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THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

ONLINE AUDIENCES AND GATEKEEPING: USER COMMENTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON EDITORIAL PROCESSES IN NEWSROOMS IN KENYA

By

Beryl Anyango Oywer
553265

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

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 BERYL ANYANGO OYWER-553265, find it satisfactory and recommended that it be accepted.

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11/02/2022

DECLARATION

ONLINE AUDIENCES AND GATEKEEPING: USER COMMENTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON EDITORIAL PROCESSES IN NEWSROOMS IN KENYA

I, **BERYL ANYANGO OYWER-553265**, 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 Mr and Mrs Oywer, my siblings Christine, Austin, and Fred for their endless support and encouragement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge my family for the support they have given me. Sincere gratitude to my supervisors: Prof. Nancy Booker and Hesbon Owilla for their guidance in every step of the way to deliver a successful document.

ABSTRACT

There has been an ongoing debate in Kenyan newsrooms on whether or not to retain the comment section on news websites in the wake of Social Media Networks which allow the media to still get user feedback devoid of any liability of unregulated third-party comments. This study set to establish the role and influence user comments have on editorial processes as well as explain what value media houses that have retained the comment section are receiving. Using methodological triangulation, this study analysed the nature of user comments, how comments influence editorial processes and the value the three media houses with an active comment section are deriving. Phase I involved a content analysis where the data was coded and analysed quantitatively then presented using tables and pie charts. For phase II, a survey was done, and the data analysed with SPSS and presented using tables and pie charts while Phase III involved in depth interviews where data was thematically analysed. This multi-method approach exposed aspects of reality which were insightful. The results indicate that contrary to the perception that discussions in comment section on news websites are often marred by incivility, this study found that majority of the comments were deliberative in nature with audience members simply looking for a platform to lend their voice in a civil way. The study also found that in cases where there were reported incidences of incivility, the sources quoted were the main trigger. Journalists were found to be using user feedback through the comment section as a measure of the quality of content they churn out while media houses are using the audience insight to make strategic decisions. New roles have emerged, and media houses are increasingly interested in getting audience feedback as they shape how they generate new story ideas, topic selection and story placement on their news websites. In addition, media houses with active comment sections have defined parameters within which they can incorporate user feedback in their day-to-day editorial processes and maintain their gatekeeping mandate without compromising on the news values that dictate what is considered as news. The results shed light on how newsrooms may give the public a platform to discuss and give their input on the news and still maintain deliberative debates.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

ISP: Internet Service Provider

MCK: Media Council of Kenya

NMG: Nation Media Group

RAG: Radio Africa Group

SG: Standard Group

UGC: User Generated Content