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## The Role of Media in Advocacy and Championing of Messages on Autism: An Analysis of Kenyan Print Media

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### **Abstract:**

*The examined the print media coverage of Autism issues in Kenya by analyzing the two leading dailies: Daily Nation and The Standard in the period of April 2016. Framing Theory and Agenda Setting Theory, were used to guide the study. A total of 60 newspapers were reviewed for this study, those published during the entire Autism awareness month period. The referenced time period was significant on the basis of some observations. Firstly, April is autism awareness month worldwide, and secondly there have been reported cases of a steady increase in children diagnosed as being on the Autism spectrum in the recent past in Kenya which means that the general public needs to be more sensitized on matters of Autism and more awareness on how to treat people on the spectrum and families of Autistic people. The findings show that there is very minimal coverage on issues of Autism and related issues in the dailies. The mass media needs to propagate more for the awareness and sensitization of Autism and Autistic related issues.*

**Keywords:** Autism, media, agenda-setting, framing, advocacy

### **1. Background**

The constitution of Kenya in Section 39 of the Persons with Disabilities Act (Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013) addresses right of people with disabilities to access information and that the Government has the responsibility to make mass media available to persons with disabilities for their rehabilitation, self-development and self-reliance. This calls upon the media to then advocate more for inclusion of every one in society with regards to people with disabilities in their content that is channeled through mainstream media. In Kenya, the media has a tremendous effect on what is disseminated to the public.

Currently, more than six million Kenyans access communication through the various media houses both in print and electronic forms Simon *et al* (2014). The media control a large base of audiences which in turn rely on them for information. In this audience, there are people with autism as well as families affected directly and indirectly with Autism. The stories broadcast and published by any media house are always framed from a certain angle and the stories are also primed based on the policy of the media house. This means that there are certain topics that are likely to receive more prominence than others in the media. The minority in society are likely to be given less address in terms of awareness and publicity of their needs in stories published or broadcast. And when broadcast, it is more of a situation that calls for sympathy from the larger mass of the audience that do not belong to the minorities- in this case autistic persons and families.

Autism is a part of developmental disabilities, which is also known as autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), (McKeever 2012). It is a type of group of complex developmental brain disorders. This can be caused due to combination of genes and environmental influences. People have varying degrees of sufferings. Social and behavioral challenges can be caused due to this (Autism Peaks, 2011).

There are several symptoms like Not respond to his or her name by 12 months of age, Not point at objects to show interest by 14 months of age, Not play 'pretend' games by 18 months of age etc. They are avoiding eye contact and want to be alone, repeat words or phrases over and over. According to McKeever (2012), one child in 88, especially one in 54 boys is diagnosed with an ASD in USA. Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S. An estimated two million individuals in the U.S. and tens of millions worldwide are affected by autism. Although improved diagnosis and environmental influences are two reasons often considered, scientists say that 50% of the increase is unexplained.

In Kenya for instance, there has been an increasing trend as far as diagnosing of autism is concerned (Riccio, 2011). Autism can happen irrespective of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class. Males are more prone to this compare to females. The symptoms can range from very mild to severe. There is no such cure for this. Various therapies help to develop communication, social, and cognitive skills.

This disorder initially identified in the early 1940s. In recent times it has become one of the most common diseases which are occurring at an alarming rate (Fombonne, 2003; Wing & Potter, 2002). Criteria in the diagnostic process have caused more awareness among parents and medical professionals (Wing & Potter, 2002).

It is important for the media to inform the public on general and specific issues on autism like the causes of autism as well as the risk factors for ASD, how to tell if the child is on the right track in development, the resources available in Kenya for children diagnosed with ASD, any treatments, supplements, medical care, local advocacy and information providers, support groups that exist in the area on autism and conditions in relation to ASD and the provisions that the government has on people diagnosed with autism. This has not been the case because most Kenyans are generally unaware about autism and all they have as the little information is misguided. The Medics too seem not to have as much information on Autism since they claim that it is an area still under investigation and research studies. Daley, 2002 also notes the lack of training in proper health care with emphasis on training on developmental disabilities like autism in the training of doctors in the developing world. Darrat 2008 also notes that Doctors and medical professionals have noted the profound impact that a developmental disability can have on the future of a child and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment.

Families living with ASD have unique stresses and therefore the community at large to be sensitized about it and prepared to meet the needs of children and adults with ASDs. This is mainly possible if enough information exists on the subject and is disseminated to a wide audience mainly through broadcast and print media of communication.

The gap in knowledge on matters of autism affects the number of patients who can access diagnosis and treatment services especially for children. Early diagnosis results in the child getting early intervention and effective treatment. The child will also be exposed to the necessary therapies and supplements to aid in growth and development. There is no proper government policy that specifically aids children with autism and their care givers. This information on autism needs to be disseminated in as many forums as possible in order for these group that is affected to be informed adequately. There is a clear need therefore for research on disabilities especially autism in developing countries and the important role of media in advocacy.

## 2. Research Objectives

- To analyze the print media coverage of autism matters in Kenya,
- To establish the aspects of autism that were covered by the print media in Kenya in April 2016
- To establish the extent the Print Media focuses on autism matters and how it has advocacy on autism in Kenya.

## 3. Research Questions

- To what extent has print media covered autism matters in Kenya?
- Which aspects of autism were covered by the print media in Kenya in April 2016?
- To what extent has the Print Media advocated on autism matters in Kenya?

## 4. Review of Theories

### 4.1. Framing of Autism in News Stories

Defining and framing issues on health in society, media play a very crucial role. Through its coverage society came to know about a disease, become more aware. Moreover, treatment scores, processes also become available through media. It draws the attention of its audience thus helping set an agenda for the policy makers and the general public at large (Cobb & Elder, 1972; Rogers et al., 1991). Media helps to find how to think about an issue (Kim et al., 2002).

Erving Goffman is a prominent name in the broad communication theory. He elucidates that any developmental topic can be viewed from a variety of standpoints. Goffman also highlighted how individual prior experiences and knowledges help to form individual's reality. He further suggested that definition, diagnosis, forming judgments and suggesting remedies are the most important four functions (Entman 1993, 2007).

Gitlin (1980) explains the concept of framing as selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol-handlers can arrange discourse. Gamson (1992) called it organizing theme in news media accounts. Reese (2001) referred to framing as 'the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences' (p. 7).

Brent et al (2005) highlighted that there are two important conceptualizations of Framing Theory. "These are sociological and psychological. As these topics and issues are presented within a variety of frames, people reshape their thinking about an issue and develop a particular conceptualization of the issue.

By choosing some elements of a reality and suppressing others, a story about a particular problem is constructed (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Ultimately, it has a packaging function that requires someone in the media industry to select certain aspects of the larger problem, and make them more palatable for the consumer so that it is easier to understand on a very broad, surface level (Kim, Carvalho, and Davis 2010).

The frames that the media choose to use when reporting on and representing a topic are essential because they tell the audience what is important to think about. This can have a deep effect on the attitudes and behavior of the individual by laying out what one should consider when evaluating a variety of issues and applying them to his or her own life. (Chong and Druckman 2007; Kim, Carvalho, and Davis 2010). Tankard (2001) adds that this definition and framing of causality and responsibility are very important because they shape the overall approach taken by policy makers when attempting to synthesize a solution for the issue, and when choosing who in particular the efforts towards change within society should be directed towards and applied to. Framing of health and social problems matters because media coverage can affect the way the public reacts to issues.

#### 4.2. Agenda Setting Research on Autism Matters

Framing is in most cases discussed with Agenda setting theory. The Agenda-Setting role of the mass media concerns more than just the transfer of news from the media to the public.

McCombs explicates that agenda-setting and priming depend on the opinion of attitude ease of understanding. They amplify the salience of subjects or the effortlessness with which this contemplation can be regained from memory (McCombs, 1982).

Principally, this theory asserts that the media tell audiences what issues are important by highlighting them in coverage and placement, thereby advancing them on the public agenda. Agenda setting theory is an influential theory within the mass communications discipline. More than 200 empirical studies have found agenda setting effects (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting has progressed from the idea that the media suggest topics for the public agenda to the recent proposal that the media actually affect the behavior of the audience. Ghanem (1987) established that agenda-setting research was entering a second phase, in which the effects of the media agenda on what the public thinks has been replaced by a research focus on how the public thinks about it.

#### 4.3. Media Advocacy and Mobilizing Information

The concept of agenda setting can be combined by the media advocacy. It integrates issues and provision of information on this topic (Gibson, 2010; Wallack et al., 1993). Important resources can be mobilized by this (Wallack et al., 1993, p. 27).

Askelson, Campo, Mastin, & Slonske (2009), suggested that media and communication campaigns need to focus more on the consequences of any issue.

California health clinics determined that direct lobbying may be most effective to activate actual policy change and in terms of media advocacy (Gardner, Geierstanger, Brindis, & McConnel, 2010).

Lemert (1984) called it as 'mobilizing information'. Kensicki (2004) suggested that media should be more apathy due to a lack of connection between social problems, nonprofit or government organizations.

### 5. Methodology

The information presented in this study was gathered primarily through content analysis of the Daily Nation and The Standard Newspapers published in Kenya during the month of April which is the official autism awareness month. The Researchers obtained all the sixty copies of the newspapers and engaged in a thorough review of the content. The specific aspects that concerned the study included distribution of articles on autism during the study period, focus of the articles in terms of placement of the story to check for high, medium or low focus, the issues addressed on Autism, frequencies in coverage of key aspects in both newspapers for awareness, anti-stigmatization, management of autism, causes of autism, experiences, acceptance, encouragement, government appeals and foundations; perspective of coverage on general news, reflective pieces and commentary/ criticism; presence and absence pictorial representation.

### 6. Results and Discussion

#### 6.1. Results

##### 6.1.1. Newspapers

A total of 60 newspapers from the month of April were analyzed, this being the Autism awareness month. The sample was drawn from both the Standard and Daily nation newspapers. Out of 60 newspapers only 5 articles were found to match the requirements. The standard had 4 articles with the Autism and autistic feature while one was from the daily nation and the total was 5. Consequently, the Standard had more articles with stories on autism, autistic experiences and sensitization of the same issues (80%) while The Daily Nation had fewer articles (20%).

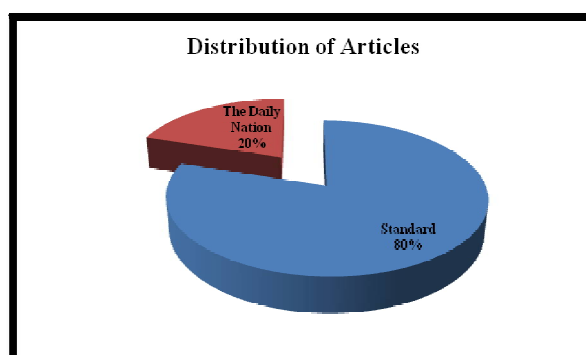


Figure 1: Showing Distribution of Articles in Both Standard and The Daily Nation Newspapers

##### 6.1.2. Frequency of Articles on Autism within the Month of April

The researcher sought to find out how many articles were published on the month of April 2016 being the autism awareness month in both the standard and The Daily Nation newspapers.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Day/Date	Sunday 3/04/2016		Saturday 23/04/2016	Wednesday 27/04/2016
	Wednesday 6/04/2016			
	Thursday 7/04/2016			

Table 1: Showing Frequency Distribution of Articles

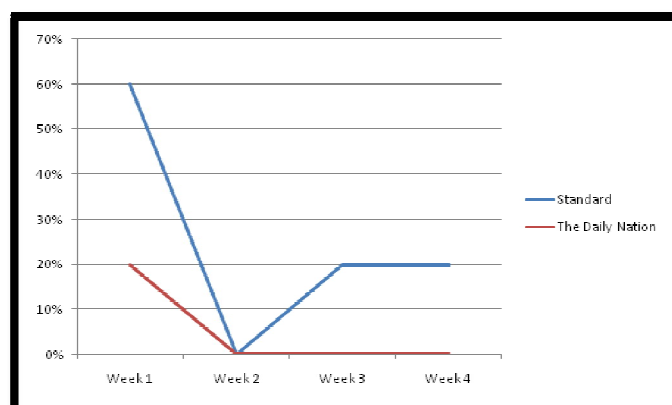


Figure 2: Showing Frequency Distribution of Articles within the Month of April on Both Newspapers

#### 6.1.3. Focus

The articles were analyzed in terms of the focus or the placement of the story in the newspaper. The articles were categorized as High, Medium or Low. High focus articles are regarded as those placed on the front or back page of the newspaper, contained a heading that mentioned the key words, devoted more than twenty lines to the piece, contained pictorials and graphics and or was an editorial article. Medium focus articles had either main stories or feature stories within the newspaper that devoted 10 to 20 lines to Autism and Autistic related issues whereas Low focus articles span from 5 to 10 lines with a single mention and did not entail any graphic.

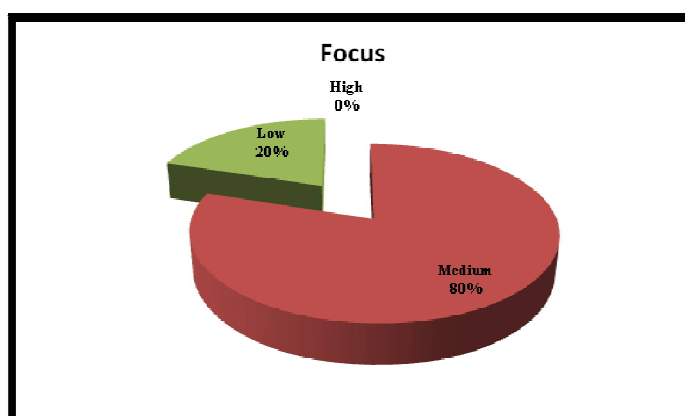


Figure 3: Showing Focus: High, Medium or Low

Therefore, of the entire sample of 5 articles, the number of stories on Autism and Autistic related issues placed on the front page, back page was 0 while medium posted the highest at 4 which is (80%) articles. Only 1 had low focus which is (20%)

#### 6.1.4. Key Issues Addressed

The second research question addressed the aspects of Autism covered by the newspapers in Kenya during the Autism awareness month of April 2016. A total of 9 aspects in the entire sample were categorized as key issues owing to their tenacity and consistency as well as importance to the issues of Autism. Awareness (80%), Anti-stigmatization (80%), Management (40%), Causes/ Investigation towards Cause (20%), Experiences (60%), Acceptance (100%), Encouragement (60%), Government Appeals (40%), Foundations/ Support groups (40%)

Key Issues Addressed	Frequency
Awareness	4
Anti-stigmatization	4
Management	2
Causes	1
Experiences	3
Acceptance	5
Encouragement	3
Government Appeals	2
Foundations	2

Table 2: Showing Frequency of Key Issues Covered Across the Articles in Both Newspapers

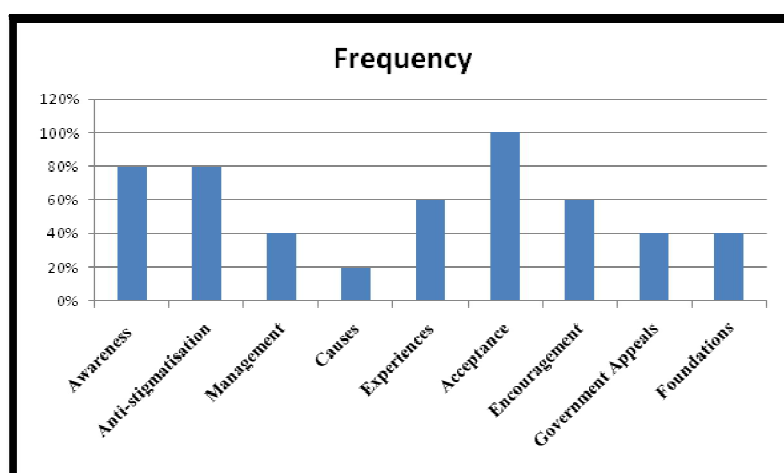


Figure 4: Showing Frequencies in Coverage of Key Aspects in Both Newspapers

#### 6.1.5. Perspective

The researchers studied how the story is written. General news articles that place importance on facts of a recent event. Employing an inverted pyramid style of writing, Reflective pieces that are longer, more insightful tone and covering issues of Autism and Autistic related more in depth or told a story rather than just presenting a series of facts. Commentary or criticism was any story that gave a first-person opinion or a stated opinion of the article in the newspaper. Hence the articles were analyzed in relation to General news, Reflective and Commentary or criticism. Of the five stories analyzed General news story was one, an equivalent of 20%, articles written from a reflective angle were three which is 60% while Commentary/Criticism was one, an equivalent of 20%.

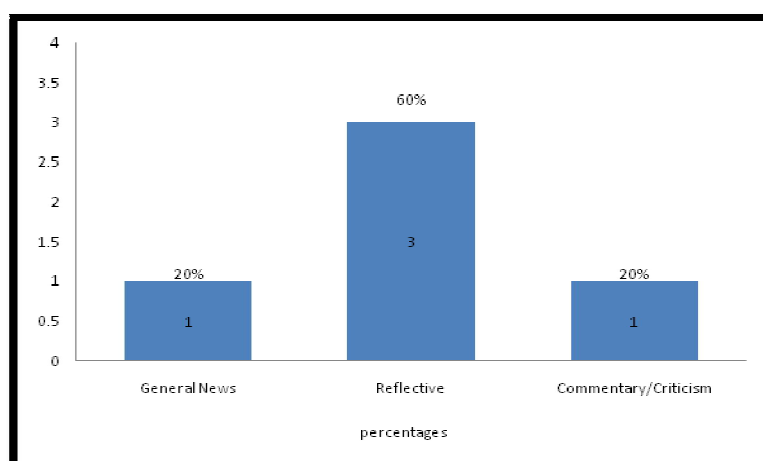


Figure 5: Showing the Perspective, in Which the Articles Were Written, with Respect to General, Reflective, and Commentary/Criticism

#### 6.1.6. Pictorial Representation

The researcher sought to analyze the pictures and graphics represented in the articles. The five articles were analyzed in terms of those containing pictures and those that did not.

Picture	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	2	40%
No	3	60%
Total	5	100

Table 3: Showing Presence of Pictures in the Newspaper Articles

Only two articles contained pictures out of all the five articles.

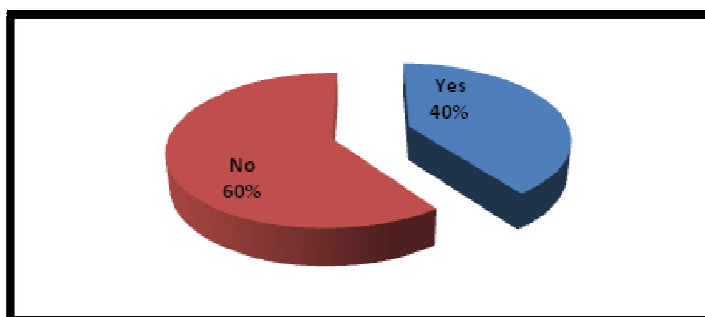


Figure 6: Showing the Presence and Absence of Pictorials

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

Media advocacy has been used successfully time and again in development communication and programs. It is not only a way of creating awareness but a means of sparking change within the community. Access to a variety of channels of communication within the country makes media advocacy an efficient strategy of communicating to the publics, prompting dialogue and positive change both within the public spheres and at an interpersonal level. Whereas information passed through real time broadcast may be ephemeral the impact of newspapers is more long lasting and can serve as a reference point. People may not access the broadcasted information during prime time but may choose to read it through a newspaper at a later time.

Autism in Kenya is an illness not known to many, most parents associate delayed speech with general delay of milestones and often times do not seek medical attention early enough. The increasing cases of autistic children within the country is alarming and reason enough to create awareness and come up with ways of ensuring that care is given to the respective children and stigmatization eradicated with relation to the same.

The media through its informative function should strive to perform its role and provide insight towards issues such as this. The month of autism was marked with very few mentions of the autistic and autism media coverage. Yet it is indeed the duty of the media to bring this out to the attention of the people.

This research was a content analysis of the coverage of Autism and Autistic related issues in the main newspapers; The Standard and The Daily Nation during the month of Autism which was April. This content analysis sought to examine the extent to which print media covered Autism matters in Kenya. Secondly, Autism was covered by the print media in Kenya in April 2016 and the print media advocated on autism matters in Kenya.

As anticipated, there is very minimal coverage on issues of Autism and Autistic related issues and aspects despite it being the month of Autism awareness worldwide. Only five articles were published on the leading newspapers within the 30 days duration. This showcased that there is very little information out there on Autism and Autistic related issues. High levels of stigmatization on the same are being experienced with majority of the kids hidden or confined to their homes.

The mass media needs to propagate for the awareness and sensitization of Autism and Autistic related issues as an informative and educative platform that reaches a dynamic and wider spectrum of audiences who are either directly or indirectly affected by this disease as a community or at individual levels.

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