

# The Nature of Media Reportage on Terrorism in Mandera County

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**Abstract:- Acts of terrorism by their nature easily lend themselves to extensive media coverage. The media is no doubt at the heart of this issue. The use of words and imagery intended to create fear and promote violence or terrorists' ideologies is considered in many states and jurisdictions as unethical among the media fraternity. The objective of this study was to examine the nature of media reportage on terrorism in Mandera County. The study concluded that terrorism reports were aired mostly in radio stations which were the most preferred media category. These reports were aired in form of news, editorial analyses, interviews, expert commentaries and listener engagement calls. The source of information for the media being journalists' own observation and judgment led to media reportage portraying terrorists as heroes and being strong. Media reportage consequently encouraged more terrorist attacks. There is need to equip the journalists with skills on reportage of news on Terrorism.**

**Keywords:-** *Terrorism, Media, Al-Shabaab, Media Framing.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has emerged as a threat to world peace beginning the 21<sup>st</sup> century into the current world setting. Terrorists do not discriminate their targets like the military or the police do. They (terrorists) kill innocent unarmed civilians, women, children and the disabled people with no regard to their right to life as envisaged in the various countries laws and constitutions. Terrorism aims not only to frighten, but also to exacerbate and polarize. According to Nacos (1994), one of the scholars that has studied terrorism over time, terrorists commit violent acts looking for three universal objectives: to get attention, to gain recognition, and even in order to obtain a certain degree of respect and legitimacy. These objectives are attainable for those individuals that are capable of receiving the most media coverage. And those that obtain it have more opportunities to influence others.

The media are attracted by extreme terrorist acts not only because it is their duty to report on any major event but also because the dramatic and spectacular aspect of terrorism fascinates the general public. Journalists, studies have shown (Fursich, 2010), tend to favor stories that resonate with their audiences due to their perceived cultural background, especially when such reports are about unexpected and dramatic events. Acts of terrorism by their nature easily lend themselves to extensive media coverage.

The media has a responsibility to inform, educate, and entertain among other responsibilities. However, all these should be done with responsibility. The media are implicated in the dissemination of information about acts of terrorism even in distant places 'because most people only experience terrorism through mass-media accounts' (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Presenting terrorism in a manner that clearly rejects violence, demystifies assassins and emphasizes victims' personal tragedies is an essential resource in any type of multi-faceted strategy that combats terror. However, the problem arises when media controlled by certain ideological, cultural or religious conniving begins to look for a fictitious balance between murderers and victims; when the "causes" of certain terrorist groups are justified against others; or when a story is treated in such a way that it gives the viewer the impression that terrorist groups are political participants that deserve certain legitimacy in the competition for power.

It is important also to note that, terrorism thrives in publicity. Media, both local and international give a lot of coverage to terror activities carried out by terrorist groups. Media provides them with a lot of coverage and even sometimes revealing future intentions of fighting troops. Both local and international media have played to the gallery of terror groups with regard to how they report terror activities in Kenya in general and Mandera County in particular. The objective of this paper therefore was to examine the nature of media reportage on terrorism in Mandera County.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The coverage of terrorism by two mainstream papers in Kenya, Daily Nation and the Standard for the period April 2014, showed that there was a general tendency to cover the acts “positively” while government’s counter-terrorism interventions received lukewarm or negative response altogether. Maina (2014) notes that this “negative” tone and “issue framing” by the media reinforced the terrorist’s objectives of spreading fear and enhancing propaganda, which inevitably undermined government’s ability to counter the Al-Shabaab as envisaged. Terrorists commit the kinds of violent acts that will attract media attention (Paletz & Schmid, 1992). Another way of saying this is that terrorists’ actions are often determined by their newsworthiness. Three factors are important in this connection. One of these factors is the degree of violence, which can be measured in the number or status of the victims. The more people hurt, the more interesting the action will be for journalists.

Television news bulletins are focused mainly on what is known as “visual culture.” The attention that a given news event receives is directly proportional to the amount of audiovisual material available for it. Many news bulletins are extremely adverse to covering and presenting a story using only narrative of audio components. The availability or lack of audiovisual material becomes a determining factor when choosing which stories will be included in the broadcast and which ones will be excluded.

This trait of mass media has repercussions on the planning of any possible attack. As a result, terrorists look to attack those places that given their location or their significance will attract the immediate attention of the media. This, in turn, provides a sufficient quantity of images that will guarantee one’s presence on the news. Following this logic, the example of the September 11, 2001, attacks were sufficiently visual to meet the demands of the TV culture and to satisfy the public fascination for live coverage of events.

Maina (2014) evaluated how The Standard Newspapers and Daily Nation reported on *Operation Usalama Watch* in April 2014. He observes that, in the Daily Nation, majority of Al-Shabaab broadcasts were in the form of news items which accounted for 71%, briefs 19%, editorial 7%, caricature 1%, features 1% and pictorial 1% while The Standard had 79% as news, 13% as briefs, 4% as editorials, 3% as features, and 1% for pictorial and caricatures. Having most of the broadcasts presented in the news format guaranteed that the news items were incessantly and repeatedly projected on the media thence drawing a lot of attention to the terrorism phenomenon. The newspapers reported the news with intent to relay the events to the public; however this also gave the terrorists’ groups a lot of publicity (Kiarie and Mogambi, 2017).

Kisang (2014) while undertaking a study on the coverage of two investigative documentaries by two local television stations, KTN and NTV, he observed that the two

stations continued to replicate and project the Al-Shabaab messages to the audiences, and often quoted verbatim, or replayed terrorists video messages, which were in the first instance subject of investigations, or in some cases had resulted in targeted attacks against Christians in Kenya. A newspaper could take days to reach Mandera. Flights never existed until recently (Business Daily, 2019). The residents could only get information through radio being the cheapest means of accessing information. The media from the sources broadcasts in Somali language. Some radios broadcast from our neighbouring country – Somalia. Some disgruntled people use these radios to propagate propaganda and incitement against government. This has led to youths and old people in Mandera getting radicalized to support and sympathize with terrorists.

Take an example of the terrorist act of the kidnapping of the Cuba Doctors in April 2019 (Business Daily, 2019). The media was awash with sensational news trying to portray the security forces in a negative way that they are not doing much in averting terrorist activities in Mandera County, let alone rescuing the captured medics. The matter of fact is that security agencies make frantic efforts to defeat terrorist activities in the County. In fact there have been numerous terror threats which have been thwarted by security agencies.

Blaisse (1992) argues that as a journalist, one has a clear and sole responsibility on the way they report their findings from their sources or eye witness accounts. Many a times, the topic of discussion or thematic analyses may not be the dangerous ones but rather the tone which is adopted by presenters or discussants as well as the style in which the messages were broadcasted or passed over unto the audience.

Authors Barnett and Reynolds were of the opinion that to a certain degree, the manner in which the United States of America media framed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 was a dedicated effort to carry out a significant level of retaliation on the terrorists (Spencer, 2012). The press intensely published the pronouncements of political leaders who were proposing a military action as well as the concerted efforts of ordinary Americans demanding for retaliatory attacks. The frame is expressed through the choice of speakers their placement, their hierarchy, the selection or rejection of subjects and images. It can also be projected in the use of certain epithets and words or phrases.

In the last four years, terrorism in Kenya has become a constant news item served by the Kenyan media. This heavy and widespread coverage of terrorism activities by the Kenyan media on the constant terror attacks not only highlighted terrorism as a salient issue but also led to the creation of a perception that the security in Kenya was weak and the country’s security Agencies were not in full control. For instance; days before USA President Barrack Obama’s visit to Kenya in July 2015, the American international media channel, CNN, described Kenya as a ‘hotbed of terrorism’ (Kiarie and Mogambi, 2017). This

caused uproar amongst the Kenyan populace, who expressed their disappointment on CNN's framing of Kenya by creating a hashtag on Twitter, *#someonetellCNN*. This saw the Kenyan Interior Cabinet Secretary Joseph Nkaissery tell journalists that the broadcast was based on lies and demonstrated heightened irresponsibility by the media network and smacks of arrogance (*Daily Nation*, 2015).

In the past, various groups in Kenya have questioned and expressed dissatisfaction in the way the media reports on terrorism. Interestingly, in 2014, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), expressed dissatisfaction with the conduct of the media. A 2014 report by MCK states that in coverage of Westgate attack, the media did not adhere to some basic journalistic principles and front for harmony in the society (Media Council of Kenya (MCK) and International Media Support (IMS), 2016). They looked at some statements adopted from some TV clips which were played out to the public. In particular, NTV was condemned for using word-for-word comments from some people suspected or known to be Al-Shabaab members without selecting parts of the messages which would not create fear among the public.

As much as it is important for the media to be the first to release an information, it is of same importance to collect as much detail as possible and, if there is great media interest for that information, keep it alive as long as possible. That is another example in which media and terrorists have the same interests: after a story has been created, both media and terrorists are equally interested in having it last as long as possible. Also, the greater the drama of some event, the longer the reporting about it will hold the audience attention, which is also in the interest of both media and terrorists.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a descriptive research design. Descriptive research is directed at making careful observations and detailed documentation of a phenomenon of interest. These observations must be based on the scientific method and therefore, are more reliable (Anol, 2012). The study was carried out in Mandera County. Mandera County is located in the former North Eastern Province of Kenya. Its capital and largest town is Mandera. The county has a population of about 867,457 (2019 census) and an area of 25,797.7 km<sup>2</sup>.

Virtually every successful terror attacks in the country, particularly the most severe ones have had a link to Mandera as an access point through which terrorists have entered Kenya. Marked rise of radical preaching from these Islamists in Mandera County has been noted through the use of radios which a number of people use to get information. Some of these radios are hosted inside Somalia (Mandera County official magazine, 2018).

The study population included both residents and non-residents in Mandera County. The target population constituted Mandera County Officials, the NPS personnel,

KDF personnel, media personnel (both local and international media representatives in Mandera County), NIS personnel as well as officials from NGOs, FBOs and CBOs. Simple random sampling was used to obtain respondents from within the general population of Mandera County. Purposive sampling was used to obtain key informants from the population of officials from Mandera County Government, the NPS personnel in Mandera County, KDF personnel, local and international media representatives in Mandera County, NIS personnel and officials from NGOs, FBOs as well as CBOs within Mandera County. A sample size of 384 was calculated using a formula proposed by Fisher (1996) as illustrated below:

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

The study used mix method technique in data collection where both primary and secondary data were collected. The research instruments for primary data collection were questionnaires while secondary data was obtained by use of key informant interviews and FGDs. The interview schedule, FGDs and questionnaires were developed with special focus on achieving the research objective. Questionnaires with both closed and open ended questions were used in this study. The interviews conducted in this study were key informant interviews where the respondents were selected purposively. Information from key informants was obtained through inquiry and recorded by researchers. Structured interviews were performed by use of open interviews; the researcher taking notes while talking with respondents.

To ensure validity and reliability of the research instruments, the researcher conducted a pilot study in the following places: Elwak, Lafey, Fino and Omar Jillo prior to the actual data collection. All resulting discrepancies were corrected to ensure that the results remain the same as if the research was to be repeated under similar circumstances. The study also made use of the supervisors and MMUST Research Experts who ensured that the research instruments were valid and reliable.

The researcher used mixed (qualitative and quantitative) approaches of data analysis to provide the researcher with an ideal method needed for descriptive explanation. Quantitative data underwent the process of data management. Thereafter, the data was coded and entered into a computer software program- Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Qualitative data was analyzed using summary sheet by compiling specific phrases and key words used by respondents in description of scenarios to represent themes. The researcher used short abbreviations as descriptive codes to label data, usually a comment from key informants, under an appropriate category such as numeric codes are organized around relevant ideas, concepts, questions, or themes. Similarities and differences were sorted out then merged into larger categories then further into sub-themes. The results were presented in form of tables, charts and graphs.

#### IV. RESULTS

The focus of this study was media reportage and as such, the study first sought to establish the types of media that were accessible to the participants and the people of Mandera County. It was noted that 69% (195) of the respondents cited both local and international media as accessible, 22% (63) cited local media as accessible while 9% (26) cited international media as accessible in Mandera County. A total of 205 respondents (72%) noted that they preferred radio, 42 (15%) preferred televisions, 34 (12%) preferred newspapers while 3 (1%) preferred online tabloids. The researcher noted that there was a high preference for radio among the people of Mandera County due to the fact that radios are easy and cheap to acquire, there is high network reception of radio stations unlike other media types and the presence of radio stations that broadcast in the local dialect that is well understood by the people. Most of the media broadcasts in Somali language. Some radios broadcast from the neighboring countries – Somalia and Ethiopia.

The study established that terrorism reports were aired most in radio as compared to televisions, newspapers and online tabloids. As such, radio was cited by 166 respondents (58%), television was cited by 46 respondents (16%) and newspapers were cited by 59 respondents (21%) while online tabloids were cited by 13 respondents (5%). These findings can be related to earlier findings of this study which noted that radio was the most preferred media category and hence, it would only be practical to have most terrorism reports being aired through that particular media category. On the other hand, key informants in the study noted that terrorism reports were almost equally spread across all the media categories. The study noted that all media categories were awash with terrorism reports.

The study established that most of the media platforms aired or broadcasted news about terror activities. A total of 205 respondents (72%) cited news, 40 respondents (14%) cited commentary and editorial analyses and 30 respondents (10%) cited interviews. 9 respondents (4%) who cited other types of reportage noted panel discussions, documentaries, investigative exposes and listener engagement talk shows. It therefore follows that media platforms presented their reports on terrorism in form of news, documentaries, expert analyses, interviews, investigative exposes and talk shows. In most of these presentations, topics of discussion revolved around analysis of terrorism, its causes and effects, recruitment through radicalization and violent extremism, dissection of propaganda audios, videos and press release from terrorists, terror acts among other topics.

From a cumulative analysis, the study established that journalists' own judgment and observation was the most prominent source of news and information for media reports on terrorism. This was as cited in 74% (211) of the cases analyzed. Government officials and agencies were the second most cited source being cited 191 times (67%). Foreign countries and agencies were cited 164 times (58%),

Non-Governmental Organisation experts were cited 101 times (36%), terrorists were cited 79 times (28%), hearsay, rumors and propaganda were cited 34 times (12%) while the opposition was cited 16 times (6%). Key informants in the study seemed to take divergent views on the source of news and information for the media on matters terrorism. While government administrators noted that they had adequate and reliable information to give to media houses, journalists protested that they were forced to use alternative sources which sometimes were unverified due to lack of cooperation on information access among government personnel.

From the data collected, the study established that most of the respondents were of the opinion that media reportage portrayed terrorists as being heroes. This was noted in 82% (234) of the respondents with 18% (50) noting that media reportage did not portray terrorists as being strong. Similar sentiments were echoed by the key informants in the study.

The study also established that most of the respondents were in disagreement that media reportage portrayed terrorists as fighting for people's rights. This was noted in 76% (215) with 24% (69) being in agreement that media reportage portrayed terrorists as fighting for people's rights. There was a resounding echo of these sentiments from the key informants in the study. They noted that terrorists did not fight for people's rights and that the media never portrayed them (the terrorists) to be doing so. It is important not to ignore the 24% who thought that the media tries to cast the terrorists as fighting for peoples' rights in Mandera County. While it is expected of the media to support the government's counterterrorism strategies, it is also possible that they could be casting terrorists as fighting for the rights of the people of Mandera County. The study established that media reportage encouraged more terror attacks. This was affirmed to by 89% of the respondents with 11% noting that media reportage did not encourage more terror attacks.

#### V. DISCUSSIONS

Radio was preferred among the people of Mandera County due to what the researcher noted as the fact that radios are easy and cheap to acquire, there is high frequency reception of radio stations unlike other media types and the presence of radio stations that broadcast in the local dialect that is well understood by the people. Some presenters take advantage of being able to speak to the masses in the local language by spreading propaganda and unverified reports. The Leadership in Mandera County further expressed frustration on the kind of media content presented by the media to the residents of Mandera County especially the radio content broadcasted in the local dialect. The radio broadcasts tend to portray government as unconcerned with the on goings in Mandera County as far as terrorism is concerned.

The news on terrorism in Mandera County contributes largely towards encouraging more terrorist activities in Mandera County. The tone and angle from which the news are presented tends to support the terrorist agenda. The gory images of terror presented on media platforms, the perceived just cause the terrorists want the populace to believe in tends to be reinforced. Since the media houses also need audiences, they invite well known analysts to the studios to explain terror activities. Some of these so called security experts end up spreading rumors and propaganda to the public through their analyses in the media. This has impacted negatively on counterterrorist strategies.

It is clear that news sources are very central in providing the right information to the general public. To be in a position to report the true and verifiable news, the media ought to verify the news on the ground with security agencies, the local population and the local County Administration. However, this to a great extent does not happen in Mandera County. The Journalists simply interview their sources and instead of taking time to verify the news, they just sit and write a story for publication. This kind of news can never be objective. It has witnessed before in the media journalists conducting investigative journalism which sometimes they never get varied opinion and verified information and they broadcast such stories. Without listening to all parties involved in the conflict then one is susceptible to publishing a one-sided story.

Terrorists as noted by English (2017) want their activities magnified by the media and since the media craves for news that sells, they fall for the trap of propelling the agenda of terrorists. Once an act of terrorism happens, the media produces numerous news broadcasts on the act of terror. The news takes the audience back to past acts of terror in the name of giving the act of terror context. This gives the terrorists mileage. The audience gets treated to unending news coverage sometimes live coverage for days.

The researcher also noted that despite some of the news being facts; there is a tendency of the terrorists gaining leverage from it to feel stronger and heroic. It was clear that media reportage paints a picture of terrorists who are strong and can easily out-manoeuvre the security apparatus in the region. The researcher noted that there were mixed feelings concerning media reportage portraying terrorists are fighting for the people's rights. Not ignoring the fact that the media have to an extent broadcasted messages that allude to terrorists fighting for the perceived "injustices" meted on the people of Mandera in this case, the researcher noted that in reality, media reportage did not directly broadcast of terrorist fighting for the rights of the people.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that both local and international media are accessible in Mandera County and that terrorism reports were aired mostly in radio stations which were the most preferred media category. These reports were aired in form of news, editorial analyses, interviews, expert commentaries and listener engagement calls. The source of information for the media being journalists' own observation and judgment led to media reportage portraying terrorists as heroes and being strong. Media reportage consequently encouraged more terrorist attacks.

## RECOMMENDATION

The study recommended that there is need for immediate and adequate training of journalists on reportage of terrorists' activities with core skills and areas being not limited to ethics, objectivity and accuracy in information gathering and reporting.

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