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The changing ecology of news: the impact of social networking sites on the production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors

Derrick Oluoch

THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF NEWS: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS AND THE GATEKEEPING ROLE OF LEGACY MEDIA EDITORS

By

Derrick Oluoch
567759

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

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APPROVAL PAGE

The Aga Khan University
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master
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Members of the Thesis Evaluation Committee appointed to examine the thesis of
OLUOCH DERRICK-567759, find it satisfactory and recommended that it be
accepted.

_____
Nancy Booker, PhD.,
Interim Dean
Chair, Thesis Evaluation Committee

_____
Rose Kimani, PhD., Supervisor

_____
Member,
Thesis Evaluation Committee

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DECLARATION

THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF NEWS: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON THE PRODUCTION OF NEWS AND THE GATEKEEPING ROLE OF LEGACY MEDIA EDITORS

I, **OLUOCH DERRICK-567759**, 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.

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Signature

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Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mum, Madam Grace and my partner, Lolita.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

The media landscape is changing, especially as more and more media audiences embrace social networking sites and consume their news content from social networking sites. Even as media organizations grapple with declining operations due to their traditional models of operation, media editors face a myriad of challenges, including competing with citizen journalism as they push to maintain and retain their journalistic duty of gatekeeping. In the face of the changing ecology of news, this study sought to establish the impact of social networking sites on the production of news and on the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. The objectives were to assess the contribution of social networking sites to selection of news by legacy media, to establish patterns in the production of legacy media news in the era of social networking sites, and to examine the gatekeeping roles of legacy media editors in the wake of digital disruption. The gatekeeping theory and the networked gatekeeping theory formed the theoretical framework. The researcher adopted a qualitative research approach and a descriptive research design. The sample size of digital editors was arrived at through purposive sampling, and in-depth interviews were employed to generate data. The study established that social networking sites impact the production process of news and play a part in the selection of news by legacy media in Kenya. It also found that social networking sites have resulted in emergent patterns in news production and that feedback received from social networking sites impacts decisions made by editors in legacy media newsrooms. The study concluded that social networking sites have created an avenue for audiences to be part of the prod news production by legacy media newsrooms in Kenya even as legacy media editors are adopting newer strategies afloat and keeping up with the digital disruption. The researcher recommended setting journalistic standards for dealing with content from social networking sites and having l journalism stakeholders adhere to the standards as they embrace emergent patterns in their operations.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

NMG: Nation Media Group

SG: Standard Media Group

SNS: Social Networking Sites

ICFJ: International Centre for Journalists

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

More and more content consumers and audiences are embracing social networking sites, and accessing their news content through these platforms. The content that they consume from these sites has not necessarily gone through the rigorous processes of news production even as the audience holds power to dictate its preference when it comes to consumption interests (Zayani, 2021). In this regard, social networking sites, while they continue to grow in significance, could be having an impact on legacy media newsroom operations (Grygiel & Lysak, 2021). Despite newsrooms incorporating social networking sites in their everyday operations, there are still concerns about the accuracy and motive of information obtained through such channels. Blanchett (2021) opines, as media decision-makers, editors increasingly find themselves compelled to rush through the gatekeeping process in a bid to keep up with new players in the online media space, particularly in the social networking sites that are journalistically unregulated and not bound by the needs and expectations of media gatekeeping checks. Thus, there are concerns that the level of checks and balances put in place by legacy media are insufficient or poorly executed (Mwongela, 2015).

Even so, in a bid to keep up and maintain the relevance of legacy media, editors in legacy media organizations are compelled to continuously look for and meet the audiences where they are and by doing this, some decisions made in the newsroom get influenced by trends in the public domain and in social networking sites, all which could be dictated by the audience. In this regard, there is need for legacy media editors to find ways of retaining and upholding media's gatekeeping role amidst the disruption.

1.2 Background to the Study

Barret-Maitland and Lynch (2020), by observing the exponential growth of social networking sites, describe the 21st century as the 'boom' period for social networking with 4 out of 10 people worldwide on social networking sites, according to a 2019 digital2africa report. Peters et al. (2022) opine that one of the significant impacts of this growth has been the emergence and rise of digital media where audiences are no longer passive recipients of news content but are also active consumers and creators of news content, a function that was predominantly a preserve of legacy media pre the digital disruption. With an understanding that the current audience is informed, legacy media is striving to adjust to maintain its importance (Canella, 2021). To do this, newsrooms are opening up to newer avenues of carrying out their functions, including allocating prominence to topics trending on social networking sites as they are deemed to be of importance to the audience.

The media landscape is fluid and changing across time, but especially so since the dawn of the 21-century. Madrid-Morales and Ireri (2021) point out that in Africa, content production, dissemination and audience engagement have been revolutionised by digital technologies as African newsrooms experience the disruptive impact of new digital technologies including in the way news is generated. In Kenya, a Media Council of Kenya (2016) study showed local journalists felt that while technological tools were affecting their work, it also enhanced collection of news.

According to Mwongela (2015), today's newspapers are under pressure to perfect the art of Day-Two Journalism by coming up with better angles that would pump freshness to a story and offer new aspects that were not covered in the breaking news. This is because, after a report has broken, it will have been extensively covered on digital platforms in the following hours. This poses a challenge to the operations of

the newsroom as editors end up embracing adjustments that would allow them to continue carrying out their roles in a counteraction to effects of the news content already running publicly on social networking sites.

Media organisations are grappling with declining or stagnating operations due to the traditional models of operation. Media editors are now faced with the challenge of competing with citizen journalism even as they strive to maintain and retain their journalistic duty of gatekeeping (Mahlangu, 2021). The media environment has morphed into high-choice platforms where digital users and news consumers have access to more and more content without necessarily interacting with legacy media (Walsh, 2000). Royal (2017) says that owing to these developments, consumers now have the luxury of only engaging based on interest. In the long run, this presents a challenge to legacy media which have to consider adjusting their operations to include and cater for the wants of an audience that boasts multiple options of news and content sources. In this bid to retain their audience, newsrooms are likely to get compelled to incorporate and adhere to the demands of the social networking sites audience by altering their operations, and this has the potential to impact newsrooms' ability to carry out their journalistic mandate, especially the gatekeeping role, efficiently.

Dutton (2009) says that the internet provides a platform through which networked individuals can form the "Fifth Estate." The independence that allows the internet user to choose where to consume their content provides them with even greater independence from media institutions. This offers an opportunity for falsified and fabricated content to be disseminated and consumed wholly by a gullible audience. Newman et al. (2012) highlight that this allows social networking sites to operate and fulfil many of the same functions as legacy media but without the centralised institutional foundations that govern the media industry thus risking misinformation and manipulation of the audience at the expense of media's responsibility and role of

gatekeeping. Similarly, digital users have the luxury of dictating the content they interact with and this means that content has to be relevant, interesting and valuable to the audience for them to consume it (Zemmels, 2012; Culloty & Suiter, 2021). As a result, there is increasing pressure on legacy media, which has historically mainly produced news content, to adjust and incorporate content that would be of interest to the digital-inclined audience.

Bowd (2016) acknowledges that social networking sites have granted the audience an avenue to be part and parcel of production of news. They can now get involved in observing, selecting, filtering, distributing, and interpreting news events. Audiences are now capable of making their news content and sharing it through their social networking sites (Krotoski, 2011). However, for the most part, this kind of content carries a personalised touch which risks being corrupted with an individual's perspectives. Even so, the public needs to be educated and acquainted with the grounding principles of journalism that govern most legacy media houses.

As digital media continue to grow and assert their dominance in the media industry, editors in legacy media newsrooms are quickly adopting newer strategies for staying afloat and keeping up with the disruption caused by the emergence of digital spaces. Owing to technological developments that have made media organizations capable of understanding the preferences of their audiences, journalists and editors, in particular, are increasingly being encouraged to consider audience preferences when they are choosing and prioritising news content (Kristensen, 2021).

While audiences are increasingly relying on social networking sites for breaking news information, there still exists a trust deficit as only a handful of the content shared on these sites has gone through rigorous verification and, in most cases, the content shared contains personal biases. Legacy media, thus, still play an integral role in offering the audience a platform to crosscheck and authenticate the information they

receive online. As Harold Russell, a pioneer mass communications scholar, quoted by Daramola (2007), postulates, there is hardly any society that can efficiently function without the input of legacy media. As they adjust to counter the effects of digital disruption including citizen journalism, legacy media has to play the integral role of gatekeeping including through considerations to modify their news production processes to ensure that the society is not only informed but also consuming verified information.

News editors and managers are increasingly reporting that misinformation has become a challenge for the media industry, especially due to the increase in fake news and alternative truths disseminated by content producers on social networking sites who have lesser interest in gatekeeping interests, according to an International Centre for Journalists report (ICFJ, 2019). Studies show that a huge chunk of the content shared by the public on social networking sites is meant to boost the chances of the creators gaining popularity, getting more eyeballs on their platforms, or getting the motivation to push an agenda (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020). However, since social networking sites are growing in their interface with legacy media as newsroom operations work to inform and engage the public, there is need for awareness as this interface could potentially affect news production and in return the gatekeeping role of legacy media.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Many Kenyans rely on many sources of information due to doubts about the reliability of legacy media organizations (Reboot, 2018). Social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are increasingly being utilized by younger audiences to obtain news and media content. According to a Reboot (2018) study, this is particularly true in situations involving breaking news or situations in which the

public feel legacy media is reluctant to break news about scandals because of self-censorship. Nonetheless, there are stories that have occasionally been picked up by legacy media as a result of traction the stories received on social networking sites. As Media Innovation Centre (2021) point out in their study, this, inevitably, has compelled legacy media to rethink their role in the chain of news and information, especially with social networking sites taking over the function of breaking news. As such, legacy media are gradually adopting fact-checking as a way to strengthen objectivity and facticity as a result of social networking sites providing more opportunities for misinformation and disinformation (Media Innovation Centre, 2021).

In order to keep up with the new players in the online media landscape, particularly social networking sites that are unregulated and are not limited by the needs and expectations of media gatekeeping checks, editors have often found themselves having to rethink how to still produce accurate news in a much shorter news cycle. Legacy media editors are compelled to shift some focus to trending topics and day-two journalism at the expense of in-depth one-off reporting (Mwongela, 2015). According to Mwongela (2015), concerns exist regarding the effectiveness of the checks and balances established by legacy media in regards to their interface with social networking sites.

This study sought to examine the impact of social networking sites on newsroom operations, particularly as they relate to production of news and the gatekeeping culture of legacy media editors, including on accuracy, verification and consideration for laws and media operations' ethical standards.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyse the impact of social networking sites on production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors.

1.4.1 Specific Objectives

1. To assess the contribution of social networking sites to news selection by legacy media.

2. To establish the patterns in production of news in the era of social networking sites.

3. To examine the gatekeeping roles of legacy media editors in the wake of digital disruption.

1.4.2 Research Questions

1. What is the contribution of social networking sites in news selection by legacy media?

2. How has the emergence of social networking sites impacted patterns of news production?

3. What are the gatekeeping roles performed by legacy media editors in the wake of digital disruption?

1.5 Justification of the Study

There are a handful of studies exploring the relationship between social networking sites and newsrooms in Kenya with some of the studies showing that social networking sites are a leading source of news in the country (Wamuyu, 2020). According to DataReportal (2021), Kenya has an internet penetration of 40 percent with over 21.7 million users on the internet as of January 2021. With such a huge internet population, Kenya has ended up grappling with an active online media audience with an appetite for content. This has created room for penetration by uncanny news sources including propagandists and inciters who share unverified information all for the sake of advancing their vested interests.

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As media decision-makers, editors could be finding themselves having to consider newer strategies to keep up with new players in the online media space, particularly the unregulated social networking sites that are not bound by the needs and expectations of media gatekeeping checks. With the ever-increasing significance of new media, particularly social networking sites, in journalism, this study sought to examine the impact of these sites on newsroom operations, particularly as it pertains to production of news, and the gatekeeping culture of legacy media editors, including on accuracy, verification and regards for laws and ethics of media operations. This research also sought to determine if the emergence of social networking sites is causing a challenge to the quality of gatekeeping in newsrooms as sensationalism and virality seem to be more often than not tolerated in the face of breaking news content.

As a result of social networking sites, there are emerging trends in the production of news that could challenge the current gatekeeping role of editors. Free and unregulated access to content on social networking sites threatens to override the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. With the challenges brought forth by developments such as audience gatekeeping, there is a need for legacy media in the country to uphold their gatekeeping role even as they adjust to accommodate social networking sites in crucial editorial processes. This research, therefore, looked at the impact of the changing ecology of news and the role social networking sites play in the production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. This analysis is critical in understanding how social networking sites influence the production of news and how legacy media editors can keep abreast of emerging trends, such as audience gatekeeping, and stay on top of the gatekeeping process as a function of the newsroom.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The audience plays an active role in news production by influencing the topic selection, story placements, and performance evaluation (Ferrer-Connil & Tandoc Jr, 2018). Nonetheless, users on social networking sites, by being part of the current media audience, are critical players in the news production process. This study sought to analyse the impact of social networking sites on production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. This analysis is critical in understanding how social networking sites impact news production processes in the Kenyan newsroom and the impact of this emergence on the gatekeeping role of editors.

The findings of this study help provide an understanding of how social networking sites influence production of news and how legacy media editors can best adjust to incorporate the resultant emerging trends, all while staying on top of gatekeeping processes as a function of the newsroom. For the academy, this study will provide an entry point into the understanding of emerging trends in news production in Kenya. It can also be used by scholars to find the effect and potential of social networking sites in influencing newsrooms and resultantly shaping newsroom operations in a way that makes the most out of the disruption. Scholars will also be able to rely on this study to advance the theories of gatekeeping and networked gatekeeping as they will gain crucial insights into how social networking sites influence newsrooms and how this influence impacts journalistic values including the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study was limited to two legacy media houses in Kenya namely the Standard Group (SG) and the Nation Media Group (NMG). The two media organisations, combined, have the leading digital legacy media coverage in Kenya in

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terms of audience reach and quantity of content rendered across their platforms (Communications Authority of Kenya [CA], 2020). They also have robust broadcast channels and boast the two leading print newspapers in the country. According to data from the CA, the editors from these two newsrooms command more than half of the country's audience share (CA, 2020).

Although several digital native media houses are coming up in Kenya, this study focused on the two legacy media houses as they boast the mainstay of trustworthy and public interest journalism, a feat ostensibly earned over the two organizations' long stay and dominance in the Kenyan media spaces for decades with SG having been in operation for a century and NMG for seven decades.

Therefore, the talent pool at these newsrooms provided a fertile ground for data collection as they interact with social networking sites frequently as they carry out their roles within the newsroom. Other than their perceived authoritative coverage, the two media houses have also made significant adjustments in the incorporation of digital journalism in their day-to-day operations and they have a good bearing on the digital media space in the country.

The overall design of this study captured the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors by adopting a qualitative research approach. Through the qualitative research approach, this study sought to find out the impact of social networking sites on production of news and the gatekeeping role of editors. This approach offered the researcher a better understanding of how social networking sites impact the production of news by factoring in how editors employ the use of social networking sites in their daily deliverables in the newsroom.

A descriptive research design was employed in this study to offer an opportunity for the researcher to explore the emergent ways in which social networking sites are impacting editorial decisions. The descriptive research design allowed the researcher

to examine the situation, identify attributes of a particular phenomenon and offer an exploration of the connection between two or more phenomena (Omair, 2015). This design explored the relations between the changing ecology of news and how this evolution correlates with the impact of social networking sites in the newsrooms.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

The data generated in this qualitative research was not objectively verified since it relied on the personal experiences of the respondents which are susceptible to being subjective. The responses given are dependent on the lived experience and perceptions of the participants and the records they hold of how they go about production of news in regards to social networking sites. Dependence on the experience of respondents presents a limitation as they cannot guarantee an accurate recollection of how newsrooms incorporate social networking sites into their operations, thus limiting the findings of this study to within the qualitative realm. Nonetheless, one way of addressing this shortcoming is to allow the respondents to give their lived experiences on their roles and how the occurrences on social networking sites influence the decisions they make within the newsroom.

The other limitations included reluctant participation during the data collection and to curb this, the researcher assured the participants of confidentiality by not incorporating their details and any probable identifiers.

This study focused on two newsrooms in Kenya that are deemed the largest and have incorporated digital journalism into their day-to-day operations. In the end, this limited the findings of this study as the results cannot accurately be generalised to represent the situation in all Kenyan newsrooms and offer a collective view of how social networking sites are impacting newsrooms and the gatekeeping role of all editors in the country.

1.9 Operational Definition of Terms

Gatekeeping: In this study, gatekeeping refers to the processes that news content is subjected to in order to ascertain that it conforms with journalistic ethics and principles before it is disseminated to the public.

Audience gatekeeping: This study describes audience gatekeeping as the process in which social network site users are sharing news content and commenting on the content across the platform based on their own set of criteria about the newsworthiness of the news content.

Ecology of news: This study employs Newman, Dutton and Blank (2012) description of ecology of news as the changing patterns of news production and consumption as shaped by the internet and related social media.

Social networking sites: Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. In this study, social networking sites are online platforms that allow users to have public profiles and get to interact with other users on the platforms either through sharing own content or reacting and commenting on content shared by others.

Legacy media: Perreault and Perreault (2021) describe legacy media as media organizations that existed long before the information age. In this study, legacy media are media organizations that command a wide reach and have a solid reputation among news consumers, and which built their reputation from operations as broadcast and print media before the internet.

Production of news: Ettema (2008) describes production of news as the process of transforming events through systematic criteria into news content that is publishable in the media. In this study, news production is the creation of news content in the newsroom.

1.10 Summary

The emergence of social networking sites has resulted in newer patterns in the operations of media organisations by playing an integral part in how new media content is generated and packaged. As captured in this chapter, evidence suggests that news media content consumers are increasingly seeking information from social networking sites because of the immediacy provided by technology. However, these audiences need more trust because there is little or no validation of the information they receive on these sites. This chapter discusses the background of the effects of social networking sites on news production and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. The chapter also defines the study's objectives including developing research questions to analyse the interaction between legacy media and social networking sites vis-à-vis the gatekeeping role of newsroom editors. The next discussion of this thesis comprises of chapters two, three, four and five as well as references and appendices sections. Chapter two offers a theoretical foundation for this study while chapter three covers the methodology adopted by the researcher. Chapter four presents findings of the study while Chapter five discusses the major findings and provides. Conclusions to the study and offers recommendations as well as areas for future research. The reference section provides a list of citations that have been used within the body text of this report, and the appendices section contains tools and items including license that were employed in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature that offers an understanding of how the changing ecology of news and social networking sites are impacting the production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. This section also offers a theoretical foundation for this study by helping explain, forecast, and comprehend the events that are being examined herein by discussing the theoretical frameworks that will guide this study's research process. This review relates previous research to this study all while exposing the gaps that this study seeks to fill.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the gatekeeping theory to provide an understanding of the effects of social networking sites on news production and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. The study also draws from the networked gatekeeping theory which explains the changing ecology of news and how social networking sites are adjusting, and offer an understanding of how these changes are affecting the production of news. Since gatekeeping theory explains the process by which journalists prioritise news and media content – deciding on what is to be published and what is to be discarded – it helps explain how the role of editors in production of news items is impacted by social networking sites.

2.2.1 Gatekeeping Theory

Journalists, particularly editors, serve as gatekeepers as they decide on what the media passes to the public. However, this role is challenged by the emergence of social networking sites as now editors have to factor in aspects such as trends in their news

production. To factor this accordingly, this study relied on the network gatekeeping theory to portray the power relations in the digital space of information by offering room for the conceptualization of the processes of information control. The theory provided an opportunity to look at symmetries between news actors in the legacy media newsrooms and the news creator on social networking sites. The network gatekeeping theory allowed for a better analysis of centralization in the digital space's networks of news creation and dissemination.

Gatekeeping theory looks at the processes that items are subjected to as they are either selected or rejected (Erzikova, 2018). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) opine that the theory has since been advanced to incorporate the processes and channels that news items go through including selection, shaping of the messages and the time of dissemination as well as how they are handled. This theory has been advanced by various scholars, including Shoemaker et al. (2001), who demonstrated how gatekeeping had been applied at the individual, communication and institutional levels. The emergent model includes independent gatekeepers working within one institution and the incorporation of internal and external forces acting upon the gatekeeping channels.

In a bid to keep up the standard of public discourse that arises from information shared via news items; editors take their gatekeeping role seriously as the theory postulates that the events that are covered by the media rely on given factors including individual journalist's perception of the important versus the less important. Other than an editor's perception, routine also plays a part in gatekeeping. Legacy media organisations have schedules that they abide by and they operate under strict time guidelines, which, in the interest of gatekeeping, all play a part in what gets disseminated to the public. To maintain the quality of content disseminated to the

public, legacy media houses also rely on in-house perceptions and agendas which often involve adhering to given rules and ethics. These biases influence the treatment of news content and ultimately determine what passes on to the public (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011). There are also players in the gatekeeping process that operate outside the newsroom. They include the institutions in the media ecosystem such as sponsors, advertisers and the government. These players also get to influence the type of content that legacy media houses avail to the public. Alongside these factors, ideology also influences what is disseminated by the legacy media as the media has the mandate to respect and abide by given norms and values (Roberts, 2005).

As used here, gatekeeping refers to selecting what the audience consumes based on specific journalistic standards. This procedure has been expanded to include the audience in a linked environment due to technology advancement. This implies that the audience is no longer only a recipient of information but is now taken into account by journalists when making information-seeking decisions (Ernste, 2014). As the key gatekeepers, the media need a structure to incorporate user comments in the editorial process while taking into account professional journalistic norms. This new phenomenon has caused tension (Tandoc Jr & Thomas, 2015). Additionally, it implies that editorial judgment, which relies on media outlets offering audiences what they want, is insufficient to establish the significance of a news article.

Notably, there are numerous simultaneous occurrences around the world that the legacy media cannot cover. Journalists are regarded as gatekeepers since they choose which news items to cover. News editors decide what should be published and what should be rejected as part of the gatekeeping approach. The gatekeeper eliminates unneeded, irrelevant, and contentious information through this procedure. It enables

journalists and editors to choose the volume and calibre of information that the public receives.

Reporting on current events often involves sharing news on content already widely consumed with the public sphere; in, some instances, such content may contravene journalistic ethics and principles. In the legacy media newsroom, what is given to the public is decided by editors who act as gatekeepers. By withholding certain information and allowing others to pass, they deliberately or unconsciously alter the information that is given (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Information that gatekeepers choose to distribute through their venues must adhere to journalistic standards, including those the public might have access to without necessarily relying on the legacy media.

However, gatekeeping has needed to be re-evaluated and rethought in light of the internet and related technologies (Bro & Wallberg, 2014). Professional and amateur journalists alike document the growth of photojournalism, for instance, since anyone with a camera and access to the internet can easily and unassisted create audio-visual content. As digital media platforms, particularly social networking sites, have grown in popularity over the past decades, these new digital news portals have given ordinary individuals the ability to share and break the news (Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015). The borders of journalism have become much more permeable as a result, changing how information is created, curated, distributed, and consumed. As opposed to what occurs in traditional legacy newsrooms, audiences can now break news events in real-time, bringing news and information to the general public with fewer or even no gatekeeping constraints. Editorial choices regarding what is and is not worthy can be made by users. They may decide what other people should read and what they should ignore (Singer, 2014).

The emergence of social network platforms, the internet, and the desire of citizen actors to participate in gathering and sharing news has irreversibly changed the media landscape. According to several studies, either everyone is a gatekeeper or nobody does. Witschge et al. (2016) note that the gatekeeping theory has been challenged by social networking sites' inclusive and participatory nature. Researchers like Shoemaker and Vos (2009) contend that gatekeeping mechanisms should be rethought because information flow has changed from a unidirectional to a multidirectional flow, and all actors may be able to affect one another as well as alter the flow of that information. Reconsidering the structure of the gatekeeping process can, therefore, account for the more interactive and networked environment created by the internet and the social networking sites.

Today's gatekeepers, editors in particular, rely on content from social networking sites to determine which pieces of information may be significant to the general public (Schwalbe et al., 2015). In this way, they lose the ability to decide which information is crucial for the general public and which is not. The articles that are trending on social media may not always match what editors in newsrooms deem to be newsworthy. However, they are frequently compelled to choose public interest items depending on how well-liked they are on the social networking sites.

2.2.2 Networked Gatekeeping Theory

Information can and is easily disseminated from one platform to another in the modern era of social networking sites, taking on a life of its own without having to depend on the legacy media's traditional media gatekeepers. In a process known as networked gatekeeping, as described by Meraz and Papacharissi (2016), news content can be shared, retweeted, hash-tagged, or even hyperlinked by new gatekeepers who rely on technologies for a larger reach on their social networking sites.

According to Nahon (2008), the networked gatekeeping theory offers an understanding of the relationship between gatekeepers and the entity that is subjected to the gatekeeping process – otherwise referred to as the gated. Recent studies indicate that gatekeeping, as it was originally intended, has failed since a 21st-century newsroom can no longer sustain it (Ernste, 2014). This is primarily because professional journalists now directly interact with other parties outside the newsroom real-time, changing communication from a linear to a non-linear process. In their findings, Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) opine that there are new directions for hybrid and fluid journalism that relies in subjective pluralism, cocreation, and collaborative curation as networked framing and gatekeeping practices become activated as prominent actors are crowd-sourced to prominence.

In their paper, Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011) looking at how immediacy, authenticity, and transparency of digital media challenge the original gatekeeping theory, they found that technological advancements and digital media have problematised traditional gatekeeping theory. According to their findings, media organisations need to be more successful in their bid to re-appropriate control online by relying on conventional gatekeeping practices. By primarily channelling through the mediation of networked people and professional communicators, digital media serves as a hub or nexus of information exchange and influence, connecting content consumers to media organisations; as a result, gatekeeping is redefined online (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2011).

In this regard, the digital media ecosystem poses a danger to legacy media as it has no emphasis on impartial, apolitical, and accurate reporting. Even more concerning is that users in these social networking sites are largely anonymous or rely on pseudo accounts and that, in their eagerness to share information, they may violate journalistic

regulations and share content that is not factual or abuse set journalistic principles and ethics while disseminating their content. The networked gatekeeping theory was employed in this study to help look at the complex factors that are influencing the legacy media gatekeepers. It helped look at how legacy media newsroom are adapting to the developments of a more collaborative media environment where professional journalists get to interact with citizen journalists and news consumers as they carry about their journalistic duties.

2.3 General and Empirical Literature Review

2.3.1 Contribution of SNS to News Selection

According to Carlson (2018) Journalists and other media practitioners purposively select and disseminate news content. However, SNS plays an active role within the news ecosystem and therefore cannot be ignored in the role of public responsibility. The development of new media brought several challenges for legacy media organisations including redefining the relationship between the media and the target audience (Hertz, 2016). Digital media and social networking sites form an interesting area of focus for legacy media organisations as they try to see how the new technology fits into their media operations in tandem with the debates on complementarity and substitution. Emergent technologies in media are a possible replacement for traditional platforms. This is particularly buoyed by the decreasing circulation of newspapers and dropping viewership of legacy media content amid competition for audiences with non-media content creators. Severin and Tankard (2001) argue that news gathering and production approaches are being replaced. However, they opine, this change is likely to be a laboured one as new media is only likely to take its place beside the legacy media, with the traditional media not necessarily going away.

The Internet brought with it new, innovative approaches. In a short amount of time, it has become essential to communication, evolving from web pages and e-mails to a growing community of bloggers and now evolving into a platform that supports multiple approaches with a multiplicity of the medium within a medium. With social networking sites assuming a central role in the current communication discourse, there remains a need to evaluate and understand how it works and the value it is adding to the existing legacy media. Bentivegna (2002) points out that speed is one of the factors touted as a positive development of the internet and, in extension social networking sites. The rate of the internet is unmatched when compared to legacy media. However, this brings with it challenges to the gatekeeping function of the media (Bentivegna, 2002).

Asynchronous and synchronous communications in social networking sites enable the rapid dissemination of texts and messages previously unattainable in the traditional legacy media (Mick & Middlebrook, 2015). The absence of boundaries not only contributes to faster diffusion of media content but also makes it possible for all interested parties to share their experiences, thoughts, and recommendations at the same time on the internet and by extension, social networking sites (Bentivegna, 2002).

Usher (2010) opines that the media industry is constantly evolving and moving on to the next thing even before the industry has had a chance to fully understand one medium and how it integrates with current media frameworks. The result is that media organisations are constantly attempting to keep up. As an illustration, consider the rapid evolution of social networking sites and the emergence of more participatory and user-friendly social networking platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.

2.3.2 Emerging Patterns in Production of News

The practice of journalism has greatly benefited from social networking sites, on both large and small media content (Reuters Handbook of Journalism). Reuters, a renowned media organization and news source, has a similar perspective to other media outlets. "We also have important questions about social networking sites, particularly when we use them to share and spread content rather than to gather and receive. This is not our first word on the matter, and it certainly won't be the last, as the concerns around what we may and cannot say there are a frequent topic of discussion" (Reuters, 2008). Reuters acknowledges that they are also attempting to understand how social networking sites operate and how to exploit them to the organisation's advantage.

Newman (2009) opines that social networking sites are increasingly taking the centre stage as it dictates the direction of journalism as a practice. While there are no distinct examples of instances where phases of the development of community participation in media coverage have eclipsed and replaced the initial incarnations, there is, however, an unprecedented growth in the rate and mount of participation and interaction with mainstream media services due to the penetration of social networking sites (Newman, 2009). Similarly, with an emphasis on information flow and emerging variables like convergence as a component of new media, scholars have attempted to examine the idea of developing technology in the communications field. Even though many argue that traditional journalism as we know it is not doomed, many feel that this is the direction the media industry is heading. Journalists frequently scamper, looking for words to discuss how emerging media may affect their profession and comprehend how new media fundamentally change journalism (Usher, 2010).

According to Jenkins (2006), convergence does not happen through media appliances, no matter how sophisticated they become. Convergence occurs within

individual consumers' brains and through social interactions with other content creators and consumers. According to scholars who believe convergence happens within individual content consumers, consumption becomes a collective process in which everyone contributes to the generation of meaning or interpretation of given content. None of us knows everything; each of us knows something, and if we pool our resources and combine our skills, we can put the pieces together (Jenkins, 2006).

2.3.3 Gatekeeping

As a result of the internet, audiences now play an active role in producing news and media content through real-time interaction with legacy media organisations on digital platforms including social networking sites, a practice theorised by Shoemaker and Vos (2009) as audience gatekeeping. In audience gatekeeping, users and consumers of news items share and comment on the content base on their own set of criteria about the newsworthiness (Kwon et al., 2013). In what mirrors the role of journalists, audience members select what content to consume and disseminate to their social networks. With this necessary process of media operation increasingly falling in the hands of those not bound by journalistic ethics, there is need for media decision-makers to find techniques to help maintain the integral role of legacy media as watchdogs and gatekeepers to help curb challenges including misinformation and fake news.

New media provides the audience with a platform where different worlds can collapse and result in the emergence of a global consciousness (William, 1993; Livingstone, 2002). This includes the ability to share and spread content across physical boundaries that the cyber world has obliterated. The issue of audience participation is central to these new technologies and the changing media landscape. Jenkins (2006) contends that the active involvement of consumers is critical to the circulation of media content across different media systems and competing media economies.

Livingstone (2002) also emphasises the growing audience participation, arguing that media theory now focuses on how audiences generate meaning in the news and media spectrum. Audience participation is followed by a look at the audience in particular, or their role for that matter, by examining their creativity in the media communication process. Thus, despite rapidly evolving technology, the part of the audience remains a focal point.

On the other hand, understanding the interaction between social networking sites and human activity is a complicated process regarding the role that each of these elements plays in the communication process. We are experiencing a function and its consequences as a result of the complex interplay between the social networking sites and consumer behaviour that is shaped by it, in which new media play a significant role (Livingstone, 2002).

However, legacy media editors must find, or come up with, ways of dealing with the influence of social networking sites. Online audience behaviour and conversations, including bloggers who disseminate information to a large audience, are increasingly becoming a critical source of influence in the public domain. Journalists and editors look up to them and the social networking sites they occupy in order to predict what media consumers will want (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017). Editors can also quickly identify newsworthy content from trending events around the world by browsing social networking sites feeds on popular sites such as Twitter (Krotoski, 2011).

2.3.4 Digital Disruption

The world is moving towards a media environment where a majority of people are having increased access to varied sources of news and information and this is

largely enabled by digital media. Digital users have the luxury of dictating the content they interact with and this means that content has to be relevant, interesting and valuable for them to consume it (Zemmels, 2012). As a result, news content is now competing with other interesting information that is not necessarily news and this has resulted in a lot of pressure on the media industry that has historically produced mostly news.

The move to an increasingly digital and social media environment has prompted an increasingly intense competition for attention. As a result, this has put a lot of pressure on legacy media organisations. Pure et al. (2013) opine, while these avenues remain vital to producers of news content, their level of importance is gradually growing lesser as distributors of news content. Media organisations are grappling with declining or stagnating operations due to digital disruption, resulting in the need and urgency to develop new, sustainable models tailored for digital news production (Cohen, 2019).

There are several underlying trends in how news and media are evolving. Due to digital disruption, the media environment has morphed into high-choice platforms where internet users and news consumers have access to more content. Other than content, they also have an array of sophisticated devices and new forms of participation at their disposal (Walsh, 2000). Royal (2017) says owing to these developments, consumers now have the luxury of only engaging based on interest. Legacy media, more often than not, finds itself drawn into the trending topics on social networking sites, thus altering its news production to capture these topics to maintain its relevance. Other than roping in trending topics into their daily operations, legacy media newsrooms are also embracing day-two journalism where the trending topics, influenced by numerous shares and comments on social networking sites, are filtered

into stories to great fresher day-two stories. At the end of the day, this has some potential impact on the agenda-setting role of the legacy media as they shift some focus to day-two journalism (Bastos, 2015; Mathurune, 2013; Bergström, & Jervelycke-Belfrage, 2018).

Dutton (2009) opines that the internet provides a platform through which networked individuals are capable of forming the "Fifth Estate." With the advent of the internet, people are now capable of sourcing their information without having to rely on any news or media institution, simply by relying upon the capabilities accorded to them by search engines and social media. Other than freedom and the ability to choose where to get their news, users can now create and share their content through various forms, including blogs, emails, tweets, comments, posts and websites. The independence that allows the internet user to act as news creators provides them with even greater independence from media institutions and offers an opportunity to express public opinion directly. Newman et al. (2012) highlights that this allows the Fifth Estate to operate and fulfil many of the same functions as the Fourth Estate but without the centralised institutional foundations that govern the Fourth Estate.

Audiences are increasingly relying on content and information shared on social networking sites. However, this still leaves a deficit in the content they consume as there is still little verification that goes into the information that is availed to the public on these sites. The information shared has the capacity and capability to contain the personal biases of those publishing the content. In the long run, this has provided legacy media houses with an opportunity to confirm the news shared and dispel fake news spread on social sites. Daramola (2007) quotes Harold Russell that society requires a watcher that scans the environment and reports on the happenings within the community that are of some value to the community. Social networking sites'

emergence is altering legacy media's role in society. In this regard, the media needs to adjust and incorporate other aspects, such as verifying content based on discussions on social networking sites. Thus, legacy media owes some of its operations to the occurrences on social networking sites, which can redefine, the agenda-setting role of legacy media.

Journalists were the public space's sole gatekeepers before the digital era (Ward, 2014). They followed codes of conduct and adhered to strict editorial policies that shaped the ethical rules they observed. As gatekeepers, journalists select and decide what content they produce and disseminate it to the public (Bro & Wallberg, 2014). For a long time, gatekeeping had been a preserve of legacy media. However, Hayasaki et al. (2016) opine that legacy media is losing its claim as the sole gatekeeper with the changing media sphere and the emergence of social networking sites. Trending topics on social networking sites have become increasingly influential in the gatekeeping process as the media that used to sieve content that was relayed to the public now has to contend with paying attention to what is trending on social networking sites, and this has the potential to impact its news production and agenda-setting role.

Diel (2017) argues that legacy media needs to abide by ethics and maintain its status as the core of good journalism despite the increasing disruption caused by the elevated ability of social media platforms to take charge and control content that trends and reaches a broader audience. In trying to keep up with the rising popularity of social networking sites, legacy media still needs to maintain its footing and ensure that they only produce quality content guided by ethics by abiding by editorial integrity and stipulated regulations. In doing this, legacy media ought to consider the interest of their audiences by ensuring the content they create is timely, relevant and accurate. However, this is against the backdrop of already firmly-footed social network site

operations that have since changed the way people live and interact with each other (Chan et al., 2021). Social networking sites are now a leading source of news and information, which was a preserve of legacy media. Apart from the wealth of content, social networking sites also come in to fill in gaps in the media operations of legacy media, including two-way communications. Social networking sites offer quick and efficient two-way communication transcending geographical and social boundaries with at least 48 percent of the global population using social networking sites (Mohsin, 2021). This study analysed the rising popularity of social networking sites in the news ecology, how this impacts news production in the evolving digital world, and the agenda-setting role of legacy media in this ecosystem.

2.4 Summary

This chapter discussed how the changing ecology of news and social networking sites impact the production of news. It also offered a view of how this evolution impacts the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. It also discussed the theoretical foundation for this study by explaining the events being examined herein. It focused on literature in media gatekeeping and the role of social networking sites in the legacy media editorial processes. This chapter also gave an overview of the growing impact of social networking sites on the operations and the resultant gatekeeping roles of newsroom editors in legacy media houses.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology adopted by the researcher to find out the impact of this rise of social networking sites in the news production process of legacy media. The overall design discussed in this section also provided the researcher with an avenue to determine the gatekeeping rigours that news content is subjected to before publishing, particularly content borrowing heavily on social networking sites. This chapter covers the research design, the study approach, population and sampling design. It also incorporates research procedures and data analysis methods alongside ethical considerations of the study and how the researcher carried out data analysis and data presentations.

3.2 Research Approach and Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach as it sought to understand how social networking sites impact the production of news and the gatekeeping role of editors. The qualitative approach is an exploratory process that offers an understanding of issues or problems by building a holistic view based on what is said and done in a natural setting without the manipulation of variables (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is appropriate in conducting studies that seek to explain a particular phenomenon by analysing lived experiences in given situations (Stake, 2010). According to Creswell (2014), this approach requires an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon within the context in which the phenomena took place. Thus, it best captures the objectives of this study which revolve around analysis of operations within

the newsroom including gate-keeping and adoption of social networking sites in news production processes.

The qualitative approach was appropriate for this study given that editors contextualise and determine what news items go out to the public as they subject the information, they receive through gatekeeping analysis before disseminating it to the public. By using qualitative research, the researcher gained a better understanding of how social networking sites impact production of news by factoring in how editors use social networking sites in their day-to-day operations in the newsroom. Qualitative research helped determine what the motivations of editorial decisions based on social networking sites are and how these actions impacted the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. Sogunro (2002) reiterates that the qualitative approach is ideal for studies that depend on naturally occurring data as it allows the researcher to develop a level of detail based on the involvement and actual experiences.

3.2.1 Research Design

Research design is the overall strategy adopted by researchers to ascertain effective analysis and address the research problem (Vaus, 2001). Kothari (2004) opines, research design offers a valid, objective, and economical roadmap to answer research questions. Both scholars emphasise the efficacy of the process employed to interpret research problems and determine appropriate answers to the research questions.

This study adopted a descriptive research design as it looked at the growing role of social networking sites on editorial processes, including news production and gatekeeping. In a descriptive research design, the researcher cannot manipulate or control variables in the study. However, they can only explain what is going on or happened (Kothari, 2004). Omair (2015) describes a descriptive research design as one

that examines a situation, identifies attributes of a particular phenomenon and is based on exploring the relation between two or more phenomena. A descriptive research design was appropriate for this study as it explored the relations between two phenomena and examined how the changing ecology of news correlates with the growing role of social networking sites. The descriptive research design also helped the researcher engage with participants in the context of their day-to-day operations.

3.3 Population

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006), a population is a group, variables, concepts, or class of subjects or phenomena that are studied and about whom researchers base their studies. Also, the population is the collection of cases of interest that researchers in a given study rely on to come up with generalized findings (Sim & Wright, 2000). Thus, the population for this study were legacy media editors in Kenya. The population in this study offered an understanding of whether the gatekeeping role of editors was being impacted by the emergence of social networking sites and whether they were compelled to factor in aspects such as trends in social networking sites in their roles in the production of news.

3.4 Target Population

The target population is the specific group of people that a researcher depends on for the findings of their study (Cox, 2011). The target population in this study were digital editors working at Nation Media Group (NMG) and Standard Media Group (SG) as they command more than half of the audience share in the country (CA, 2020). The editors were settled upon based on their interaction with social networking sites as they gather and disseminate news content. The two media houses are among the most authoritative legacy media houses in the country and have a strong bearing on the

digital news space. Therefore, they offer impeccable representation and a good basis for analysis of the effects of the digital news space, particularly social networking sites, on newsroom operations in Kenya.

3.5 Study Site

The site for this study was Nairobi, Kenya, where the two media houses are headquartered. The researcher conducted the interviews in Nairobi at the convenience of the respondents with those physically unavailable at the time interviewed virtually.

3.6 Sample Size

The researcher purposively sampled 8 editors interacting with digital platforms for daily docketing – a summary of deliverables expected for the day – and content dissemination at NMG and SG newsrooms. While both newsrooms have embraced convergence and, therefore, do not have a distinct difference between actors in the digital space and the rest of the newsroom, there are still point persons within their editorial departments who are charged with managing their digital editorial processes. Thus, the digital-inclined editors provided information that the researcher could rely upon to respond to objectives on whether social networking sites are reinforcing or undermining legacy media news production processes and their gatekeeping role.

At the NMG converged newsroom, the study purposely sampled editors including the Audience Engagement Editor in charge of customer experience on the digital platforms of the media house. As their role dictates, they are part of the team that determines what content is included for the online audience and how this content is packaged. Also sampled was the Continuity Editor who is responsible for the daily docketing and what content runs on NMG editorial platforms. The other editor was the Community Editor responsible for the sourcing of content from the grassroots,

especially human-interest content. The Enterprise Editor in charge of prime content, and who dockets the main stories for the media house's print and digital brands was also interviewed.

At the SG, the researcher sampled editors including the Digital Editor who is in charge of the media house's digital platforms; the Continuity Editor responsible for docketing in the converged newsroom; the Intake Editor responsible for content sourcing across the converged newsroom; the Radar Editor in charge of current affairs and whose role entails monitoring social networking sites for breaking news content.

3.7 Sampling Procedures

For a researcher to make a rational assumption that qualifies the population under the study as representational of the overall prevailing conditions being studied, there is a need for the researcher to use an adequate sample size (Adam, 2020). Sharma (2017) defines sampling as a procedure that a researcher employs to systematically select a specific number of respondents from a pre-determined population to serve as data sources and participants in the study. Researchers depend on sampling techniques as it is practically impossible to engage every participant in the study population (Sharma, 2017).

This study adopted a purposive sampling technique when selecting participants. Purposive sampling is conducive as it helps the researcher obtain information from specific participants within the population who have the information that the researcher is seeking (Lavrakas, 2008). In this regard, the purposive selection used in this study depended on the fact that particular editors within the selected newsrooms have elaborate interactions with the social networking sites and, therefore, have information on how these sites influence their day-to-day operations. The editors are also the best placed to identify adjustments in their gatekeeping role in newsrooms.

3.8 Research Method

The researcher used in-depth interviews to gather information from a sample of 8 legacy media houses' editors and generated qualitative descriptions of given attributes to represent the larger population of legacy media editors in Kenya. The interviews entailed in-depth interactive conversations with the respondents on the research questions. According to Hammond and Wellington (2020), interviews allow for clarification of questions and the identification of unexpected themes. It also allows for probing into accounts of events, thoughts, values, feelings as well as perspectives.

The interviews were semi-structured and targeted to the editors within the two newsrooms in Kenya, the Nation Media Group and the Standard Media Group. Stuckey (2013) argues that semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to dictate the interviews based on the responses of the participants by flexibly incorporating follow-up questions. To this regard, the researcher was able to collect additional data relevant to the study as respondents had the chance to respond to emergent questions informed by reactions to the main questions. Interviews allow researchers to develop holistic descriptions of the phenomena under study. Interviews permit learning of how events are interpreted (Warren, 2002).

3.9 Data Collection Tools

Comprehensive interview guides were used to collect data from respondents in this study. In qualitative research, interviews are used to give meaning to leading themes in the respondent's areas of relevant operation (McNamara, 2009). Mcgrath et al. (2019) elaborate that interviews allow for an in-depth look into the participants' lived experiences while revealing additional phenomena as experienced and perceived by the respondents.

Interview guides are a set of questions tailored to guide researchers during interviews (Turner, 2010). To cater for the digital sub-editors whose roles mainly entail quality assurance and user experience on the digital platforms and not necessarily content sourcing and creation, the researcher used one interview guide for the editors involved in content sourcing. The researcher adopted a semi-structured interview design which allowed them to adhere to the interview guide and yet flexibly incorporate topical trajectories during the interview processes. Kabir (2016) opines that semi-structured interviews allow a researcher to get more than a single chance to interview given respondents as it allows them to add secondary questions during the interview process.

The researcher employed open-ended questions for the interviews so as to allow the respondents to give impartial answers by being able to respond freely and include all responses they may have deemed relevant to a given query. The open-ended questions elicited more than yes and no answers and respondents were able to provide detailed accounts of their experiences dealing with social networking sites.

3.10 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher sought permission from the two media houses – Nation Media Group and Standard Media Group – to collect data from their staff. The researcher then approached the target respondents and settled appointments for the interviews. On the material day, the interviews were audio-recorded and backed-up for future referencing.

3.11 Pre-testing of Data Collection Tools

As Cramer and Howitt (2011) opine, pre-testing is when a small set of respondents within the research population are selected for data collection to identify any possible issues with the data collection tools employed by the researcher. To

identify any possible problems with the data collection tools, the researcher conducted a pilot study to pre-test the interview guide before they embarked on the actual data collection.

For the pre-testing of the interview guide, the researcher involved digital editors from Radio Africa Group as it is one of the legacy media houses in Kenya sharing a lot in common with NMG and SG. Other than the similarities, the researcher also considered Radio Africa as it forms part of the study population. The pre-testing was done in Nairobi and the tools administered to respondents with roles similar to the target population in the study to ascertain relevance and similarity in test conditions. The responses were collected as simulations to determine if the interview guide covered the appropriate areas and whether the questions were clear and capable of eliciting accurate responses to the research questions the study sought to answer.

3.12 Validity and Reliability of Research Tools

The validity of a research tool is the extent to which it purports to measure what it intends to measure (Bolarinwa, 2015). The researcher ensured the validity of the interview guide as it helped them determine the questions to use and certify that the questions were correctly attending to the matters of importance to the study. To ascertain the tool's validity, the researcher analysed the data from the pretesting to check whether the responses were addressing the study's objectives. The correct tool gives data that responds to the actual study area (Taherdoost, 2016). The researcher pre-tested the data collection tool with two editors at Radio Africa, a number that was settled on based on the available resources at the researcher's disposal. As Blair and Conrad (2011) say, using a larger sample during pre-testing, a researcher needs to critically look at the expected payoff from the pre-test concerning the resource requirement for the actual data collection.

On the other hand, reliability is the ability of a tool to provide the same reply over and over. Reliability looks at how the responses collected using a particular tool can be replicated. By looking at the pre-test responses, the researcher was also able to find out that the respondents gave similar responses to the given questions thus was able to rely on saturation to triangulate the data.

Creswell (2009) opines that the measurement tool must be reliable for a study to be valid. To ensure this, the researcher resorted to plain language for better clarity of the questions. The pre-testing helped the researcher know that the tool is reliable and could produce steady, consistent results if used for the actual data collection. Other than embracing the use of simple language, the questions that appeared problematic were rephrased to improve the validity and reliability of the tool.

3.13 Data Analysis and Presentation Plan

After collecting the data, the researcher cleaned it up to ascertain that all the responses were complete and could be used in the study. The data was then analysed to capture emergent themes relevant to the research questions. Thus, the study relied on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis can be helpful in the study as it helps the researcher summarise the perspectives of different respondents and highlight patterns and similarities (King, 2004). The interviews were audio-recorded, and the researcher transcribed them verbatim and created initial indexing of the keywords, which was then used to classify the responses together based on similarity and response to the objectives. From the keyword's classification, the researcher then came up with themes based on the study's research questions. The researcher then generated reports relevant to the themes as they respond to the research questions and objectives.

The researcher used source triangulation since the study employed semi-structured interview guides. Triangulation is when a researcher uses different data

sources to comprehensively understand a given phenomenon (Turner, 2016). Source triangulation was mainly helpful in this study as the researcher was collecting unique and individualised perceptions of how social networking sites have impacted operations in the newsroom including the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. The researcher then organised the preliminary findings and generated reports that were presented in narratives and quotes from the respondents.

3.14 Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought all necessary clearances before embarking on data collection. The clearances included approval by the Aga Khan University Ethics Review Committee through the Graduate School of Media and Communications *(See Appendix C)*. The researcher also got a permit to conduct the study from relevant authorities, including the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) *(See Appendix E)*. The researcher also sought consent from the editors taking part in the study *(See Appendix A)*. The findings were presented as a collective representation of the legacy media landscape of the country in the face of the growing role of social networking sites.

The study relied on data from the media editors, and the nature of the information they shared touched on editorial processes that the respondents might consider sensitive. The data collected risked revealing sensitive existing gatekeeping protocols including possible lack of gatekeeping protocols in the media houses under study. Case in point, the respondents needed to provide information on their ethical decision-making and editorial processes. Such information could present ethical issues of disclosure of confidential information concerning editorial policies at the two media houses.

The information collected also had the potential of exposing the vulnerabilities of the media houses under the study, and some of the editors were hesitant to disclose the sensitive editorial information for fear of recrimination. Therefore, the researcher considered the principle of no harm by staying aware and informed of all the potential harm that the study could inflict on the respondents and the reputation of the media organisations under study. To do this, the researcher relied on strategies to protect the study subjects, including the removal of identifier components and biographical details, and presentation of the findings in aggregated form.

At the time of data collection, the researcher was still an employee of the Nation Media Group, one of the two media houses under study in this research. To ensure bias and conflict of interest did not creep in, the researcher observed professionalism and openly disclosed this fact to the respondents while assuring that the data collected was strictly for academic purposes.

3.15 Summary

This chapter has discussed the qualitative research approach and descriptive research design, and in-depth interviews that targeted digital editors working at NMG and SG for the sake of the study. It has also described how the data was collected and analysed, focused on the validity and reliability of the research tools and the ethical considerations the researcher adhered to while conducting the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This study sought to find out how social networking sites are impacting production of news within the legacy media newsroom and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. This chapter presents the findings, analysis and interpretations from the in-depth interviews from the digital editors at Nation Media Group (NMG) and Standard Media Group (SG). The researcher interviewed 6 participants drawn from Standard Media Group and Nation Media Group. The participants comprised of digital editors who interact and employ Social Networking Sites (SNS) on a daily basis as they go about their role. The study targeted a total of 8 editors and had a response rate of 75% as two were unavailable for either physical or virtual interviews. The responses were analysed and presented within the study objectives. For the purposes of this study, the responses were attributed generic titles from Interviewee 1 all the way to Interviewee 6.

4.2 Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation

4.2.1 Findings

4.2.1.1 Contribution of SNS to News Selection

The first objective of the study sought to assess the contribution of social networking sites to news selection by legacy media. The researcher analysed the responses on contribution of SNS to news selection and there were four emergent key themes including Source of news, Docketing, Follow-up stories and Prominence.

Source of news

Social Networking Sites are a leading source of news content and deeper insights for news stories. All the respondents mentioned that often, the newsroom picks topics covered on SNS and mainstreams them on their platforms. Most of these stories originate on SNS and as the study found, a majority of legacy media online audience are found on SNS and thus the need to factor in content that appeals to the SNS audience:

> Yeah, we know that most of the people that we want to capture online are on all these social media platforms. And there is so much that is going on that remains and uncovered. Some stories actually even end up being quite big. You chance upon it on social media and then you commission that story purely based on the source of that story being social media. You can then send a team to go and do more probing so that you can mainstream the story (Interviewee 2).

Interviewee 4 also pointed out that SNS is a leading source of news. Editors consider trending topics on SNS to commission stories that tend to offer deeper insights and give the audience a professional perspective.

> For instance, there was a discussion on when children are supposed to learn how to swim, for instance. This discussion picked up pace when musician Davido's son drowned and it was extensively talked about on social media. In such a case, it is only a feature story that is going to talk about how parents should teach their children how to swim and whether parenting is the issue or negligence is to blame when such incidents occur (Interviewee 4).

By joining discussions on SNS through media content, newsrooms strive to offer additional value to their audiences. As Interviewee 6 puts it: "... our role in such trending topics is taking the story forward rather than being a stenographer of what has happened; where you are saying 'he said, she said'. That adds no value to the conversation here." Newsrooms thus go the extra mile to provide all the details that would ensure the narrative becomes balanced. Nonetheless, there are other avenues besides SNS that are efficient and are employed when deciding on story leads.

> Other avenues for follow up, one of them probably, maybe a key one is, say, news sources themselves. You might publish a story then the

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news source has a reaction or something develops. Then, the news source can be an alternative avenue for you to do a follow up story. I think even in the newsroom itself. The newsroom is structured such that journalists who are working on stories, from time to time, they consult and sometimes maybe have their own internal conversations which could ultimately give those alternatives, or maybe follow up angles for stories that have already been published (Interviewee 3).

As illustrated above, there are other sources of news content beyond those brought forth by social networking sites, and news sources remain a main avenue of story leads.

Docketing

The study established that coverage on social networking sites influence the stories that are picked for the day as editors' factor in prior and potential coverage of topics on SNS when they carry out their docketing roles. According to the respondents, trending topics on SNS form part of the daily docketing. The findings show that, with the audience leaning towards trends on SNS, legacy media newsrooms push the limits to ensure that they are in sync with the audience by including trending topics in their dockets. By doing this, they are able to get good readership and viewership.

In most cases, if you are off, you are likely not to get any good readership or views on your story. So, at the end of the day, when you do a story or before you decide on the stories that are going to carry the day, you have to look at the trends earlier on so that you are aware of the kind of stories that are likely to carry the day (Interviewee 4).

Trends on SNS form part of the daily docketing as editors factor the trending topics that offer good story leads which then the newsroom pursues further by including them in the docket lists. The study found that editors consider topics on SNS for their docketing:

Of course. I have to check the trending topics. Occasionally you stumble upon a topic, you pick and it offers a story lead so I'm able to assign. And since it is a trending topic, you know, you require quick turn-around so that you still continue jumping and benefiting

on that trend. So, yeah, I consider topics on social media for my docketing (Interviewee 5).

SNS impact the look of news dockets as daily docket meetings are guided by analytics derived from SNS. Newsrooms have come up with digital tools that allow them to collect and monitor traction on SNS and the information is used to guide choice of stories that are geared towards making the most of the trends. The study also found that prior coverage of SNS impacts docketing

> Yes, social media plays a critical role in determining how our docket looks like. Every morning at 7:30 we converge as section editors and regional editors and the first order of business is looking at analytics. You know how stories performed the previous day, how they are performing in real time. We have all those tools. We have targets for performance of stories on social media and we also we get like a breakdown or a briefing on what is trending on social media; what are the most popular stories within that moment. If there are trending hashtags or if something is being discussed and it's trending, then it follows that you need to commission a story along that topic so that you can take advantage of the traffic and also inform your audiences on that particular issue that is creating great interest (Interviewee 2).

> It is important because social media is a very good indicator on how your would-be readers [are] perceiving your story and how they are interacting with it. Obviously sometimes there are very helpful suggestions that social media would make on the kind of angle to follow, the kind of things they would want to know in the story. In the end, this helps to figure out how to package the day two story (Interviewee 1).

By considering the coverage of topics on SNS, editors are able to determine what topics are likely to resonate well with the audience and hence include them in their docket lists.

It also emerged that the coverage of topics on SNS does not always influence the decision on big stories for the day during the docketing. However, the findings also show that SNS played a critical role in helping the newsroom understand the topics that the audience are interested in. "No, not necessarily what to focus on for that day, but

every day it does not hurt to go through social media and see what people are discussing and see what topics can give you clicks (Interviewee 2)."

Follow-up stories

A majority of the respondents agreed that the engagement that stories have on SNS impacts the decision to pursue follow-up stories. Newsrooms consider how a story performs on SNS to decide whether to commission a follow-up story. Feedback from SNS helps editors decide whether to push for a follow up or to commission a second story addressing any grey areas from the initial story. Interviewee 3 said that at times feedback from SNS goes all the way to offer solutions to a problem the newsroom could be battling with as pertains the coverage of a news story:

> Thereafter, you must you must ask yourself, 'are there are other follow up angles that we can have for these stories?' And that will also be informed by the feedback that you get on social media because at times you might publish a story and the people out there will tell you that 'hey you missed out on this' or probably what next, what happened next or if it is a story that probably needs solution, you can probably even get that kind of feedback from your online audience as people maybe giving you tips on how to address that particular problem or to find solutions to that particular issue (Interviewee 3).

Performance of a story on SNS also offers insights that editors can then pick up and rely on to keep their audience hooked to their news platforms.

> Once we get the data that this was the top ranked story on say Facebook and Twitter, we obviously know that there is some great interest on that story. Or, you know, people will tell you that 'this story has been shared widely on social media or on WhatsApp groups that I'm in' and so we ensure that we get a follow up story so that we keep serving it to people and that guarantees that we keep the audiences hooked and coming back to the site (Interviewee 2).

The findings also show that when a story ranks top on SNS, then the newsroom picks that as an indication of some great interest on the story or topic and the editors use this to commission a follow-up story so as to ensure the newsroom continues to

serve the needs of their audience. One of the respondents added that SNS also acts as a post analysis platform for the newsroom even as they guided choice for follow-ups. Interview 4 opines that editors consider pursuing follow-up stories after they analyse the reactions that the initial story received on SNS:

> In most cases it is normally like a post analysis. You will do a story and then depending on how people react to it, you can do like an analysis of what to do next. In most cases you will have to analyse, look at this how the story is doing, look at the comments to see where you went wrong, because, as much as we are journalists, we never get it right all the time (Interviewee 4).

Prominence

Deciding on the level of prominence to accord news stories is one of the areas that editor's factor when selecting news content. All of the participants observed that social networking sites guide their choice of what content to give prominence when deciding on the main stories of the day. Coverage of topics on these sites help point the editors to the areas where the audience is interested.

> When I wake up, the first thing I do is I check Twitter to see what is trending, then I will check YouTube and then there's a way you can check on Google Kenya to see what guys are talking about. If you follow social media, you will be able to know what guys are talking about and then based on that, depending on whether it's newsworthy, because you see not all, banter should be a story (Interviewee 6).

SNS performance is key in deciding prominence. According to the findings, in the digital era, legacy media derive most of their feedback from SNS and with this they get a glimpse of the audience's preferences. Therefore, there is need for newsrooms to adjust their content and angle them to the needs of the audience.

> Like I've mentioned, the interactions that we have are mainly out there on social media. So, if you are going to have, say, a number of stories that you are working on at a particular time, the prominence that you give to those stories, you will have to factor in maybe the kind of feedback that those stories potentially might trigger (Interviewee 3).

Not all trending topics on SNS, however, find their way into mainstream content by legacy media, as there are some topics that get traction on SNS as sponsored campaigns. Newsrooms, therefore, sieve through the trending topics to separate the sponsored campaigns from organic campaigns. The findings also show that organic campaigns have a lasting effect. The lasting impression gives editors room to gauge the topics and consider mainstreaming them on their legacy media new platforms.

> If a hashtag appears for like 5 minutes and it disappears then you can sense that probably it is a sponsored campaign. But most of the organic campaigns actually have a lasting effect for even up to days up to weeks or even up to up to months. So yeah, based on how it [a trending topic] is performing on social media, you can tell whether you need to jump on it or let it slide (Interviewee 2).

However, according to Interviewee 1, SNS determines the level of prominence to accord a story only up to a limit; "But I think only to an extent that there are obviously those stories that you would want to look out for that are not everywhere and that are not on social media, that are not with everybody else and would set you apart." They opine that there are other stories that are not covered on SNS but are important and need to be given priority when selecting stories.

4.2.1.2 Emerging Patterns in Production of News

This study also sought to establish patterns in production of news in the era of social networking sites. The researcher looked at how SNS impact production of news and how legacy media editors are employing SNS in their roles during the production of news and found five emergent themes from the responses. They include: Guide for Story Leads; SNS Coverage and Mainstreaming Content; Perception and Packaging of Content; Audience Behaviour and performance of Articles; and Feedback and Follow-up.

Guide for story leads

Newsrooms depend on social networking sites for story leads. However, the reliance is narrowed down to mostly guiding decisions on what the society might be interested in. According to the respondents, besides giving newsrooms an opportunity to glimpse into what the society is pursuing and what they care about, engagement on SNS also fuels follow-up stories and deeper coverage of topics. Trends on SNS are also synonymous with soft news story leads. Interviewee 4 says that "A breaking news story will give the what, when, why, but in most cases, it does not give the how and the 'so what?', you know. Social media reaction and interaction gives rise to deeper stories coupled with the fact that you cannot just run stories based on breaking news angles because this kind of stories are not really impactful. In most cases, this is how feature stories are born. And as you understand right now, there is a lot of information overload, stories are everywhere, news is everywhere. So, for you to really stand out, you have to follow up on these minor stories to make them deeper and better" (Interviewee 4).

The study also found that editors pick SNS topics to mainstream without necessarily limiting themselves to hard news content. There are instances where newsrooms jump on trends on SNS solely because they want to be part of the conversation and gain on the traction the topic is receiving and not necessarily because the topic is of great news value. "There are certain trends and conversations that go viral that you cannot ignore, either because they are very serious or even sometimes, they are lighted-hearted," Interviewee 6 says before adding that "It is not necessarily a serious like story, the same case with other feel-good stories. There is no harm in jumping onto those trends" (Interviewee 6).

While SNS offers insights into story leads, it also gives a view of what "the society thinks, what the they are pursuing, and what they care about." However, the findings also show that:

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There is obviously the requirement as a journalist to give them something else, to give them something more, to give them proper context, and to give the fresher perspective to an idea. But that does not mean completely ignoring what social media is doing, what people are talking about out there, cause then that would be defeatist. That would be closing your eyes to what is happening right before you (Interviewee 1).

SNS coverage and mainstreaming content

Stories on social networking sites are often picked and shared on mainstream media platforms as these conversations often make mainstream news items. Trending topics on SNS are also incorporated into mainstream media where they are repackaged to offer readers better fact-checked perspectives as legacy media battles with fake news online:

There is a lot of dirt and untruths within social media. So, if [a legacy media organisation] published it, then it means it went through a rigorous process. So yes, I take advantage of these topics to offer insights onto what possibly could be, you know, discussed over the issue (Interviewee 4).

The study found that newsrooms pick SNS topics that will give them traction and promote conversations that will allow the particular newsrooms to make the most of the SNS trends. To be able to do this effectively, editors have found themselves employing newer strategies including splitting content into two or picking a different angle to serve as a follow up story.

The Kenyan lady who was killed in the US by the husband. So, when that story came. It was a complete story. But I realised that within the story, the husband had actually suffered from mental illness and all. That and that there were red flags that were actually ignored because he literally had cried for help weeks before he committed the crime. I remember it was a blogger who broke the story. But how did we not lose out and take charge of that conversation? By the follow up story – the red flags that were ignored." The interviewee added that "you want to continue that conversation because once you see the interest from the audience peaking, you do not let that go. You feed that demon in them. They want more of this. So, you continue feeding it until you start noticing that interest dropping (Interviewee 5).

The study found that newsrooms pick stories on social networking sites and share them on mainstream media platforms. The study also found that legacy media newsrooms mainstream content from SNS especially when the topic or story draws a lot of interest and responses.

> There are also instances when we also invade peoples' spaces you know. By invade I mean, these people may not be interested in getting a story to mainstream media. They might just be discussing an event or an incident or a topic. But when, as a journalist, you see that it is actually drawing interest and responses, then you know that you can mainstream the story. Then you will be speaking to many people. In the end [in the newsroom] you commission a story and you bring it now to our platforms (Interviewee 2).

Perception and packaging of content

Newsrooms factor SNS audience perception of stories to better angle and adjust the stories. Newsrooms also anticipate how a story will perform on SNS before it is commissioned. The study also established that potential performance of stories on SNS impacts the choice of stories to be given prominence on the news platforms. In order to avoid collecting negative reactions on SNS, editors consider altering the packaging of their content into ways that augur well with their online audience.

> In order to not get negative comments, you will have to at least tweak it a little bit. Sometimes it is even the photo. People feel like the photo is a bit gory, or maybe the photo is not right for the story, so you will have to change it because at the end of the day, social media is becoming a big part of our day-to-day lives [as mainstream media] because you also fear cancellation (Interviewee 4).

The study also found that feedback received online, mostly from SNS users, impacts how newsrooms package their content. "Largely, you have to factor in the reception that the content that you have receives. And in the digital era, the major advantage is that the feedback is often spontaneous and instantaneous, so you can always know how well whatever you have put out has been received. (Interviewee 4)." As a result, editors have found themselves altering headlines and, in some instances,

reangling an entire story based on the negative reception the particular story received online. Interviewee 3 concurs that "it happens often. It is something that I have had to do. Say for example changing the headline or even, in some cases, reangling the whole story based on maybe you could be having a situation in which a story contains factual errors."

Audience behaviour and performance of articles

Interactions and overall traction on SNS impact how stories are handled in the newsroom. SNS have also seen the birth of newer newsroom strategies in a bid to increase and maintain top readership. When packaging their content, newsrooms consider options that stand the best chances of being well received by the audience. To be able to achieve this, editors strive to ensure the stories remain within the confines of SNS trends so that they can yield maximum gains from the SNS traction.

> But also, in terms of the social media promotion, when I get to these stories, I'm always very deliberate in asking the social team to use powerful quotes within the story that will resonate with this audience that we are targeting on social media. So even in terms of social promotion, you want to remain within the confines of the trend. (Interviewee 5).

Apart from potential reaction and feedback, newsrooms also factor in the analytics of how given content performed on SNS. As Interviewee 3 says, "Analytics generally informs, or rather largely dictates, issues like prominence accorded stories on the news website, and even the angles to use probably in similar stories." The information is used to guide how stories are handled including settling on best angles and prominence to accord the stories.

However, according to some of the respondents, the behaviour of mainstream media audiences on SNS does not exactly mirror performance of articles on news sites. There are instances when news content receives top reactions and feedback on SNS but

the same does not mirror the performance of the particular content on the legacy media news platforms:

> I would be lying if I did not say this. You position your stories on social media but these fellas will comment on that story without reading it. They will not even bother to open. You find a story has almost 1000 comments but when you look at the performance of the story on Analytics, it is doing badly and you wonder why these 1000 people did not open the story, what was it about this story that essentially no one opened it? (Interviewee 5).

The study also found that SNS are integral to the operations of the newsroom as the online audience plays a part in dictating how newsrooms adjust. As a result, the researcher found, newsrooms are often embracing newer ways of doing things as they adjust to keep up with the ever-morphing SNS audience:

> Of course, in this age you cannot do without it [social networking sites]. The audiences keep changing. They morph into something and it is actually very interesting because the audience of August is not the audience I'm dealing with now. Every month I have a different animal and you have to be very dynamic as an editor as you plan your day and how you try to position your stories (Interviewee 5).

Feedback and follow-up

Newsrooms investigate stories on SNS for deeper leads and for insights. SNS also plays the role of quality control through instant feedback and reactions from audiences. The research also found that newsrooms consider this feedback and interactions when repackaging stories.

> Information, news and any event that is newsworthy, is already out there. And by saying it is out there, we are talking about the consumers who largely interact with the mainstream media content, or what has been published online, already having interacted with the very news elsewhere. So, such considerations [audience feedback] are key for me as a practicing journalist and as a digital journalist for that matter (Interviewee 3).

The study found that newsrooms also rely on SNS to gauge what the society is fixated on and use this information to curate their content and offer their audience

media content that speaks to their needs. As Interviewee 1 says: "[SNS] is the easiest way to gauge what society is fixated on. It is a mirror that society gives to you on the stories you are doing or on the things they care about. And the things they would want to see in your coverage."

SNS allows newsrooms to quality check their content and correct any errors promptly. The study found that feedback received on SNS gives editors the opportunity to make corrections faster as the audience is often quick to point out published errors.

> Real-time feedback is both negative and positive. The fact is, if you publish a misleading article then you have a shorter time to notice mistakes and correct them as people will point them out as soon as the story goes up. Previously, you know, it would take even five days or even a week before you knew that you actually misled the public. So, the opportunity to make corrections within a shorter period of time, I think is a positive thing (Interviewee 2).

4.2.1.3 Gatekeeping Role of Editors

As the third objective, the study sought to examine the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors in the wake of digital disruption. The researcher found seven emergent themes that spoke to the relationship between the gatekeeping role of editors and SNS as an aspect of digital disruption. These may be summarised as social activism, SNS and Newsroom Decision Making, Unpublishing Content, Professionalism versus 'social media noise', Audience Sentiment, Feedback and Newsroom Decisions, and Journalistic Principles and Reliance on SNS.

Social activism

The study found that editors pick up social justice campaigns on social networking sites as legacy media is often roped into social activism courses due to how topics are covered on SNS. However, there is always the need to verify the authenticity

of such campaigns so as to ensure the newsroom is not roped into taking part in sponsored campaigns.

> Especially when it comes to social activism, I do a quick but thorough audit of where they started. I have some tool that I use. Basically, this tool enables me to know who started the hashtag and whether it is paid. It is always very important to know that before you jump into such causes. And for social activism there is always a very thin line, you know, between falling out with the law and helping promote our cause. When we find such a topic, I want to amplify it but what I always tend to go with is getting a different angle from what is being discussed. I always like doing different angles, mostly because you want to offer something different. The hashtag, everyone retweets that. But now when you go and offer something new, you take charge of that conversation and you promote a cause, you know, service journalism (Interviewee 5).

The study also found that legacy media editors take part in social activism causes due to topics' coverage on SNS as they often want to make the most of the traction that these causes elicit. SNS also bring a sense of immediacy when it comes to covering these causes and this compels newsrooms to consider making the most of them while the society is still engrossed in them so as to take advantage of that attention to pass the message.

> There are various causes that have been, for lack of a better word, fought on social media, and have found their way into the mainstream media simply because they are societal issues. Social media also gives a sense of immediacy to push for these topics in a way that the previous traditional sense of how media ran does not offer. So, there are obviously cases where you would find there was activism that happened on social media that found their way into the mainstream media (Interviewee 1).

The study also found that there are instances when editors jump onto social activism campaigns out of fear of only picking them up late when they have already lost the attention of the public. As Interviewee 2 says: "We also jump on that [social justice campaigns]. So, essentially, social media many a times will lead the way and then as mainstream media we'll follow and then exploit and also use our platforms to

amplify it further to the rest of the audiences." However, newsrooms also cherry pick

what social justice campaigns to pick from SNS. They do this in a bid to steer clear of

activist journalism.

> Of course, there is always a campaign that is running. You can
> provide coverage without doing activist journalism. But you have to
> be careful. You have to draw a line, because when you are a mass
> media website, you have all sorts of readers and you do not want to
> appear to be championing a certain cause, because then you end up
> alienating certain segments of your audiences (Interviewee 6).

SNS and newsroom decision making

The study found that feedback on SNS impacts newsroom decisions including

settling on feature story ideas and angles. It also found that feedback rendered on SNS

impacts decisions on how stories are handled in the newsroom. Legacy media editors

have often times considered altering stories especially when they carried errors. Due to

feedback shared on SNS, the editors pick the mistakes, correct the stories and run

updated versions which are mostly accompanied with editor's notes acknowledging the

mistake.

> Sometimes we get things wrong, so there are facts that come to our
> attention after the story has gone up. And once we corroborate that
> we actually got it wrong, we have taken steps to correct that: put an
> editors' note - you have to accept and indicate the story that you made
> a mistake so that it offers a second line of feedback. If that feedback
> came via social media, we also do that editor's note via social media
> and say 'hey, it is a correction we have changed ABC because these
> facts have come to be known to us' (Interviewee 5).

However, as Interviewee 1 points out, while performance of stories on SNS is

integral, the newsroom does not always rely on a story's potential coverage on the sites

before running it. "It would be very difficult to think about how social media would

react before publishing the story. But there are obviously a few cases here and there

where social media has pointed out to us that we got it wrong here, there was proper

context there, there was this and this person to talk to here. You would then obviously

put that into the final story that then comes or updates the story that had gone out"
(Interviewee 1).

Unpublishing content

The study found that feedback on SNS hardly compels editors to unpublish a story. Nonetheless, it also found that unpublishing of stories depends on several reasons beyond SNS, as Interview 2 points out: "On considering bringing down a story based on comments from social media, there are many issues considered and we have actually taken a down a number. But there are many aspects to this. First, maybe the story is not balanced or it is not well edited and then people just swarm the comment section on social media bashing the media house because of the quality. So obviously then that is a mistake on your [editor's] end. So, you either bring down the story, or you edit it and then republish it."

The study also found that there are instances when newer information is brought to the attention of the editors after a story has gone and they have found themselves obliged to pull down the story especially in cases where the story was either misleading or erroneous.

> You are a journalist and you are writing on a technical issue and probably the experts that you have interviewed misled you. And then someone who is more experienced comes up with new information and you can clearly tell that your story is misleading or erroneous. We have a way of how that is done; you bring down the story with accountability that 'this story has been withdrawn for this and that reason' (Interviewee 2).

Nonetheless, the study also found that it is not always that a story is pulled down as a result of feedback received from SNS. Interviewee 6 opines that there is need to find a balance between the feedback received and the editorial policy on how to handle such stories: "The thing with feedback, especially when you have a product that is for the mass market, you have to find a balance between using audience feedback to guide

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editorial decisions and your editorial decisions being controlled by audience feedback."
In the end, this points out to tension that exists between editorial gatekeeping and listening to the needs and demands of the audience.

Professionalism versus 'social media noise'

The study also found that professionalism and journalistic experience helps newsrooms stay ahead of 'social media noise.' Even so, settling on newsworthy content on SNS relies a lot on personal judgment. "As long as it is something that can be corroborated, number one, and it is factual and it is newsworthy, then you can go ahead and do a story," Interviewee 6 opines. The findings also show that professionalism also ensures that an editor can stand their ground when faced with criticism:

> As trained professionals, we can almost always sieve out things that might waste your time or that are a no-go zone. Or, when faced with criticism, you can stand by your story because you know you did due diligence and you got all your facts right. So, social media noise, as we often time call it, cannot force you then to withdraw a story or stop covering a topic just because people are making noises. That is actually when you employ your professional antics and experience to make a decision. (Interviewee 2)

However, the study also found that SNS are increasingly compelling editors to follow trends at the expense of professional journalism. SNS is increasingly leading the way as legacy media plays catch-up as SNS trends dictate operation in the newsroom.

> At the same time, social media is also making it difficult for me to do my role. Sometimes you have to literally follow what the trends dictate. And I do not think that is our role as journalists. As the 4th estate, we are supposed to be the watchdogs. We are supposed to actually lead and social media follows, but right now, it is more of media following what is on social media, and at the end of the day, this is killing the essence of journalism (Interviewee 4).

Audience sentiment

Newsrooms can foretell when a story is likely to elicit negative reactions on SNS. The study also found that audience sentiment on SNS guides decisions on stories

in the newsroom. Legacy media editors have to factor in a number of things before they run a story including how the story is likely to impact the audience. With reactions now instant as a result of SNS, editors are now more cautious when they settle on stories as they do not want the newsroom to come out as either being inconsiderate to a faction of the society or to appear to be forcing an agenda on the public.

> You factor in audience sentiment. I think any editor would be a fool not to because, especially when it comes to sensitive topics. Are they going to feel like we are piling onto their problems? In such a case, yes, you have to factor in: 'are these people going to feel like we are adding on to their discrimination, or whatever' (Interviewee 6).

Nonetheless, the study also found that the behaviour of the online audience is unpredictable and sometimes newsrooms get it wrong when trying to anticipate the reaction of the audience. However, the audience behaviour when it comes to reception of stories can be manipulated by the way a news content is rendered.

> The audience has some peculiar habits which at times narrows down to maybe just the way you angle or the way you, say, do your headlines. You can have a story that is not so big, but the way you craft the headline will drive the numbers. So, all those are things that probably come out when you are looking at the analytics (Interviewee 3).

Feedback and newsroom decisions

The study found that feedback and general reactions that legacy media news content elicit on SNS are not checkpoints to block coverage of the stories. Nonetheless, the anticipated feedback on SNS impacts how content is packaged. Legacy media editors often rely on feedback from their audience to pick up what the audience prefers or what they are fixated on:

> We do not use social media as a checkpoint to prevent us from doing the stories. In most cases we want to know what people want to read. In most cases, we look at the comments. Like for instance, you do a story but when you see the comments, you find that people are leaning towards a particular angle, probably some point you did not include in the story. When they say 'why have you not told us this?'

> It is not that they are dictating what you are doing, but in most cases, they will try and tell you what you have missed and that is probably what they want to read (Interviewee 4).

However, the study also found that the feedback received from SNS does not work to box newsrooms into a corner to do things in a particular way. While editors recognise that SNS is dynamic and cannot be regulated as the case with the newsroom, they often loosen up and try to be as flexible as possible as they carry out their roles in ways that align with the needs and expectations of the audience.

> We have to literally go with the audience and move with them how they want it. And it is on social media where you get to determine whether you are it or you are not. You have it or you do not, you are with them or you are on your own (Interviewee 5).

Journalistic principles and reliance on SNS

The study found that the urgency caused by SNS clouds journalistic principles. Editors often find themselves compelled to keep their news platforms on top and to be able to achieve this, they end up considering running stories that would interest the audience without necessarily factoring in whether the said story is newsworthy:

> It is good, it is bad because at the end of the day, it will compel me as an editor to always strive to keep my news site on top. It will sometimes push me into probably running a story that is not necessarily newsworthy because it is trending and it will bring me the eyeballs, you know (Interviewee 4).

However, the study also found that Editorial Policies and journalistic principles guide the reliance on SNS. Editors try to ensure that they do not jump into just any topic but first consider whether the topics or stories remain within the editorial policies of the newsroom. The findings also show that editors tend to also avoid topics that are offensive and disparaging:

> We do not do that. But topics that shape conversations around social issues. You know, politics, healthcare, education and such; those are very constructive and I will quickly champion and look at how to leverage and position the products that I work for (Interviewee 5).

The study also found that criticism and negative feedback from SNS does not always result in self-censorship in the newsroom. They listen to both praises and criticisms without necessarily doing self-censorship:

> As journalists, we walk the middle ground which basically means you have to serve both sides, you do not expect to only listen to praises, there are also criticisms. But it does not mean that because I'm publishing a story and I expect criticism, then I do self-censorship. I give the story out and you let the feedback come in whichever way it comes (Interviewee 5).

4.3 Summary of Key Findings

This study found that social networking sites impact the process of production of news and plays a part in the selection of news content by legacy media. To achieve this, SNS guides the level of prominence accorded to news items as editors rely on SNS to guide their decisions. Similarly, SNS dictates the docketing of stories as the coverage of given news topics on the sites influence the stories that are picked for the day as editors factor in coverage on SNS when carrying out their docketing duties. SNS also plays part in the selection of news content as it serves as a source of fresh story leads and deeper insights for follow-up stories. The editors pointed out that they oftentimes picked stories extensively covered on SNS by the public and mainstreamed them on legacy media news platforms.

The study also found that SNS, as a key component of the changing ecology of news, has resulted in emergent patterns in the production of news by legacy media. Editors consider potential performance of news stories on SNS and this guides their decisions including deciding on the news items to be given prominence on the legacy media platforms even as they tend to prioritise content that is likely to be well received by the audience. The study found that a topic's coverage on SNS offers a glimpse of this reception. According to the findings, SNS also dictates how editors package

content. Depending on how the public relates with a given story or topic, editors rely on this information to adjust and angle media content so that it is better received by the audience. Another emerging pattern identified by the study is that newsrooms now rely on SNS to find topics already well received by the public and then mainstream the given topics on legacy media news platforms.

In examining the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors, this study found that SNS ropes newsrooms into social activism. Editors pick up social justice campaigns depending on how extensively they are covered on SNS. Also, the feedback received from SNS often impacts the decisions made by editors as both received and anticipated feedback guides how the content by legacy media is rendered. Lastly, the study found that the emerging reliance on SNS by newsrooms is testing the adherence to journalistic principles as oftentimes the urgency brought forth by SNS clouds the very principles that govern the practice of journalism. Even so, Editorial Policies and journalistic principles are still relied upon to guide legacy media's reliance on SNS.

4.4 Summary

This chapter provided the findings on the impact of social networking sites on production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy editors. The findings were grouped into three sections guided by the specific objectives of the study. The findings in this chapter are based on the analysis of the responses collected from in-depth interviews and they were presented as direct quotes. This chapter also provided a summary of the key findings of the study. The next chapter presents discussions of the key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the main findings on the impact of social networking sites on production of news and the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors. It discusses the key findings against the literature and theories relied upon in the study and responds to the research questions. It also gives a conclusion and makes recommendations.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.2.1 Contribution of SNS to News Selection

In the first objective, this study sought to assess the contribution of social networking sites to selection of news by legacy media. The study found that social networking sites impact the process of production of news and play a part in the selection of news content by legacy media by guiding and dictating the story ideas given prominence and those included in docketing lists. The sites play a critical role in determining how daily dockets look like as performance of stories is usually factored. Performance of stories on social networking sites is one of the parameters employed when creating a docket.

This study also found that currently, the interactions that legacy media have are mainly drawn from social networking sites. As thus, the decision to pick stories to accord prominence at a particular time heavily depends on the traction the topics, or similar stories, achieved on social networking sites. Other than guiding decisions on prominence and docketing, editors in newsrooms also rely on social networking sites as a source for story leads and deeper insights for follow-up stories.

As Hertz (2016) opines, new media brought new challenges for legacy media including a newer perspective of the relationship between the audience and legacy media. As legacy media adjust to make the most of digital media and social networking sites, they are increasingly embracing newer areas of focus in their media operations. It is in this same line that trending topics on social networking sites form part of daily docketing as often they give rise to story leads. Similarly, when a story ranks top on given social networking sites, that is normally picked as an obvious indication of the public's interest in that story. In such an instance, editors will mostly commission a follow-up story bringing out another angle to the issue as they strive to ensure that they keep serving their audience and keep them hooked to their news platform. As the literature brought out, this serves to ascertain that news gathering and production approaches are being replaced as digital media and social networking sites form an interesting area of focus for legacy media organisations.

5.2.2 Emerging Patterns in Production of News

The second objective of the study sought to establish patterns in the production of news in the era of social networking sites. The study found that social networking sites have resulted in emergent patterns in the production of news by legacy media as they offer a guide for story leads and mainstream content. Topics extensively covered on social networking sites are normally picked and mainstreamed by legacy media. As the Gatekeeping Theory alludes, the increasing popularity of digital media platforms, particularly social networking sites, have given ordinary individuals the ability to share and break the news (Schwalbe, Silcock, & Candello, 2015).

This study found that legacy media houses, owing to their good standing, do offer readers better perspectives to trending topics as the content covered by these media houses is normally considered the truth. In a bid to keep up with competition

coming from other content creators that are not mainstream news channels, legacy editors have found themselves leaning towards trends on social networking sites.

Social networking sites are increasingly taking the centre stage by dictating the direction of journalism (Newman, 2009). The same case was implied as this study also found that editors now factor the potential performance of news stories on social networking sites. The perceived performance of a story guides the editors' decisions including deciding on the news items to be given prominence on the legacy media platforms even as they tend to prioritise content that is likely to be well received by the audience.

This study also found out that social networking sites dictate how editors package content. According to the Reuters Handbook of Journalism, the practice of journalism has greatly benefited from social networking sites (Reuters, 2008). Case in point, depending on how the public relates with a given story or topic, editors pick this information to adjust and angle media content so that it is better received by the audience. This way, the media positions itself to better meet the needs of their audience. As brought out in the study, nowadays editors first look at trends so as to be abreast with the kind of stories that are likely to carry the day. This way, they are better placed to settle on the best story ideas to rake in the most traction for their news platforms.

5.2.3 Gatekeeping Role of Editors

The third objective of this study sought to examine the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors in the wake of digital disruption. As Livingstone (2002) points out, as a result of the increasing audience participation, media studies are now focusing on ways of generating meaning in the media space. Editors now look up to social networking sites in order to predict what media consumers now want (Groshek &

Tandoc, 2017). Livingstone (2002) also adds that the resultant complicated interplay between social networking sites and consumer behaviour is brought about by both sides playing an integral role in the chain of communication.

In examining the gatekeeping role of legacy media editors, this study found that newsrooms now find themselves roped into social activism as a result of social networking sites. Editors pick up social justice campaigns depending on how extensively they are covered on these sites. The study found that many times, social networking sites lead the way in highlighting social justice campaigns and legacy media only follows to exploit and use their platforms to mainstream the campaigns.

The study also found that feedback received on social networking sites impacts the decisions on how news stories are handled. Both received and anticipated feedback guide how legacy media editors choose to render their content. Gatekeeping theory looks at how items are processed as they are either selected or rejected (Erzikova, 2018). The theory postulates that the content that the media carries rely on a number of factors including an individual editor's perception to decide on what is more important. And as this study found out, social networking sites are testing the adherence to journalistic principles as oftentimes the urgency brought forth by social networking sites clouds the very principles that govern the practice of journalism. As Tandoc Jr and Thomas (2015) point out, editorial judgement, which often depends on media organizations offering audiences what they want, cannot sufficiently establish the significance of news content. Even so, this study found, Editorial Policies and journalistic principles are still relied upon to guide legacy media's reliance on these sites.

5.3 Conclusions and Implications for Practice

From the findings, social networking sites have created an avenue for audiences to be part of the production of news by legacy media newsrooms in Kenya. Legacy media editors are adopting newer strategies in a bid to stay afloat and keep up with the digital disruption. However, as social networking sites cement their role in the media cycle, editors are compelled to consider audience preferences as they choose and prioritise news content in the newsrooms and in the long run giving the audience a say in the content carried by the legacy media. Similarly, audience sentiments on these sites have an impact on how editors carry out their roles as oftentimes they incorporate popular content on the sites in the mainstream media content.

This study also concludes that legacy media still plays an integral role of offering audiences authentic and verified content in the face of the explosion of fake news brought forth by the digital disruption. Even so, legacy media also picks up content run on social networking sites and mainstreams this content for legacy media audiences. The content includes social justice campaigns. However, legacy media still cherry picks the social activism content they mainstream as they strive to avoid activist journalism otherwise promoted by citizen journalism on social networking sites.

This study also established that Kenyan newsrooms pick stories on social networking sites as a result of the traction the stories receive on the sites. As a result, this portrays the media's fixation with making money as the focus is on raking in the highest numbers possible, figures that correspond with the digital revenue the legacy media stand to earn when their content performs exceptionally. However, the study also found that Editorial Policies and journalistic principles guide legacy media's reliance on social networking sites for content. The findings from this study also indicate that reliance on social networking sites exposes legacy media to penetration by

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unprofessionalism as the urgency caused by these sites tends to cloud journalistic principles.

5.4 Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that gatekeeping in the face of the growing role of social networking sites is a challenge. There are chances that editors at legacy media houses will increasingly lower their guard as it pertains to gatekeeping. In this regard, there is need for all journalism stakeholders to set standards and ascertain that they are enforced. There is still need for the principles of gatekeeping to guide editors as they embrace emergent patterns as they carry out their roles. Even so, legacy media houses should undertake more effort to determine the credibility of the content they retrieve on social networking sites and not solely depend on the popularity of the topics before considering them for mainstreaming.

This study established that legacy media gets value by incorporating social networking sites in their newsroom operations, particularly in production of news. The findings reveal that social networking sites impact the way newsrooms package their content and settle on news items for their dockets. By focusing on audience feedback, legacy media risks losing their gatekeeping role. However, newsrooms stand a better chance of striking a balance if the dockets are structured in a way that there are segments that are extensively dictated by audience feedback on social networking sites and others that are reserved for hard news story leads.

5.5 Areas for Further Research

Since this study looked at the impact of social networking sites on production of news, further studies can focus on social networking sites news dissemination. Another area for further research would be to look at editorial policies and how they

cater for digital disruption. Furthers research can also study how social networking sites are impacting operations of small media houses.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: In-depth Interview Guide

The interviews included a set of questions that loosely guided the answers and conversation on how the changing ecology of news correlates with the growing role of social networking sites and how this relationship is impacting the gatekeeping role of editors. The digital editors interviewed were not given the questions beforehand but heard them for the first time during the interviews.

The questions were in three parts:

1. How social networking sites impact news production and how editors employ the use of social networking sites (Evolving patterns in news production)

- What is your role in choosing what content to give prominence when docketing? Do you consider coverage of topics on social networking sites when settling on your role?

- Do you consider potential, and/or prior, coverage of a topic on social networks when deciding the level of prominence to accord a story? How do you employ this approach?

- Do you find yourself settling on story ideas from time to time based on their coverage on social networking sites? What parameters do you rely on to determine whether the coverage of a topic on social sites is worth being considered when docketing?

2. The motivations behind editorial decisions based on social networking sites (Contribution of SNS)

- How often do you consider the potential performance of a story on social sites when docketing? Do you consider pursuing follow-up stories based on how a story performs on social networking sites? (Performance here would include both reach and interaction). What other avenues do you consider when championing follow-up stories?

- Social networking sites are littered with calls for activism and cases highlighting the plight of various communities. As an editor, have you ever settled on a topic - brought to your attention via social networking sites - for coverage in a bid to call out authorities or find help to address challenges faced by given communities?

3. How editor's use of social networking sites is impacting their gatekeeping roles

- What is your personal experience with trends on social networking sites when docketing? Have you ever felt like a story is worthy owing to prior coverage of the topic received on social sites?

- As a result of real-time interaction with your audience on social networking sites, have you ever considered unpublishing a story or considered a severe alteration to a story owing to [negative] comments and reactions? Do you think about these [potential] interactions when deciding whether or not to run a story?

- As a newsroom editor, have you ever found yourself making editorial decisions (including and not limited to killing a story and investigating a story lead for deeper insights) based on trends on social networking sites? How did the trend (extensive coverage of the topic on social networking sites) impact your decision-making?

Appendix B: AKU Ethics Review Committee Approval Letter

THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

REF: AKU-GSMC/ERC/2022/009

Date: November 10, 2022.

Dear Derrick Oluoch (Student No. 567759)

RE: THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF NEWS: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES ON NEWS PRODUCTION AND THE GATEKEEPING ROLE OF LEGACY MEDIA EDITORS

This is to inform you that Aga Khan University – Graduate School of Media and Communications Ethics Review Committee has reviewed and approved your above research proposal. Your approval period is November 10, 2022, to November 09, 2023, and your application's approval number is AKU-GSMC/ERC/2022/009.

This approval is subject to compliance with the following, under the supervision of your two supervisors:

1. Only the approved documents including the informed consent form and the data collection instruments will be used.
2. Any changes, made on the approved documents that may increase the risks or affect the welfare or safety of the participants or compromise the integrity of the study must be reported to GSMC within the shortest time possible. The amended documents will be taken through a fresh review and the due process of approval.
3. In the event that the research cannot be completed within the one-year approved period, the researcher will request for renewal of approval 30 days prior to the end of the approved period.
4. The researcher will be required to submit a comprehensive progress report when applying for renewal of approval.
5. Submission of an executive summary report to the GSMC's Ethics Review Committee within 90 days of completion of the study.
6. Produce all the data collected using the approved tools as and when required by the Ethics Review Committee within the 90 days of completion of your study.

Prior to commencing your study, you will be required to obtain a research permit from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). You can access the application portal from the website on https://www.nacosti.go.ke/.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Dr Nancy Booker
Interim Dean

Appendix C: Introductory Letter from AKU

THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Media and Communications

National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation
P. O. Box 30623 – 00100
Nairobi

November 10, 2022

Dear Sir/Madam,

DERRICK OLUOCH (STUDENT NO. 567759)

Derrick Oluoch is a registered student at the Aga Khan University, Graduate School of Media and Communications. He is enrolled in the Master of Arts in Digital Journalism Programme and has completed his course work. He is now working on his Master's thesis. Mr. Oluoch's topic is **"The Changing Ecology of News: The Impact of Social Network Sites on News Production and the Gatekeeping Role of Legacy Media Editors."**

The purpose of my writing is to request you to assist Mr. Oluoch complete this important academic exercise. Any information collected will be used solely for academic purposes. Upon completion of the research, Mr. Oluoch's thesis will be available at our library. He will also submit two hard copies and one soft copy in pdf of his completed work to your department.

We appreciate your support to our student towards his successful completion of his thesis research.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Nancy Booker
Interim Dean

Appendix D: NACOSTI Research Licence