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS .....  | 10   |
| 1.10 SUMMARY .....   | 11   |
| CHAPTER TWO .....  | 12   |
| LITERATURE REVIEW .....  | 12   |
| 2.1 INTRODUCTION .....   | 12   |
| 2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....  | 12   |
| 2.2.1 <i>The Gatekeeping Theory</i> .....  | 12   |
| 2.2.1.1 Editorial Processes .....  | 14   |
| 2.2.1.2 Criticism on the Gatekeeping Theory .....                                  | 15   |
| 2.2.2 <i>Networked Gate-Keeping Theory</i> .....                                   | 16   |
| 2.3 GENERAL AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                  | 19   |
| 2.3.1 <i>Data Smog in Journalism</i> .....   | 19   |
| 2.3.2 <i>Data Smog and Coverage of Covid-19</i> .....                              | 20   |
| 2.3.3 <i>Debunking Infodemics (Myths, Misinformation and Disinformation)</i> ..... | 26   |
| 2.3.4 <i>Scientific Inconsistencies</i> .....                                      | 28   |
| 2.3.5 <i>Role of Social Media in the Coverage of Covid-19 Pandemic</i> .....       | 30   |
| 2.4 SUMMARY .....  | 33   |
| CHAPTER THREE .....  | 34   |
| RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....   | 34   |
| 3.1 INTRODUCTION .....   | 34   |
| 3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN .....                                    | 34   |
| 3.3 POPULATION .....   | 35   |
| 3.4 TARGET POPULATION .....  | 36   |
| 3.5 STUDY SITE .....   | 36   |
| 3.6 SAMPLE SIZE .....  | 36   |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 3.7 SAMPLING PROCEDURES.....  | 36 |
| 3.8 RESEARCH METHOD .....   | 38 |
| 3.9 DATA GENERATION / COLLECTION TOOLS .....                        | 39 |
| 3.10 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE .....                                | 40 |
| 3.11 PRE-TESTING OF DATA GENERATION / COLLECTION TOOLS.....         | 40 |
| 3.12 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF RESEARCH TOOLS .....               | 41 |
| 3.13 DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION PLAN.....                       | 41 |
| 3.14 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....                                   | 42 |
| 3.15 SUMMARY .....  | 43 |
| CHAPTER FOUR.....   | 44 |
| DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION .....                | 44 |
| 4.1 INTRODUCTION.....   | 44 |
| 4.2 PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION .....                 | 44 |
| 4.2.1 <i>Response Rate and Demographic Results</i> .....            | 44 |
| 4.2.2 <i>Presentation of Findings</i> .....                         | 44 |
| 4.2.2.1 Research Objective 1 .....                                  | 44 |
| 4.2.2.2 Research Objective 2 .....                                  | 51 |
| 4.2.2.3 Research Objective 3 .....                                  | 54 |
| 4.2.3 <i>Key Informant Interview Analysis</i> .....                 | 58 |
| 4.3 SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS.....                                | 60 |
| 4.4 SUMMARY .....   | 64 |
| CHAPTER FIVE .....  | 65 |
| DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....                  | 65 |
| 5.1 INTRODUCTION.....   | 65 |
| 5.2 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS .....                                | 65 |
| 5.2.1 <i>Research Objective 1</i> .....                             | 65 |
| 5.2.2 <i>Research Objective 2</i> .....                             | 69 |
| 5.2.3 <i>Research Objective 3</i> .....                             | 72 |
| 5.2.4 <i>Link to the Theoretical Framework</i> .....                | 74 |
| 5.3 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE .....                   | 75 |
| 5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS .....   | 78 |
| 5.5 AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....                                 | 79 |
| REFERENCES .....  | 81 |
| APPENDICES .....  | 90 |
| APPENDIX A:        IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE.....                    | 90 |
| APPENDIX B:        KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE .....              | 92 |
| APPENDIX C:        RESEARCH TIMELINES.....                          | 94 |
| APPENDIX D:        BUDGET .....                                     | 95 |
| APPENDIX E:        AKU ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER..... | 96 |
| APPENDIX F:        INTRODUCTORY LETTER FROM AKU.....                | 97 |
| APPENDIX G:        NACOSTI RESEARCH LICENSE .....                   | 98 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Table 1: Number of health reporters and those who covered the COVID-19 pandemic...</i> | <i>38</i> |
| <i>Table 2: Number of health editors interviewed.....</i>                                 | <i>38</i> |

## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| <b>AFP:</b>      | Agence France-Presse  |
| <b>AKU-GSMC:</b> | Aga Khan University Graduate School of Media and Communications |
| <b>BBC:</b>      | British Broadcasting Corporation                                |
| <b>CA:</b>       | Communications Authority of Kenya                               |
| <b>CBS:</b>      | Columbia Broadcasting System                                    |
| <b>CDC:</b>      | Centre for Disease and Control                                  |
| <b>CGTN:</b>     | China Global Television Network                                 |
| <b>CNBC:</b>     | Consumer News and Business Channel                              |
| <b>CNN:</b>      | Cable News Network  |
| <b>COVID-19:</b> | Coronavirus Disease 2019  |
| <b>FDA:</b>      | Food and Drug Administration                                    |
| <b>GDP:</b>      | Gross Domestic Product  |
| <b>ICFJ:</b>     | International Center for Journalists                            |
| <b>KEMRI:</b>    | Kenya Medical Research Institute                                |
| <b>KII:</b>      | Key Informant Interview   |
| <b>MCK:</b>      | Media Council of Kenya  |
| <b>MoH:</b>      | Ministry of Health  |
| <b>NACOSTI:</b>  | National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation       |
| <b>NMG:</b>      | Nation Media Group  |

**RMS:** Royal Media Services

**SARS-Cov-2:** Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus

**SG:** Standard Group

**TRT:** Turkish Radio and Television

**TV:** Television

**UGC:** User Generated Content

**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

**UNICEF:** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

**US/USA:** United states of America

**WHO:** World Health Organisation