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

**FACT-CHECKING IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF  
HOW NEWSROOMS ADDRESS DISINFORMATION DURING BREAKING  
NEWS**

By

MARY.N. KULUNDU  
535190

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

Nairobi, Kenya

May, 2021  
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APPROVAL PAGE

The Aga Khan University  
Graduate School of Media and Communications

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment 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 MARY NYAMBURA KULUNDU-535190, find it satisfactory and recommend  
that it be accepted.

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May, 2021

## DECLARATION

### **FACT-CHECKING IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF HOW NEWSROOMS ADDRESS DISINFORMATION DURING BREAKING NEWS**

I, **Mary. N. Kulundu-535190**, 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.

---

Signature

---

Date

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved brother, the late Michael Muli Kulundu. Just as you always said, "We the Kulundus, work hard for our stuff". Yes, I gave it everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge the Aga Khan University – Graduate School of Media and Communications (AKU-GSMC) for according me the opportunity to study at one of the leading institutions in the region. If it were not for this opportunity this project would not have come to life. I am grateful to my supervisors, Dr. James Oranga and Dr. Rosalind Raddatz, whose dedication to see me succeed challenged me to the core. I am indebted to AKU-GSMC staff members Hesbon Owilla and Henry Kibira; who went beyond the call of duty to make this project successful. A special thank you to my treasured friends; Priscilla Kimaita, Millicent Kimaita, and Essie Akinyi, who prayed for me when I was on the outs with this project. To my father, Kennedy Mzee Kulundu, thank you for being my rock. To my mother, Agnes Ndinda Muli, thank you for urging me on and praying for me. Finally, this project would not have been possible without the cooperation of the participants who sacrificed their time to share invaluable insights.

## ABSTRACT

The role of the media is to inform its audience. This entails the supply of truthful and credible information. However, the traditional practices of ascertaining the truthfulness of news sources are now threatened by the rise of social media as a news source. The complexity arises from the fact that social media platforms lack an established means of confirming the credibility of both the source and the information. More so, the established procedures are randomly ignored in the event of breaking news, a time when the newsroom is time-bound and faces the highest risk of misinformation and disinformation. Subsequently, there are questions on the capacity of media outlets to consistently respond to the threat of misinformation and disinformation, which is an unmerited risk in the practice of journalism. While the literature reviewed in this study acknowledged that misinformation and disinformation are indeed a risk to the practice of journalism, the theory of Social Responsibility tasked the fourth Estate to always be truthful in the presentation of information regardless of the format adopted. At the same time the concept of ritualization and routinisation place it upon newsrooms to adhere to an established system of ensuring accuracy before publishing. Responding to this risk, this study adopted a qualitative approach, in the form of a multiple case study, involving three media houses operating in Kenya: two local and one international, to assess the capacity of newsrooms to counter misinformation and disinformation. Through in-depth interviews of 14 journalists selected purposively in these media organisations, this research evaluates the mechanisms of fact-checking and verification of news sources during breaking news. The study unearths the vulnerability of local newsrooms to misinformation and disinformation and presents the data using exploratory narrative as the themes emerge. The omission results from media's failure to adhere to rituals and routines put in place to ensure accuracy, lack of technology and training, limited human resource and the "online first policy" which allows the publishing of bits of information before comprehensive information is attained. Resultantly, the study calls for the institution of strict fact-checking and verification procedures and guidelines. Principally, media houses ought to ensure a process of ritualization and routinization, and must also enforce compulsory observance of newsroom protocol which are put in place to ensure the media remains socially responsible. Observance of all guidelines and protocols must be consistent, even in times when a newsroom faces relentless pressure to be the first to publish or break news. Further, this research recommends capacity building in media organizations by making appropriate investment in technology. Technology provides journalists with sound fact-checking and verification tools capable of discerning instances of misinformation online. Additionally, journalists require frequent training to inform them of new misinformation trends, improve their use of verification tools and equip them with relevant information to help them spot misinformation.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE .....	III
DECLARATION .....	IV
DEDICATION .....	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	VI
ABSTRACT .....	VII
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.....	1
1.3 Statement of the Problem.....	5
1.4 Objectives of the Study .....	7
1.4.1 Specific Objectives .....	7
1.4.2 Research Questions .....	8
1.5 Rationale of the Study.....	8
1.6 Significance of the Study .....	9
1.7 Scope of the Study .....	11
1.8 Limitations of the Study.....	11
1.9 Operational Definition of Terms.....	12
1.10 Summary .....	13
CHAPTER TWO .....	14
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Theoretical Framework.....	14
2.2.1 Social Responsibility Theory .....	15
2.2.1.1 The Concept of News Routines and Rituals .....	17
2.2.1.2 How the Theory and the Concept Relate .....	19
2.3 General and Empirical Literature Review .....	20
2.3.1 Breaking News in the Digital Era .....	20
2.3.2 Social Media as News Sources for Mainstream Media .....	22
2.3.3 Fact-Checking and Verification .....	26
2.3.4 Fact-Checking and Verification in the Digital Era .....	27
2.3.5 What are Newsrooms Doing to Cope?.....	30
2.3.6 The New York Times.....	31
2.3.7 The BBC .....	32
2.3.8 The Associated Press .....	32
2.3.9 Fact-Checking and Verification Initiatives .....	33
2.3.10 Dangers of Misinformation and Disinformation.....	35
2.4 Summary .....	37
CHAPTER THREE .....	38
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	38
3.1 Introduction.....	38
3.2 Research Approach and Research Design .....	38
3.3 Population .....	39
3.4 Target Population.....	40
3.5. Study Site .....	40
3.6. Sample Size.....	41

3.7 Sampling Procedures .....	42
3.8 Research Method .....	43
3.9 Data Collection Generation / Collection Tools.....	43
3.10 Data Collection Procedure .....	44
3.11 Pre – testing of Data Generation / Collection Tools .....	45
3.12 Validity and Reliability of Research Tools.....	45
3.13 Data Analysis and Presentation Plan .....	46
3.14 Ethical Considerations .....	46
3.15 Summary .....	47
CHAPTER FOUR.....	48
DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION .....	48
4.1 Introduction.....	48
4.2 Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation .....	48
4.2.1 Response Rate and Demographic Results.....	48
4.2.2 Key Informant Findings.....	49
4.2.2.1 Research Objective 1 .....	49
4.2.2.2 Research Objective 2 .....	63
4.2.2.3 Research Objective 3 .....	68
4.2.2.4 Research Objective 4 .....	72
4.3 Summary of Key Findings .....	77
4.7 Summary .....	79
CHAPTER FIVE .....	81
DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	81
5.1 Introduction.....	81
5.2. Discussion of Key Findings.....	81
5.2.1 Mechanisms Applied to Manage Misinformation and Disinformation .....	81
5.2.2 Implementation of Fact-Checking Mechanisms in Newsrooms .....	85
5.2.3 Capacity to Detect Misinformation and Disinformation .....	88
5.2.4 Challenges in Managing Misinformation and Disinformation .....	91
5.3 Conclusions.....	92
5.4 Recommendations and Implications for Practice .....	93
5.5 Areas for Further Research .....	96
REFERENCES .....	98
APPENDICES .....	105
Appendix A: Interview Guide.....	105
Appendix B: Ethics Review Committee Approval Letter .....	107
Appendix C: Introductory Letter from AKU .....	108
Appendix D: NACOSTI Research License .....	109

LIST OF TABLES

*Table 1: Sample Size* ..... 42

## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>ABC:</b>	American Broadcasting Company
<b>AFP:</b>	Agence France-Presse
<b>AP:</b>	Associated Press
<b>BBC:</b>	British Broadcasting Corporation
<b>CNN:</b>	Cable News Network
<b>DW:</b>	Deutsche Welle
<b>KIIs:</b>	Key Informant Interviews
<b>MCK:</b>	Media Council of Kenya
<b>NMG:</b>	Nation Media Group
<b>SG:</b>	Standard Group
<b>UGC:</b>	User Generated Content
<b>VOA:</b>	Voice of America