

Media Framing Of Student Protests: A Content Analysis of the Nation Newspapers, Kenya

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Abstract: Overwhelming evidence from all over the world shows that the media are the major influencers of opinion today. By the way they report an event they set the terms of debate and, in the process, they may have a negative or positive influence. The tone, frequency, depth and prominence given by the media towards a certain issue is believed to determine the reaction or the attitudes of the targeted audience towards it. This study examined the portrayal of students' protests in Kenya by the Nation Newspapers during the year 2008 when increased student protests raised a nationwide outcry. Contents of copies of the Nation Newspaper during the year were analysed to determine the tone, prominence and source of each story concerning student protests. The results showed that mentions of student protests were negative with 60% of the stories studied associating the protests with crime and indiscipline. Only 5% of the stories concerning student protests were published on the front page with the majority of the news sources being teachers (45%) and government officials (38%). Results of the research should offer stakeholders new insight into best ways to evaluate media information and hopefully find effective solutions to violent student protests.

Keywords: Content analysis, media framing, agenda setting, student protests, indiscipline.

1. INTRODUCTION

Media reporting can have a positive or negative influence on the audience perception of issues and events covered. By the way they report an event, they may redefine the issues and set the terms of debate. The framing theory explains the media's influence on society. It suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. Individuals usually believe the media and form opinions based on information received from media sources regardless of whether or not the information is factual. It is, therefore, important to understand the different ways the media frame important news information. According to Chyi and McCombs (2004), "the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event, consciously or unconsciously."

Following an outcry over increasing violent student protests in Kenya, many efforts were made to try to understand the causes, but none of them have looked at the way the media reports the protests as a possible contributory factor.

Acknowledging the seriousness of the problem of secondary school protests, in 2001, the Central Province Education Board (PEB 2001) prepared a report entitled, "Report on the Causes, Effects and Remedies of Indiscipline in Secondary Schools in Central Province." The report, prepared in the wake of violent student protests in Nyeri High School in 1999 where school prefects were killed after students set fire on them said, "It is a worrying trend where student unrest has evolved from simple protests to destruction of property and burning of prefects." (PEB 2002:5) In deed, within a space of one year, between 1999 and 2000, the report observed that there were more than 122 violent student protests in the province.

Similarly other organizations and groups issued warnings of disastrous consequences of the increase in violent student protests. Among these were teachers in Nairobi who said in a statement that protests threatened to paralyze learning in secondary schools. The Kenya Secondary School Heads Association said, “The trend is worrying as incidents of burning down school property and killings are now the preferred choice of many students in expressing their grievances.” (Daily Nation, March 31, 2009) In one month alone in 2008, 300 schools were closed due to violent protests.

But these were not the most serious or the only widespread violent student protests in Kenya. In fact, looked at from a historical context, secondary school protests almost emerged with Kenya’s independence from Britain in 1963. By 1974, student protests had increased to such proportions that the Kenyatta government issued a presidential decree banning student strikes and ordered a blackout on the protests in the media. That year alone, between March and September, there were 70 secondary schools on strike (Kinyanjui 1976). It was however the students riots at the Kyanguli Secondary School in Machakos who on the night of March 25/26, 2001, shocked the country when they set fire on a school dormitory killing 67 of their colleagues who were sleeping in the dormitory.

The grievance and pain of those directly affected by these protests was best captured by Hussein Dado, District Commissioner in Machakos during the Kyanguli Secondary School dormitory burning tragedy and one of those involved in the rescue effort: “These are memories I would like to forget but I cannot... The terrible sight of burning flesh, seeing children burning and there was nothing I could do about it!” (Ndetei, 2002). It is true to say that most Kenyans look upon secondary schools with fear, apprehension, concern, bewilderment and despair. At any time, violent protests can erupt, with deadly consequences.

In his study on the psychological effects of the Kyanguli Secondary School tragedy quoted above, Prof. Ndetei (2002) decries the lack of effort to establish the causes of student protests. “We have operated on assumptions which is most unfortunate. These assumptions have been mainly emotive and in the process, we continue to repeat the same wrongful assumptions.”

There have been many researches trying to establish the cause of student protests, Typical of these researches is the study entitled, “School Strikes: The Art of Blaming the Victim”. In the study, (Kinyanjui 1975) examined “the attitudes and interpretations given to secondary school strikes by government officials particularly those in the Ministry of Education.”

The researcher examined the views on the causes of student protests expressed by the ministry officials and the general public as reported and published in the Daily Nation and the Standard newspapers and pointed out the biases that he blamed for the increase in violent student strike. “The publicity given to these schools (that went on strike) however, gave the impression that the situation in Kenyan schools was out of control” (Kinyanjui 1976). Kinyanjui’s study is of a particular interest because its concern is with media reporting on the same topic as in this study, but it differs in that it does not use frames as the basis of his analysis.

Using the framing theory, this study analysed the content of stories on students’ protests carried in the Nation Newspapers during the year 2008 when an increase in student protests led to a nationwide outcry in Kenya. The purpose was to determine the story source and type, frames used and page placement of each mention of student protests.

Objectives of the Study:

Specifically, the study aims:

- a) To establish the tone of the stories used by the Nation Newspapers to present information concerning student protests.
- b) To determine prominence given to reports on student protests.
- c) To determine the sources of the stories.

Theoretical Frame Work:

To help the understanding of phenomena being studied, this research is anchored on media framing theory. The theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information. In this way the media may shift peoples’ attitudes and set the agenda. Entman (1993) explained that to frame a story is to “select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a

communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation". An increase in salience improves the probability that the audience will remember the information.

A key concept to the framing theory is the notion of "dominant meaning". "From a framing perspective, dominant meaning consists of the problem, causal, evaluative, and treatment interpretations with the highest probability of being noticed, processed, and accepted by the most people" (Entman, 1993). The tone, frequency, depth and prominence given by the media towards a certain issue is believed to determine the reaction or the thoughts of the targeted audience towards it. Media can influence the framework of the news either through choosing the news angle, choosing the sources to be used, headline expression, catchphrases, moral appeals, visual images, and other symbolic devices (Gamson, 1989).

II. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative content analysis was conducted for this study. Neunendorf, 2002 broadly summarized the three main uses of content analysis as (a) descriptive; (b) hypothesis testing and (c) facilitating inference. Berelson (1952) describes content analysis as a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication while Neuman (1997) describes it as: "A technique for gathering and analysing the content of text. The 'content' refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The 'text' is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication".

Content analysis is used to study a broad range of 'texts' that include, the editorial content of newspapers, magazines, social media and TV programs. For this study, the content of the Nation Newspapers that comprise the Daily Nation, Saturday Nation and Sunday Nation were studied and analysed to find out how the media portrays student protests in Kenya. The newspapers which are the largest in eastern Africa, was purposively selected based on its wide circulation and influence. Editions of the newspaper studied were those published in the period between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2008 when there was an unprecedented number of student strikes. The total number of editions published during the period were 366 which were accessed at the Nation Newspapers library and examined for the mentions of the student protests/strikes. A total of 306 mentions were found and were all analysed. The study was limited to secondary schools protests.

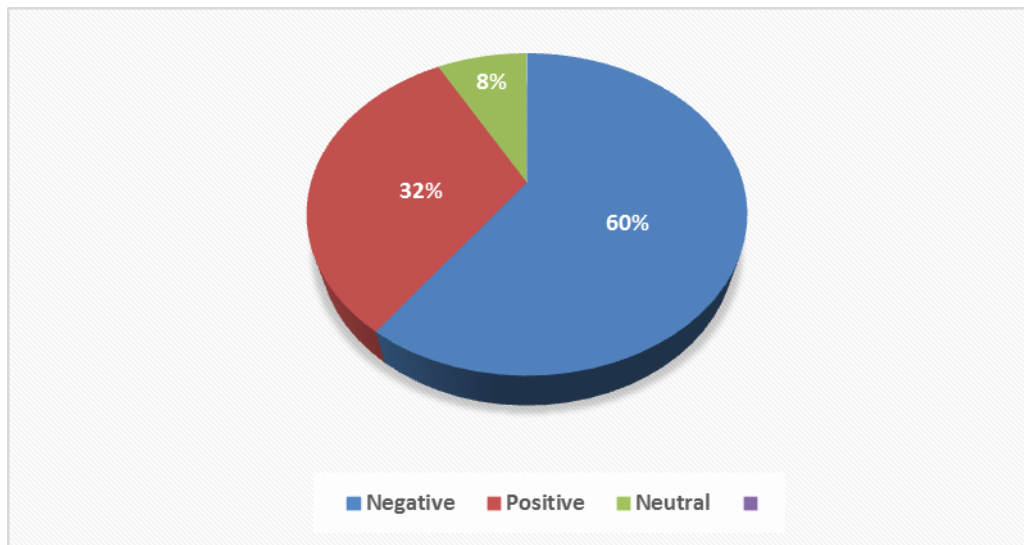
Unit of Analysis and Content Category:

- 1) Tone of the story
 - a) *negative* – those stories that blame the student by emphasising on damage done to schools, drugs, violence, devil worship, indiscipline etc.;
 - b) *Neutral* - emphasis on generation gap, socio-cultural turbulence, city influence, incitement etc.;
 - c) *Positive* – those stories that portray the students as having genuine grievances as indicated by an emphasis on lack of facilities, government/school administration policies, teacher transfers etc.
2. Prominence (story size, story type, placement e.g. inside, section front, front page).
3. Source of the story (whether government official, teachers, parents, students)

III. RESULTS

Introduction:

The analysing of data in this study is guided by the theory of framing. According to Entman (1993) media frame events and issues by selecting "an aspect of reality and making it more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment." The data was divided into three units of analysis - tone of the story, prominence and source of the story. Indicative words were developed for each unit. Results are set out below.

(1) Tone of mentions of student protests in Nation Newspapers:**Fig 1: Frequency of tone of mentions of student protests**

a) *Negative tone*: Indicative words selected for this unit of analysis were an emphasis on damage done to schools, drugs, violence, devil worship, poor upbringing, a lot of pocket money, calls to ignore student protests, admonishes for students not to waste their parents' money, crime and indiscipline. Results showed that 60% of the stories had a negative tone. The key word, "indiscipline" alone accounted for more than 50% of the indicative words used to characterise student protests. Surprisingly words indicative of crime alone accounted for 35% of the newspapers headlines while only 10% of the story text used the same indicative words. This could be because crime sells more newspapers than indiscipline because of greater audience interest (Vallenburg, Semetco and Vreese, 1999). Thus unlike in the normal practice of objectivity where headlines normally summarise the content of a story, Nation Newspapers made great deviation in its choice of headlines when reporting student protests.

b) *Neutral tone*: Indicative words were generation gap, socio-cultural turbulence, city influence and incitement or their equivalents. In the headlines, this frame was present in only 8% of the cases. This came to the researcher as surprise noting the frequency with which it is mentioned in ordinary conversation.

c) *Positive tone*: Positive tone is articulation of genuine student needs. Indicators of this frame were identified as an emphasis on lack of facilities, government/school administration policies, teacher transfers and their equivalents. The results were as follows: 32% of the headlines emphasized this frame, while 33% of the story text emphasized the frame. Government and school administration policies were specifically mentioned in 27% of the cases while inadequacy of facilities and poor diet were mentioned in 6% of the cases.

(2) Prominence:

Prominence refers to the importance attached to the story by the editor as indicated by placement, spread and size of headline and the story length. In analysing prominence, we are trying to understand the editorial decisions that may have preceded a story placement in the newspapers, its spread and headline. In deciding where and how a story is placed in the newspaper, the editor is not just thinking about appearance, he is signalling to the readers the importance he or she attaches to the story (Gorp, 2007). Editorial decision is also reflected in the categorisation of stories into news, editorial and features. Editorial is the editors – and therefore the newspapers – voice. It signals to the reader the importance the editor attached to the issues or events discussed. Our findings in this regard are shown in Table 1 below.

TABLE1: TYPE OF STORIES USED BY NATION NEWSPAPERS ON STUDENT PROTESTS

Story type	Percentages
News	71%
Editorial	6.3%
Features	22.7%

This indicated the general lack of interest in student protests. Over the period of a year of great intensity of violent student protests, it attracted only 6.3% of editorial space. When a topic is “editorialized”, it means that the newspaper gave extra importance.

Other ways of estimating the importance attached to an event or issue by a newspaper is by looking at the space allocated to the stories concerning the issues or events. The smaller the space, the less important the newspaper considers the topic. In the case of Nation Newspapers, there was a fair amount of space given to the issue of student protests. The average length of the stories was 300 words (about 60%) with a fair amount reaching 800 words. This may be so because a fair amount of the stories 22.7% fell under the features category which are normally long.

But there was a marked difference when it came to story placement. The editor sends an important message by simply deciding where a story is placed in the newspaper. In the Daily Nation, in deed, as in every newspaper in the world, important stories of the day are placed in the front page. The back page is the second most important page with the inside pages being less important. Our finding on this variable was as shown in Table 2 below:

TABLE 2: PLACEMENT OF STORIES ON STUDENT PROTESTS BY DAILY NATION

Placement	Percentage
Placed on front page	5%
Placed on back page	0%
Placed on inside pages	95%

If it is remembered that this was a year that many secondary schools staged protests, many of them resulting in deaths, burning of dormitories and other acts of violence, it is surprising that most of the student protest stories were relegated to inside pages. And even within the inside pages, only 24% were the lead stories within the pages. It would seem there was an effort to underplay the student protests or purely to exercise self-censorship in the belief that greater exposure would lead to more school protests (Kinyanjui, 1974).

Source of the story:

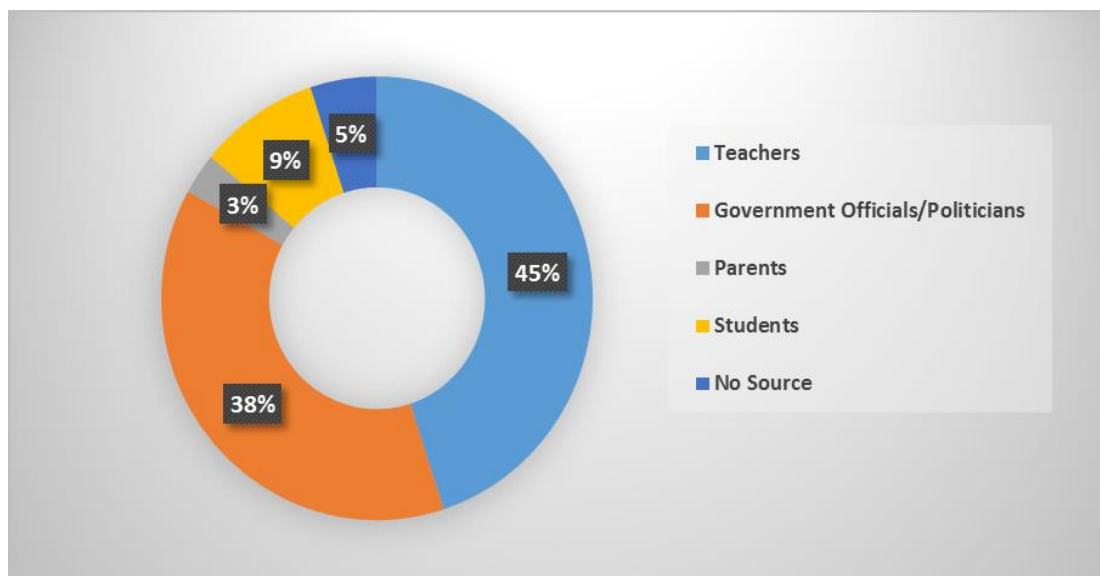


Fig. 2 Percentage of spokespersons quoted by daily nation in stories on student protests

Whoever is quoted about a particular issue within a news story has increased impact on how the issue is portrayed to the public. In the case of the Daily Nation this is really the most glaring framing method used. In stories about student protest, the obvious source of information would be expected to be the students. They are the ones with grievances. But this obvious source of information is ignored in most cases by the Daily Nation. The results of the question: “Who are the main source of the story?” are shown in fig 2 above.

More than 45% of the sources quoted are teachers. It is interesting that the politician/government official is included as a source authority accounting for 38%. Contrast that with parents as source authorities. Parents were quoted in only less than 3% of the stories although, by virtue of being the fathers and mothers of the students, they are more likely to be familiar with the issues at hand. Like their parents, students are rarely asked for their views by the Nation Newspapers. Only 9% of the stories studied had a student as the quoted source.

IV. DISCUSSION

Summary of major findings:

Based on the data we analysed, it is quite clear that the Nation Newspapers stories on student protests are negative towards the students.

Tone of mentions of student protests in Nation Newspapers:

In the Nation Newspapers, the indicative word, “indiscipline” alone accounted for more than 50% of the mentions. Results showed that 60% of the stories emphasized crime. In contrast only 32% of the stories analysis could be classified as positive or sympathetic to the student protests. Only 6% emphasised lack of facilities in schools. This could have been either because the newspapers were anxious to sell copies or because of the “dominant meaning” where news people are reacting to audience expectations (Vallenburg, Semetco and Vreese, 1999 , Entman, 1993).

Prominence:

A variety of indicators were developed to measure the importance the Nation Newspapers attached to student protests. The results were quite mixed. In terms of placement, 95% of the stories analysed were not given prominence because they were placed on the inside pages. The newspaper allocated editorial column space to only 6.3% of student protest stories analysed. This is in line with the findings on the tone of stories as shown above. Seen from the average length of the stories, the picture would however appear different. The average length of the stories was 300 words. But this finding could have been influenced by the fair number of stories classified as features which are normally long.

Source of the story:

The findings of the study show that the Nation Newspapers rely more on government officials and teachers when writing stories on student strikes. Nearly a half (45%) of the story sources are teachers followed by politicians/government officials (38%). Students and parents are the least quoted as sources of the newspaper stories on student protests. While students may avoid press statements for fear of being victimised, that does not account for the small number of parents, who are or should be, in most cases, more familiar with the issues involved in student protests.

Future research:

This research looked only at the frames used by Nation newspapers when reporting student protests. Further research may be needed to establish frames used by other media platforms. Media framing of stories and events is important because of the power of the media to influence public and individual attitudes on the issues and events they report about. That may influence decisions made regarding the issues and events. In the case of student protests, it may affect the search for solutions and even escalate the problem. But the influence can only be inferred. Further research is needed to establish the relationship between newspaper reporting and solutions being suggested.

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