Representing school arson in Kenya: An analysis of newspaper reporting

Hildah Oburu iD
Department of Psychology, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Bronwyné Coetzee and Leslie Swartz
Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Abstract

Arson is a recurrent problem in Kenyan secondary schools. Although school violence – notably gun violence – has received significant attention, there has been less academic attention paid to school arson, especially in Africa. This study explores how newspaper reports in Kenya framed school arson and links these framings to broader questions about the understanding and production of Kenyan identity. A thematic analysis of 334 newspaper reports revealed multiple understandings of school arson. Print media discourse afforded journalists an opportunity to make a commentary on the post-colonial globalized Kenyan society. We discuss the implications of this for understanding post-colonial media in Africa.

Keywords

Arson, Kenya, print media, school violence, social representations, thematic analysis

There have been many studies analyzing media coverage, and specifically newspaper reporting, of school violence, especially in the USA (Leavy and Maloney, 2009). Muschert and Carr (2006), in an analysis of American shootings, focused on frame analysis (Goffman, 1974: 11; Pan and Kosicki, 1993: 70) and found that the school shootings were framed differently at different stages of reporting. They found that the shootings were initially framed at the individual and community level, then framed based on implications for society, and, finally, the frame changed back to the community level (Muschert and Carr, 2006: 760). Wondemaghen (2014: 696), by contrast, demonstrated that school

Corresponding author:
Hildah Oburu, Department of Psychology, University of Nairobi, PO Box 30197-00100, Nairobi, Kenya.
Emails: hildahbo@outlook.com; oburu_hilda@uonbi.ac.ke

shootings, as reported in the media '. . .was framed as a gun problem rather than a socially or psychologically related crime'. Some authors have focused on the emotive aspects of reporting on school shootings. For example, Burns and Crawford (1999: 147) focused on the media's role in sparking a moral panic surrounding school shootings, and Kupchik and Bracy (2009: 136) focused on how news reports fueled fear and heightened the sense of threat of school violence.

Though there are many studies on newspaper reporting of school violence, these focus primarily on school shootings in North America. School arson in Kenya, however, is in fact significantly more common than school shootings in the USA. There are no studies on this phenomenon, hence the need for the current study.

A brief history of schools and school violence in Kenya

Kenya's education system is influenced by British colonization (Teferra and Altbach, 2004: 23). At the time of independence in 1963, the country inherited a system of education established to educate British administrators (Sifuna and Otiende, 2006: 212; Yakaboski and Nolan, 2011: 2) consisting of schools modeled on the British public school tradition (Oxlade, 1973: 6). The defining characteristics of the British public school were '. . .selectivity, independence and boarding' (Oxlade, 1973: 6). In a British public school, '. . .most students, especially those coming from distant towns and rural areas, were boarders' (Van Zanten, 2010: 330). The boarding school characteristic is '. . . an essentially English feature of education' (Oxlade, 1973: 13). However, it is a common feature of Kenyan secondary schools, and it is mostly these boarding schools that experience riots, strikes and school fires (Griffin, 1996: 1).

The first recorded case of student unrest in Kenya was reported in 1908 during the colonial period when students refused to participate in manual work (a protest against technical education), and instead asked for more reading and writing (Sifuna and Otiende, 2006: 195). There have been many incidents of student unrest coupled with violence since then, all since Kenya gained independence in 1963. In 1974, for instance, 70 secondary schools experienced student unrest. This upsurge led to a presidential decree banning strikes by workers and students (Kinyanjui, 1976: 1). However, there was a history behind these strikes. Between 1968 and 1974, the government had introduced a system of financing local community schools (*harambee* schools were originally funded by local community contributions and student fees) and admitting government sponsored students, but still retaining vacancies (*harambee* streams) for the local communities (Kinyanjui, 1976: 3). This system brought about tension between government-aided and non-government-aided students. The tension was one of the main causes of the unrest. In addition, the government-aided students felt the *harambee* schools were not as well equipped as the well-established elite schools, the boarding facilities were poor and they lacked adequate teaching staff (Kinyanjui, 1976: 4).

By the last decade of the 20th century, school unrest was characterized by excessive destruction of property and loss of life. In 1999, for instance, students set a prefects' cubicle on fire, leading to the death of the four prefects. It was reported that the prefects were unpopular and that the alleged perpetrators were acting in revenge (Achieng, 2001).

In 2001, there was a dormitory fire where more than 60 students perished. Two students aged 16 were the alleged perpetrators. Police investigations revealed the students were protesting bad food and accommodation, misappropriation of school funds and cancellation of the school's examination results due to cheating (*BBC News*, 2002).

Contextualizing school fires and reporting about them in Kenya

A landmark event in Kenyan history regarding child rights was the passing of the Children's Act in 2001. This Act is framed in terms very similar to the language of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations (UN), 1989) with its emphasis on child rights, including the protection of children from all forms of violence. Article 28 of the UN Convention specifically states that schools must be run in an orderly way without the use of violence. This, in effect, means that the use of corporal punishment is outlawed. As we shall show, the passing of this Act, predating as it did an upsurge in school arson in the country, was something of a watershed in Kenyan history, whereby established ideas about the subservient role of children and the need for physical punishments was replaced by this more cosmopolitan liberal view. This tension between a socially constructed 'international', liberal view of children and childhood and what can be seen as a more hierarchical African view to some extent parallels issues facing journalists in Kenya, and in Africa more broadly.

Between January and August 2016, news headlines such as 'Why are Kenyan schools being torched?' and 'Wave of Kenya school fires continues' (*BBC News*, 2016a, 2016b, respectively), 'Over 100 Kenyan schools burned in apparent arson attacks' (Yusuf, 2016 in *VOA News*) and 'How students planned and executed burning of dormitories' (*Daily Nation*, 3 July 2016) became common.

The severity, frequency and intensity of the school fires, now much more common and devastating than in the past, drew outrage and condemnation across Kenya. Consequently, there exists an ongoing debate globally on what caused such deliberate destruction of property. At the time of writing this article, top stories in the country-comprised headlines such as, 'Wave of unrest continues to rock Nyanza schools' (*Daily Nation*, 2018) and 'Two more Nyanza schools hit by dorm fires' (Gwengi, 2018 in *The Standard*).

Across Kenya, reports of the fires were disseminated in local newspapers. The reports contained perspectives of various stakeholders, including government officials, parents and teachers' unions. Further, local newspapers also printed public reactions to the reports, which are included in the data analyzed.

What predominated in the newspaper reports was the following: while all newspaper reports were referring to one phenomenon (the burning of secondary schools), diverse opinions were expressed in the reports and conclusions reached. Although it was a problem that had recurred over the past two decades and had even been a subject of three main government task force investigations, there was no consensus on the causes nor the best way of managing the problem. It was clear that different people understood the school fires crisis differently. This article focuses on the different understandings of school arson by applying social representations theory (Moscovici, 1984: 24).

Our analysis uses thematic analysis of newspaper articles from the two largest media houses in Kenya (_Daily Nation_ and _The Standard Digital_) to identify the different social representations of school arson in Kenyan print media. The analysis will help in gaining an understanding of the different social representations (Moscovici and Duveen, 2000) of school arson and pinpoint the dominant understandings.

Media language and framing

Framing involves selecting aspects of a perceived reality and highlighting them to promote particular interpretations (Entman, 1993: 52; Entman, 2007: 167). Media framing, therefore, influences what the readers notice and remember. This influence has also been referred to as media effects (Potter, 2012: 38). Wondemaghen (2014: 697) states that through framing, especially by including and excluding interpretations, the mass media have the power to direct audiences to those issues which are of concern and those which are not.

Newspapers can influence how the public debates an issue, thus influencing the social representations of a phenomenon. Bullock and Cubert (2002: 479) have noted that the choice of words in a newspaper article influences the public's understanding of an event. However, the understanding of an event may not be uniform due to the different interpretive schemas of the readers (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009: 18)

Methodology

The sample

We searched the archives of the two media houses (Standard Digital and the Nation Media Group) that dominate the print media market in Kenya in terms of circulation (Ogola, 2018: 80).[1] The articles were sourced both from the media house libraries and the more recent articles from their websites (www.standardmedia.co.ke and www.nation.co.ke, respectively). The key search terms used were 'school fires', 'school fire crisis', 'school unrest' and 'burning of schools'. Some of the articles were archived on old Polaroid films and were available as scanned copies.

The search yielded 334 newspaper articles (135 articles from the Standard Digital and 199 from the Nation Media Group) published between 2000 and 2018 on school violence/unrest in general, with emphasis on those that reported on arson incidents. The original number of articles was 413. However, some of the reports were about fires caused by electrical faults or due to unknown causes. The focus of this study is on fires that were a result of arson, and we therefore excluded 79 articles which alluded to fires caused by electrical faults or unknown causes. The articles included main headline stories, feature stories, commentaries and letters to the editor. The period of data collection was between June 2017 and April 2018. Table 1 below is a summary of the distribution of articles by year:

The newspaper articles were uploaded onto ATLAS.ti version 8 for coding. The documents were grouped according to year and media house.

Table 1. Tally of newspaper articles.

YEAR	Media	House	TOTAL
	Standard Digital	Nation Media Group	
2000	0	1	1
2001	0	19	19
2002	0	2	2
2003	0	4	4
2004	1	14	15
2005	0	3	3
2006	0	1	1
2007	0	2	2
2008	0	8	8
2009	0	3	3
2010	6	5	11
2011	1	0	1
2012	7	11	18
2013	2	3	5
2014	0	0	0
2015	2	9	11
2016	87	86	173
2017	26	26	52
2018	3	2	5
TOTAL	**135**	**199**	**334**

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the six stages of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012: 60–69). Thematic analysis is a method of systematically identifying, organizing and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set (Boyatzis, 1998: 4; Braun and Clarke, 2012: 57). Thematic analysis allows for the interrogation of data in many ways. It allows for obvious meanings to be reported, latent meanings to be interrogated and the assumptions and ideas that lie behind the data to be explicitly stated (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 58). Thematic analysis could also be modified to suit the needs of the study (Nowell et al., 2017: 2) and it was accessible (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 58).

Results

We identified four central themes in the newspaper reporting on the school fires:

1. School arson as a form of protest
2. Bad apples spoiling the barrel
3. A broken-down society
4. Consultation vs retribution

We present each of these in turn.

School arson as a form of protest

The most prominent theme mentioned in the newspaper articles was that of arson as a form of protest against various factors both inside and outside the schools. Reports spoke of generally poor conditions within the school environment, for example:

> We need to understand why children are only concentrating in burning dormitories and not administration blocks, laboratories and classrooms. There is an issue with boarding. (*Daily Nation*, 28 July 2016, citing the chairman of the head teachers' association)

> There are underlying causes such as poor diet and horrible conditions in dorms. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 27 July 2016)

Linked to this was a perception that educators were ineffective in terms of managing the school and effecting appropriate discipline, for example:

> In some schools, high handedness by teachers and punishment that is sometimes not commensurate with the offence are fertile grounds for resentment against school authorities. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 22 July 2016)

> They were protesting against alleged mismanagement of the school. (Staff writer, *Daily Nation*, 24 October 2001)

Pressure placed on students both by changes in school policies and practices and by the teachers' inability to adapt optimally to these changes was seen as another reason for protests:

> Head teachers have joined the Kenya national union of teachers in claiming that recent changes to the school calendar and the elimination of prayer and visiting day during the third term as causes of school fires. (*The Standard*, 28 July 2016)

> Noting that pressure to get grades maybe among factors causing students to raze down buildings in their institutions, the president advised parents and teachers not to exert excess emphasis on academic excellence. (*The Standard*, 30 July 2016)

> Teachers were also blamed for not covering the syllabus on time. The last-minute rush to cover topics before examinations put too much pressure on students, resulting in unrest. (*Daily Nation*, 10 February 2009, citing a ministry of education report)

These are key examples of a range of ways in which arson is viewed as a form of protest against unsatisfactory and, crucially, changing social conditions, an issue we shall return to in the discussion section below.

Bad apples spoiling the barrel

In contrast to the previous theme, which viewed arson as a response to school conditions, this theme located the reason for arson more clearly within what were perceived to be

bad students who commonly influenced others. Here the attributions are much more individualized and seen as the product of irrationality or questionable morality, leading to influence over the innocent:

Key suspect in school fire was indisciplined. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 6 September 2017)

We do not use massive resource to build schools only for some students to raze them down because of madness. (*Daily Nation*, 20 October 2010, citing the prime minister at the time)

The team looked at the possibility of drug and substance abuse and incitement and peer pressure. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 29 July 2016, citing a report of a meeting between the teachers' service commission and secondary school head teachers)

At least 10 of the suspects were admitted recently after being expelled from their previous schools for indiscipline. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 6 August 2012)

Male gender was also seen as a factor:

. . .in most cases, school unrest in Kenya occurs in either all-boys' schools or among male students in mixed institutions. Research across the globe has found that adolescent boys tend to report higher cases of externalised problem behaviour than girls. It is therefore not surprising that we have a major behaviour challenge among our male students. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 21 July 2016)

The type of school was also seen as a factor. The few student perpetrators seemed to be confined to specific schools:

Most affected are the former district schools, now called subcounty, which in percentage terms constituted 37.8 per cent of the reported cases, followed by the former provincial schools, now called extra-county at 31.1 per cent.

Only two national schools have reported strikes – Meru School and Chewoyet in West Pokot County. Notably, these are the recently upgraded national schools. None of the old 17 national schools have experienced riots, a testament to the fact that they are generally well endowed with resources and are reasonably managed effectively. (*Sunday Nation*, 24 July 2016, citing the findings of a government report)

This points to the existence of a stratified school system that seems to marginalize some learners. There is minimal likelihood of finding 'bad apples' in privileged schools because learners in these schools:

. . .are driven by the desire to succeed academically. Little wonder that we rarely, if ever, hear of riotous destruction of property at Alliance or Starehe [referring to two of the top privileged schools] (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 5 July 2016)

However, 'bad apples' who are unwilling to learn, and more likely to start school fires at the slightest provocation, are more likely to be found in the marginalized schools:

The students on the other end of the spectrum view education as an unnecessary burden foisted on them by their parents and teachers. Therefore, it does not take much to get them worked up. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 5 July 2016)

The perceived poor moral quality of 'bad apples' was often attributed to bad parenting:

. . .teachers accused parents of encouraging unrest by giving their children a lot of pocket money. (*Daily Nation*, 28 July 2004)

The bubble of many years of poor parenting has finally burst. As the government establishes the causes of this wave of school fires, parents should go back to the drawing board and find their fault in the upbringing of their children. (Letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 30 July 2016)

But parents shouldn't pretend to be completely shocked by their children's criminal activities, by the way. In several instances around the country, they themselves either burnt or destroyed school property while protesting against the administration. And they wonder where their offspring got their ideas! An apple does not fall far from the tree, you know. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 3 August 2016)

The quotes above implicitly speak to a perception that parenting has deteriorated along with changing social conditions in Kenya, which links to the next section's themes.

A broken-down society

Another overarching theme was the construction of school arson as a function of a broken-down modern society. The current society is contrasted with an idealized past African society (that is, post-independence and before the enactment of the Children's Act of 2001) in which authority figures such as teachers and parents were fully in charge and could rein in 'errant' children through the use of corporal punishment. According to media reports, school arson was also a result of politicians behaving irresponsibly and the media reporting irresponsibly by carrying reports that fueled the spread of school fires through contagion, as illustrated below:

Experts say erosion of social values and poor enforcement of school rules is [*sic*] largely to blame for the increased indiscipline in schools, alongside copycat attacks based on media reports. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 4 December 2003)

Last month, the violence in schools was blamed on children copying the violent and teargas-filled picketing by MPs against the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission. (Columnist, *Sunday Nation*, 24 July 2016)

So children watch. They observe that when adults, say, in the political space, do not get their way, they call demonstrations and generally become ungovernable. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 30 June 2016)

The culture of institutionalised impunity is the elephant in the room, as far as the recurring incidents of high school unrest is concerned. The students are following the examples of their

national leaders. In this country, notoriety is a status symbol. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 4 July 2016)

The authority of the teacher, for instance, was undermined by bad government policies aimed at protecting children at the expense of the teachers. One such policy is the ban on the use of corporal punishment:

Since the government banned corporal punishment cases of indiscipline have escalated leading to destruction of properties through fires. (*The Standard*, 5 July 2016, citing comments made by a senator)

As a result of the ban on the use of corporal punishment, the teachers were left at the mercy of the students who had no regard for the teachers' authority.

When the students realised how protected they are [*sic*] by the Education Act and the constitution, they developed an inflated ego, impunity and an urge to taunt their teachers. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 6 August 2016)

The ban on corporal punishment was considered alien and un-African, hence the increase in delinquent behaviour among learners:

Copying and pasting of policies from the so-called developed countries and adhering to international conventions disregarding our social and cultural context in the name of child rights is expensively unwise. (Letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 7 July 2016)

Contemporary technologies, and especially social media, were also seen as a cause of the arson:

On the other hand, the distractions of Facebook, Twitter and others can be overwhelming for impressionable young folks. Consequently, some students fall behind in their studies and will thus try to find the flimsiest of excuses to cause mayhem so as not to take exams. (*Daily Nation*, 5 July 2016)

The average boarder is, therefore, one who in all likelihood owns a mobile phone, is used to watching TV, listening to the radio and has access to the internet at home. Locking him up away from these technological platforms is like putting a carefree movie actor in a monastery. . .they will soon break free. (Columnist, *Saturday Nation*, 23 July 2016)

In the context of the image of a changing society, for which contemporary Kenyans are not prepared, some reports spoke of a gap between traditional forms of education and contemporary needs. This was at times related to skills deficits on the part of teachers and curricular issues:

Training of teachers also needs to factor in issues such as how to handle students and boarding school management. (*Saturday Nation*, 9 September 2017, report citing discussions held at a head teachers' meeting)

Curiously, the need for a review of the teaching curriculum has not been accorded the urgency it requires. It doesn't make sense to train 21st century teachers the same way teachers were trained decades ago. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 9 July 2016)

These issues are seen to be linked to broader social challenges:

Perhaps we have kept to the draconian and constraining systems for this generation of children to bear it. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 21 July 2016)

But then again, these young adults are under great pressure from socio-economic disparities, peer group pressure, an increasingly competitive environment and shrinking job opportunities after their graduation. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 5 November 2012)

The extent of concern about social influences on students leading to arson can be seen in reports linking arson to terrorists and criminals. Kenya has suffered terrorist attacks and an upsurge in crime, and school arsonists are seen to be both victims and disseminators of the bad influence:

Terror and criminal gangs have infiltrated primary and secondary schools, raising the concerns about the safety of students, a government report shows. (*Daily Nation*, 12 June 2017)

Consultation vs retribution

Almost all reports analyzed in this study suggested a wide range of solutions to the problem of school arson. The solutions were grouped into two: consultation (non-punitive or need for dialog about the day-to-day running of school affairs) and retribution (punitive or a need to weed out or punish the bad elements).

The consultation/non-punitive solutions were further divided into various categories. First were those solutions that focused on general boarding school life. They included the need to reform the day-to-day running of boarding schools, the quality of staff employed to run boarding schools and improvement of living conditions:

Perhaps we should consider running boarding facilities as semi-autonomous units headed by trained personnel in housekeeping and institutional management. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 6 September 2017)

To nip student unrest in the bud, we must improve living conditions in public schools. (Columnist, *Saturday Nation*, 23 July 2016)

Schools should endeavour to create a happy atmosphere which will lower anxiety. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 30 July 2016)

. . .the ministry should employ full time guidance and counselling professionals and chaplains in every school. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 30 July 2016)

TSC (teachers' service commission) also directed boarding administrators and other key administrative staff to be living in their school compounds. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 28 July 2016)

Closely linked to the improvement of school conditions was the proposal to abolish boarding schools altogether:

> We need to rethink the whole concept of boarding schools. (Columnist, *Daily Nation*, 6 September 2017)

> Overhaul boarding model and expand school infrastructure. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 16 September 2017)

Secondly, there were those solutions that focused on the ineffectiveness of teachers in managing boarding schools and managing learners' behaviour, as illustrated by the following extracts:

> . . .principals found to be fit to serve should be retrained in human resource management, team building, conflict management and resolutions and disaster preparedness and management. Most principals have no clue what sound school management entails. Their basic objective is to amass power and pursue corruption. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 30 July 2016)

> For counselling to replace corporal punishment, as the ministry wants, teachers must be trained in psychology and emotional intelligence. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 5 August 2015)

> He said understanding the needs of learners would also go a long way to end cases of arson in schools. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 23 June 2016, citing the president)

> Your status as a trainer requires that you be a role model as discipline is concerned. You should therefore desist from engaging in activities that portray you negatively. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 28 July 2016)

Thirdly, there were those solutions that focused on solving the problem of poor parenting as illustrated:

> Parents have been accused of abdicating their roles to instil discipline in their children to teachers, hence the unruly behaviour witnessed among students. They should not fear reprimanding their children from an early age. (Editorial, *The Standard*, 13 November 2016)

> We should introduce parenting programmes, like 'mothers' day' or 'fathers' day' where mothers or fathers have specific visiting days to intermingle with their sons or daughters as they parent. Such programmes reduce homesickness and burnout among learners. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 30 July 2016)

Fourthly, there were suggested solutions that focused on students in general. These included the need for guidance and counselling for all students, mentorship and the need to learn social skills.

One newspaper report citing a survey conducted by the media house indicated that 42.3 percent of those polled recommended:

Introduction of guidance and counselling programmes in all schools. . . (*The Standard*, 31 July 2016)

Other suggestions included a recommendation for induction programmes as well as the acquisition of social skills by students:

Induction programmes for new students can also help. I have found these induction programmes especially helpful in passing the spirit and traditions of the school to new students. (Columnist, *Sunday Nation*, 10 July 2016)

Dr Matiang'i appealed to students to learn how to air their grievances with school administration instead of venting their issues through burning schools. (*The Standard*, 2 July 2016, report citing the cabinet secretary for education)

Lastly, there were suggested solutions that focused on the role of the government. They included the need to review the curriculum and review the placement of teachers:

A curriculum review should be put in place to incorporate guidance and counselling and fire safety. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 23 July 2016)

The teachers' employer also insisted it will continue to ensure teachers and school managers don't work in their home areas. (*The Standard*, 28 July 2016)

This should pre-empt conflicts emanating from vested interests. It will also ensure principals are not perceived to be representing partisan interests. (*The Standard*, 28 July 2016, report citing the teachers' service commission)

However, the main recurrent non-punitive suggested solution was a call to the government to involve all stakeholders in finding a solution and a call for dialog between students and teachers/head teachers:

As a way forward, the Ministry of Education should convene around table stakeholders' forum which can examine some of the issues raised by students. (Editorial, *The Standard*, 3 July 2016)

The time has come for all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, education officials and the students themselves to work together to solve this problem. (Letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 20 July 2016)

In the meantime, principals and boards of management should continue holding meetings with students and address any grievances. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 29 July 2016, citing religious leaders)

There were fewer solutions that called for retribution/punishment. They included vetting of students to ensure there would be no transfer for troublemakers (bad apples), weeding out of incompetent head teachers, testing students for alcohol, increasing police patrols near schools and closure of schools:

Students from schools rocked by unrest will be vetted to ensure troublemakers do not transfer to other schools, the Government directed yesterday. (*The Standard*, 28 June 2016, report citing a government directive)

First, the Ministry of Education should vet all heads of schools to weed out incompetent principals. Many principals lack integrity. Some of them are not in office on merit. (Letter to the editor, *Saturday Nation*, 30 July 2016)

Teachers have proposed that students be subjected to breathalyser tests as part of measures to curb school unrest. (Columnist, *The Standard*, 30 May 2017)

. . .patrols would be intensified near learning institutions. (*Daily Nation*, 4 September 2017, report citing regional police coordinator)

. . .schools should be closed earlier than scheduled to avert more fires. (*Daily Nation*, 22 July 2016, report citing a former university vice-chancellor)

However, the main recurrent suggested punitive solution was the re-introduction of corporal punishment:

Corporal punishment will curb indiscipline. (Letter to the editor, *Daily Nation*, 29 June 2016)

I support reintroduction of corporal punishment in schools. (Letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 23 July 2016)

The government should lift the ban on corporal punishment in schools to help teachers deal with disciplinary cases that are getting out of hand. (Letter to the editor, *The Standard*, 9 July 2016)

All in all, the suggested solutions lean more towards the adoption of a more conciliatory, consultative approach in solving the problem of school arson and less towards punishment.

It is worth noting that the suggested solutions fail to consider the complexity of the causes; they are vague and sometimes impractical. For example, quoting the prime minister of the country at the time, the newspaper report indicated that the cause of school fires was madness.

This is a very serious claim. However, there is no attempt made in the newspaper report to explain further what 'madness' entails. The claim is not backed by any further information on whether there had been any assessment done to confirm the presence of madness. One of the suggested solutions is the strengthening of guidance and counselling programmes in schools. The extent to which guidance and counselling would work on a problem such as 'madness' is not clear.

In another article, a secondary school principal is quoted as saying that children are under a lot of pressure and can resort to burning schools. Referring to a counselling session he had with a student, the principal informed the writer that:

One of them told him that he was no longer interested in studies, he told his parents he wanted out, but they were insistent that he should complete his studies; he had to a find [*sic*] way so that the school could be closed. (*The Standard*, 7 July 2016)

The chairman of the Kenya union of post-primary education teachers decries the helplessness of teachers in managing students:

> He said the ministry had made disciplining students so hard that teachers and board members are so helpless. (*Daily Nation*, 9 September 2017)

What the union chairman is referring to here is mainly the ban on the use of corporal punishment. The ban on the use of corporal punishment is aimed at protecting children. However, teachers view it as an affront to their authority. The different understandings of the ban on corporal punishment would imply that guidance and counselling might not be a preferred solution for everyone.

Discussion

Our findings show that the problem of school arson is framed as a problem with multiple causes. However, there is more focus on the individual learner and how the learner experiences learning/schooling. Learners are framed as either those engaging in school arson as a form of protest or 'a few disgruntled ones' who need to be taken out of the school system. This is consistent with what Bantjes and Nieuwoudt (2011: 31), writing from South Africa, have argued, that when learners engage in misbehavior '. . .the tendency is to attribute the misbehavior to internal psychodynamics (to ascribe the problem to individual psychopathology). . .'. However, Duveen and Lloyd (2013: 157) remind us that '. . .individuals are so inextricably interwoven in a fabric of social relations within which their lives are lived that a representation of the "individual" divorced from the "social" is. . .inadequate'. Further, there is little in the newspaper articles on what the view of the learner is or even the view of the parent accused of poor parenting that creates the bad apples. This is despite the emphasis placed on the individual learner.

Technology was also blamed for the school fires. New technology is often viewed with suspicion and it 'creates ambivalent feelings in the public' (Wagner and Kronberger, 2001: 147). The use of the mobile phone, especially among schoolchildren, draws mixed reactions. Linking the image of a student hunched over a mobile phone with school fires provided a 'good to think' trope (Wagner and Kronberger, 2001: 150) that helped 'explain the strange, threatening and unfamiliar phenomenon' (Wagner and Kronberger, 2001: 150) of school fires. According to Bantjes and Nieuwoudt (2011: 31), blaming society or parents for school arson serves the function of externalizing the problem beyond the school setting.

The reports on school arson were mainly from first responders who included administrative government officials, security officers, ministry of education officials or rehashed versions of information contained in government reports on school fires. It is probable then that the reports provided by the sources were aimed at protecting and strengthening the prevailing social position and power through 'interpretations that facilitate acceptance of their preferred meaning' (Berkowitz and TerKeurst, 1999: 126). There was a lack of interrogation of the information provided. For instance, a recurring problem across the years is the lack of implementation of recommendations in past government reports on school fires and unrest by the government. This is stated without any further interrogation

of why past recommendations have not been implemented. Ogola (2018: 80) has argued that there may be 'declining quality' and 'an end to serious journalism' in Kenyan print media, while Donsbach (2010: 45) notes that journalists need a broader intellectual perspective to make sound news decisions. According to Donsbach (2010: 44), '. . .journalism has focused primarily in gathering news and less on connecting this information to other areas of knowledge'. Further, Donsbach (2010: 45) posits that journalism is the 'new knowledge profession' that requires certain competencies such as subject competence. Journalists need subject competence, among other competencies, to make judgments on the newsworthiness of events, to ask critical questions and find the right experts to confirm or disconfirm their news reports.

Lowe Morna (2012: 5), with reference to the coverage of women's issues in newspaper reports focusing largely on South Africa, has noted that sometimes the coverage lacks depth in terms of '. . .extent of investigation and inquiry. . .'. Further, the reports lack '. . .persistence and thoroughness of inquiry' (Lowe Morna, 2012: 6). Lowe Morna (2012: 6) further notes that '. . .news pages are too crammed with what the minister says' without any interrogation of the practicalities of what the minister has said. In the same vein, newspaper reports on school fires in Kenya are characterized by a lack of depth and thorough inquiry. The reports are framed using the '. . .the perspective of powerful societal stakeholders' (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009: 408), hence the lack of focus on the practical use of the suggested solutions.

A common ideal model for journalism is to adopt a scientific approach to reporting which is to '. . .gather authoritative data and then present it without taking a side in the discourse' (Berkowitz, 2009: 102). However, reporters gather information from sources, but sources have vested interests (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 1), and because of these interests journalists may inadvertently '. . .reproduce a specific meaning or a specific vantage point on the social order' (Berkowitz, 2009: 106). Much of the time, media discourse involves struggles over meaning (Gamson et al., 1992: 382) with some preferred meanings becoming more salient because of the power advantage of the actors involved (Gamson et al., 1992: 382). In addition, Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999: 125) have argued that '. . .the relationship between journalists and their sources is a struggle for determining meanings among groups of social actors'.

The suggested solutions to possible causes were vague and impractical. However, the framing of the solutions to the problem of school arson brings to the fore the dilemma facing journalists in Kenya: should they adopt a liberal model of journalism or remain true to their African identity and reality with all its extant cultural beliefs, traditions and practices, such as the use of physical punishment to rein in errant children? Contemporary literature describes the tension African journalists face between presenting themselves as cosmopolitan and part of the global educated liberal elite on the one hand, and as guardians of a threatened and oppressed African identity on the other (Kanyegirire, 2006: 159; Nyamnjoh, 2015: 40). In what has been called a 'Jekyll and Hyde' situation by the African scholar Nyamnjoh (2005: 2–3), African journalists are called upon to participate in and promote liberal democratic ideals, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that contemporary liberalism is built historically on a system which denigrated indigenous African values and views (Nyamnjoh, 2015: 40).

Conclusion

The newspaper reports constructed school arson as an issue with multiple varied causes and subsequently identified solutions to the causes. However, the social construction of school arson by journalists did not address arson per se, but rather afforded journalists an opportunity to make a commentary on Kenyan society. The issue of school arson, in summary, provides a basis for Kenyan journalists to make a broader commentary on their society in a post-colonial but globalized context.

ORCID iD

Hildah Oburu [image] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6998-1850

Note

1. The third media house, *The Star*, with an estimated circulation of 10,000, copies, was not included in the study because it started its operations in 2007. The focus of this study was to include newspaper articles from 2000 to date.

References

Achieng J (2001) The death of school children remains a mystery. Available at: http://www.ipsnews.net/2001/03/education-kenya-the-death-of-school-children-remains-a-mystery/ (accessed 07 December 2018).

Bantjes J and Nieuwoudt J (2011) A group-analytic formulation of an incident of disruptive behaviour in a school. *Psycho-Analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa* 19(2): 29–65.

BBC News (2002) Kenya school fire trial starts. 21 January. Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1774052.stm (Consulted 22 November 2018).

BBC News (2016a) Why are Kenyan schools being torched. 25 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36845144#:~:text=More%20than%20100%20government%20secondary,reforms%20to%20the%20education%20sector.

BBC News (2016b) Wave of Kenya school fires continues. 30 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-36929336/wave-of-kenya-school-fires-continues

Berkowitz DA (2009) Reporters and their sources. In: Wahl-Jorgensen K and Hanitzsch T (eds) *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis, pp. 102–115.

Berkowitz D and TerKeurst JV (1999) Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship. *Journal of Communication* 49(3): 125–136.

Boyatzis RE (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Braun V and Clarke V (2012) Thematic analysis. In: Cooper H (ed.) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Vol 2: Research Designs*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 57–71.

Bullock CF and Cubert J (2002) Coverage of domestic violence fatalities by newspapers in Washington state. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 17(5): 475–499.

Burns R and Crawford C (1999) School shootings, the media and public fear: Ingredients for moral panic. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 32(2): 147–168.

Daily Nation (2018) Wave of unrest continues to rock Nyanza schools. 8 July. Available at: https://www.nation.co.ke/kenya/counties/kisumu/wave-of-unrest-continues-to-rock-nyanza-schools-64340

Donsbach W (2010) Journalists and their professional identities. In: Allan S (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 38–48.

Duveen G and Lloyd B (2013) The significance of social identities. In: Moscovici S, Jovchelovitch S and Wagoner B (eds) *Development as a Social Process: Contributions of Gerard Duveen*. London: Routledge, pp. 156–172.

Entman RM (1993) Framing: towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.

Entman RM (2007) Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power. *Journal of Communication* 57(1): 163–173.

Gamson WA, Croteau D, Hoynes W, et al. (1992) Media images and the social construction of reality. *Annual Review of Sociology* 18(1992): 373–393.

Goffman E (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Griffin G (1996) *School Mastery: Straight Talk about Boarding School Management*. Nairobi: Lectern Publications Ltd.

Gwengi I (2018) Two more Nyanza schools hit by dorm fires. *The Standard*. 8 July. Available at: https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001287252/two-more-nyanza-schools-hit-by-dorm-fires#:~:text=Two%20more%20Nyanza%20schools%20hit%20by%20dorm%20fires&text=Saturday%2C%20property%20worth%20thousands%20of,Otieno%20Oyoo%2C%20Maranda%20and%20Ambira.

Herman SE and Chomsky N (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.

Kanyegirire A (2006) Hybrid journalistic identities? Journalism(s) and NEPAD. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 27(2): 159–178.

Kinyanjui K (1976) *Secondary School Strikes: The Art of Blaming the Victim*. Discussion Paper No. 243. Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi.

Kupchik A and Bracy NL (2009) The news media on school crime and violence: Constructing dangerousness and fueling fear. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 7(2): 136–155.

Leavy P and Maloney KP (2009) American reporting of school violence and 'People like us': A comparison of newspaper coverage of the Columbine and Red Lake School shootings. *Critical Sociology* 35(2): 273–292.

Littlejohn SW and Foss KA (2009) *Encylopaedia of Communication Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Lowe Morna C (2012) *Promoting gender equality in and through the media: A Southern African Case Study* (Vol. 3). Available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/media2002/reports/EP5Morna.PDF (accessed 22 November 2018).

Moscovici S (1984) The phenomenon of social representations. In: Farr R and Moscovici S (eds) *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–69.

Moscovici S and Duveen G (2000) The phenomenon of social representations. In: Moscovici S and Duveen G (eds) *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 18–77.

Muschert GW and Carr C (2006) Media salience and frame changing across events: Coverage of nine school shootings, 1997-2001. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83(4): 747–766.

Nowell LS, Norris JM, White DE, et al. (2017) Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16(1): 160940691773384.

Nyamnjoh FB (2005) *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books.

Nyamnjoh FB (2015) Journalism in Africa: Modernity, Africanity. *African Journalism Studies* 36(1): 37–43.

Ogola G (2018) The Nairobian and the "politics" of tabloidisation in Kenya's print media: Normative trends in the dynamics of socio-political and economic struggles. In: Mabweazara HM (ed.) *Newsmaking Cultures in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 79–97.

Oxlade D (1973) *A study of the English public school tradition in former government European secondary boarding schools in Kenya and its influence on other secondary schools*. PhD Thesis, University of Nairobi, Nairobi. Available at: http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/63809 (accessed 22 November 2018).

Pan Z and Kosicki GM (1993) Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political Communication* 10(1): 55–75.

Potter WJ (2012) *Media Effects*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Sifuna D and Otiende J (2006) *An Introductory History of Education*. Revised ed. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.

Teferra D and Altbach PG (2004) African higher education: Challenges for the 21st century. *Higher Education* 47(1): 21–50.

Tewksbury D and Scheufele DA (2009) New framing theory and research. In: Bryant J and Oliver MB (eds) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, pp. 17–33.

United Nations (1989) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx (accessed 22 November 2018).

Van Zanten A (2010) The sociology of elite education. In: Apple MW, Ball SJ and Gandin LA (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 329–339.

Wagner W and Kronberger N (2001) Killer tomatoes! Collective symbolic coping with biotechnology. In: Deaux K and Philogene G (eds) *Representations of the Social*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, pp. 147–164.

Wondemaghen M (2014) Media construction of a school shooting as a social problem. *Journalism* 15(6): 696–712.

Yakaboski T and Nolan K (2011) The Kenyan school systems' impact on public higher education access: examination of growth, access and challenges. *Journal of International Education and Leadership* 1(1): 1–13.

Yusuf M (2016) Over 100 Kenyan schools burned in apparent arson attacks. *VOA News*. 30 July. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/africa/over-100-kenyan-schools-burned-apparent-arson-attacks#:~:text=This%20week%2C%20with%20fires%20reported,as%20a%20deterrent%20to%20arson.

Author biographies

Hildah Oburu is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, where she teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate students. She completed her PhD studies at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, in 2019. Her PhD focused on school violence, specifically arson, in Kenyan secondary schools. Her interests span the psychology of learning and teaching, motivation and emotion, as well as the assessment of psychosocial and behavioral aspects of youth violence.

Bronwyné Coetzee is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University, where she teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students. Her research

interests include the psychosocial and behavioral aspects of chronic illness across the lifespan (children, adolescents and adults). Much of her research has focused on barriers (individual and structural) to medication-taking among children (0–5 years) as well as adults. This work has led to the development of two scales assessing barriers to medication-taking as well as a visualization intervention to improve adherence to antiretroviral therapy among adolescents and adults in the Western Cape.

Leslie Swartz is a distinguished professor of psychology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. His work focuses on disability and mental health issues in the social context, with a focus on Africa. His most recent book (co-edited) is *The Palgrave Handbook of Disability and Citizenship in the Global South.* He publishes widely, was founding editor-in-chief of the *African Journal of Disability* and is associate editor of *Transcultural Psychiatry* and *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education.*