



Influence of Media Reporting Guidelines on Children Reporting in Kenya: What Should Journalists Do?

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ABSTRACT

Although media reporting guidelines protect children, very little is known about how these guidelines influence the practice of journalism. This study examined the influence of media reporting guidelines on children's reporting in Kenya and tried to generate debate on what journalists do in such situations. All the 2,105 journalists in Nairobi County accredited by the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) constituted the target population. Based on practice theory, the study employed a descriptive research design. The researcher employed stratified random sampling and calculated the desired sample size using Taro Yamane's formula. The study analysed 238 responses from an online questionnaire and found that most journalists had not fully interacted with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF's) guidelines for journalists reporting on children (40%). Also, it shows that many media organisations don't have internal guidelines and 60% of the respondents had encountered cases of reporters and editors being sanctioned for violating existing media reporting guidelines in Kenya. In conclusion, the study argues that while these guidelines are good for children, they tend to complicate the work of media professionals because of the challenge of clearly defining stories that constitute public interest or those critical to the coverage of children. There is a need to continually organise refresher training to enhance knowledge and skills for journalists to determine children's stories to be published and that are unlikely to attract public outcry.

Keywords: Children, Ethics, Guidelines, Journalists, Media

I. INTRODUCTION

For many years, a sustained debate has been held on how media reports children with some accusing the media of underreporting children's issues (Notley & Dezuanni, 2022; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Min & Feaster, 2010). In most countries, media is an important source of information on children's stories for the general public because of its power to inform and educate the larger masses about society. Media platforms can be used to inform and educate the general public, parents, children, and stakeholders who play a key role in formulating public policies to combat and prevent this problem. To demonstrate the level of attention given to children by journalists, this study notes numerous scholarly works attempting to generate knowledge on the role of the media in covering children. For example, Haddon and Stald (2009) analysed media in fourteen European countries, pointing out the greater risk of online content to children. In Denmark, Blach-Ørsten et al. (2021) analysed rulings from the Press Council from 1999 to 2019 to investigate if and how breaches of press ethics differ across news beats. The study found that the most common breach in crime reporting was the unnecessary identification of persons mentioned in crime stories. Berry et al. (2012) extensively looked at how media covered the sentencing of individuals committing crimes against children and how this affects public knowledge and attitudes. Their findings demonstrate that journalists should always be given free space to operate but the issue has always been the misuse of such spaces. This illustrates the place of the media in society, but the bigger issue has been the need to regulate the contact of journalists while carrying out their duties.

While the role of journalists is critical in addressing issues affecting society especially for the marginalized group including children, violations and damage caused by the coverage highlighted the need to regulate the practice of journalism (Frost, 2015; Fengler et al, 2015). This is reflected in the famous case of Elisabeth Fritzl, a victim of intrafamilial sexual abuse in which her father held her captive (Middleton, 2016; Salter, 2013). According to Connolly (2009), the British tabloids led the pack, and it was the Sun that published the first grainy picture of Elisabeth - her face pixelated - following her move to a new home. The journalist tracked her to a supposedly secret location in



Austria where she and her six children had made a new life with a new identity. This paper does not delve into the case but tries to show the importance of regulating journalists' practices. The issue of addressing victims' right to privacy has been discussed in many books (such as Mills, 2008; Simpson & Cote 2006), and ethical codes and guidelines have been written to increase journalists' sensitivity in these cases. There seems to be some consensus in the field that the privacy of certain types of victims should be protected, such as sexual assault victims and children, at least in most circumstances.

Considering the effects of media, governments and other stakeholders have continued to reinforce the protection of children from the media. According to Anik et al. (2021), approximately 37% of newspaper stories in Bangladesh disclosed at least one identifying information of victims (such as name, parents' name, family member's name, or school name), and 23% of stories included sensual and/or excessive descriptions of the event. Jones et al. 2010 state that media publicity is more likely to have a negative effect on children and becomes essential to have measures that guide reporting of children.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Kenya, like many other countries, children are protected through a code of conduct for the practice of journalism. In most instances, journalists are required by law to avoid identifying children involved in sexual offences whether they are victims, witnesses, or defendants. However, one notable section seemingly used knowingly or unknowingly by journalists is that which allows them to report on children if a story falls in the public interest. By allowing the journalists to determine what constitutes public interest, it means some opportunities for journalists to highlight the plight of children. The code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya only lists one item (child abuse or abandonment) that defines public interest.

Although media reporting guidelines have been developed, studies show international media have breached the guidelines, especially in the specification of methods, identifying locations of events, and disclosing contents of suicide (Chandra et al., 2014). Most journalists publish stories that lack inclusion of supportive information (Pitman & Stevenson, 2015). Some countries such as Ireland have successfully implemented media reporting guidelines through the Ireland National Media Monitoring Agency established in 2007 to monitor all media content daily and to ensure adherence to the guidelines (The Samaritans, 2013). The studies have investigated online media reporting guidelines and found that 199 out of 229 articles complied with at least one of the Samaritan's guidelines (Utterson, et al., 2017). According to their findings reference to sources of support to those considering suicide (70%) was the most breached component of guidelines.

While media reporting guidelines exist in Kenya, we know little about how these guidelines influence children's reporting in Kenya. This study does not advocate for what reporters and editors can do or improve the sector but seeks to examine the existence and general acceptance of reporting guidelines on children's issues. Besides the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya (Media Council Act, 2013), other media guidelines include Guidelines for Election Coverage (2022), Guidelines for journalists in Kenya (developed in 2019/2020 after the COVID-19 outbreak), safety of journalists and human rights defenders and Guidelines in Reporting the Judiciary. There are no specific locally developed guidelines for children reporting but journalists rely on the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF's) guidelines for journalists reporting on children.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the influence of media reporting guidelines on children's reporting in Kenya.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study employs Practice Theory popularised by a French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, in the late twentieth century and has continued to guide researchers in diverse fields including sociology, and anthropology. In recent years, practice theory has taken on an increased importance that has spread beyond sociology and anthropology. It has been applied to various fields of study such as everyday life (Shove, et al., 2012), management (Tengblad, 2012) and international relations (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018). Bueger and Gadinger noted that, in this framework, "practice" has been lifted as the primary organising concept, whereas it used to be mostly a supporting one (Rouse, 2007). The focus on practice helps to avoid the over-emphasis on the role of institutions or norms, texts or representations, beliefs, or individual mental processes as the primary explainers of the social and cultural (Reckwitz, 2016; Rouse, 2007).



Practice theory seems fit for journalism studies because journalism is certainly characterised by routine enactments. In its simplest form, journalism consists of regular core practices of selection, production, and distribution of information to a public not previously known to the author or each other (Raetzsch 2011). However, as noted, these core practices are currently happening in more diverse settings than before, and they are enacted by increasingly varying actors, largely due to the digitalization of communication technologies and the emergence of new user cultures.

2.2 Empirical Review

Cohen-Almagor (2005) investigated troubling episodes and suggested guidelines in the coverage of acts of terrorism by media in the UK, Canada, USA, Israel, and Germany. He supports the call for the media industry to develop guidelines for media when reporting terrorism but warns that it should not be perceived as licensing. Accordingly, the media reporting guidelines seek to increase the ethical and professional conduct of journalists who provide essential services because they are often responsible for investigating events and reporting on them objectively. Tatum, et al. (2010) critically examine whether media reporting guidelines developed in 2001 in the USA were adhered to between 2002 and 2003. Based on their survey of 157 individuals and newspaper analysis, they found that the USA newspapers' coverage of suicide behaviour was not consistent in reflecting the influence of media guidelines. Moreover, 19% of their analysis found inappropriate imagery, and they recommended media guidelines on how media can cover suicide.

It is also important to note that until recently, few studies have examined whether reporters and editors have adhered to media guidelines. Researchers in Switzerland are pioneers in monitoring journalists' compliance with the guidelines (Michel et al., 2000; Di Salvo, 2022). These studies demonstrated that reporters and editors were likely to adhere to media reporting guidelines, with headlines, photos and text generally being less sensational. In Australia, researchers investigated the implications of its public media reporting guidelines on reporters' and editors' work (Pirkis et al., 2002; Romano, 2021). In the analysis of newspapers, radio, and television, they found good compliance among them except for inadequate prevention of information and referral sources.

Furthermore, Duncan and Luce (2022) analyzed 159 news stories published between 2018 and 2019 with a major focus on adherence and non-adherence to global media reporting guidelines. They found that post-judicial (59%) and event-driven stories (56%) were more likely to engage in sensationalism. Other studies have explored the quality of media reporting of health issues and whether they had adhered to the media reporting guidelines. In Ireland, McTernan et al. (2018) analyzed 243 articles between 2009 and 2012 and established that fewer (12%) of the articles violated media reporting guidelines by using sensational language with 4% publishing inappropriate photographs. Despite this observation, there was an improvement in adherence to the media guidelines during the period. To ensure that reporters and editors adhere to the guidelines, the authors recommend continuous media monitoring by regulatory agencies and the government.

Kagunda and Nabushawo (2020) revealed that children experiencing mental health issues were frequently confined to their homes and restrained, justified by concerns that "they might harm themselves and harm others." Although media possesses the power to advocate for children's rights and influence the experiences of childhood through its content, Okpara (2023) found that Nigerian media outlets tend to prioritize entertainment programs that attract major sponsors over reporting on child rights issues. Most certainly one would argue that important stories of children do not go into public because journalists fear being reprimanded over violation due to definitions of which stories fall under public interest.

A content analysis of media code of conduct violations by television news anchors in Pakistan conducted by Sarwar et al. (2023) revealed that non-media graduates are 18% more likely to violate media ethics compared to media graduates. The most common complaints involved political bias and the dissemination of unverified content. The study suggests that these violations stem from a lack of understanding of relevant laws, underscoring the need for legal education among media professionals.

Porro and Banjac (2012) studied the frequency and way children are portrayed in South African media, the study shows that coverage of children in 2011 continues to be low compared to the overall percentage of children in South Africa's population. Ortum (2013) investigated the extent of children's content within Kenyan media, observing that issues concerning children received minimal attention, often manifesting as concise news briefs in prominent newspapers such as The Daily Nation and The Standard.



III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study used a descriptive research design. This design offers a high degree of sample representativeness, and the researcher can easily opt to study respondents' views (Polit & Beck, 2004). In this case, the researcher obtained and described respondent's views regarding media reporting guidelines and how it affects the practice of journalism in Kenya. To address the research questions, quantitative research was conducted. This generated quantifiable data. The design is always concerned with observable data and measurable phenomena that involve people, events, or things; and establishes the strength of the relationship between variables normally by statistical test (Couchman & Dawson, 1995; Siedlecki, 2020). The researcher exercised control by enhancing the external validity of the study. He utilized a structured questionnaire, which enabled him to quantify the responses and conduct statistical analysis. This study-maintained objectivity through structured data collection.

3.2 Target Population and Sample Size

All journalists working in media organizations in Nairobi County constitute the target population for this study. Since most mainstream media organizations have head offices within Nairobi City County, this study was conducted on all journalists working in media organizations in Nairobi County. The journalists who were considered are mainly those accredited and identified in the accreditation list of the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), published on its website (<https://mediacouncil.or.ke/>). The total number of journalists in Nairobi County as shown in the MCK accreditation database is 2,105, but there could be more, and this constitutes the target population for this study.

To get the desired sample size, stratified random sampling was employed. In this case, the researcher used known information about the target population elements to separate sample units into non-overlapping groups or strata from which they were randomly selected (Hunter, 2010). Therefore, journalists' details such as media organization, gender, occupation, and age were used in the stratification process. This ensured that all media organizations benefited equally, or journalists got an equal chance of being selected. Sample size calculation was done using Taro Yamane's formula as shown below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{2,105}{1 + 2,105(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = 336.26 \text{ (336)}$$

n= Sample size

N= Population size (2,105)

E=error (0.05) reliability 95%

Once the target journalists had been identified, the researcher used Google Forms to collect the data. The forms were emailed to the target respondents who would fill them, and the researcher exported the data into an Excel sheet and later SPSS for analysis. During data collection, the researcher monitored the flow of questionnaires filled and submitted by the respondents. This helped the researcher to conduct a follow-up by calling those who emailed the questionnaire to increase the response rate.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed in this study. The quantitative codes were analyzed using the statistical package for social science (SPSS). The SPSS was used to run description statistics such as frequency and percentage to present the quantitative data in the form of tables and graphs. The quantitative approach in this study is considered to have quantification of qualitative data has been used to gain an in-depth understanding of media coverage of the subjects under study. Immediately after closing data collection, the researcher stopped the forms from being filled in by the respondents. This allowed the researcher to analyze the data and prepare the final report.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Response Rate

A total of 336 questionnaires were shared via emails with the target respondents with whom the researcher had established rapport and agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaires were generated from Google Forms making it easier for the respondents to fill them at their convenience and submit their responses virtually. At the end of the data collection process, 238 (71%) questionnaires had been fully filled and submitted while 98 (29%) responses were not received making the researcher disregard them. The study attributes the response rate to sustained phone calls and consistent chats (through Short Message Service – SMS, and WhatsApp) with the respondents and this raised the possibility of an improved response rate being realized (Dillman et al., 2009).

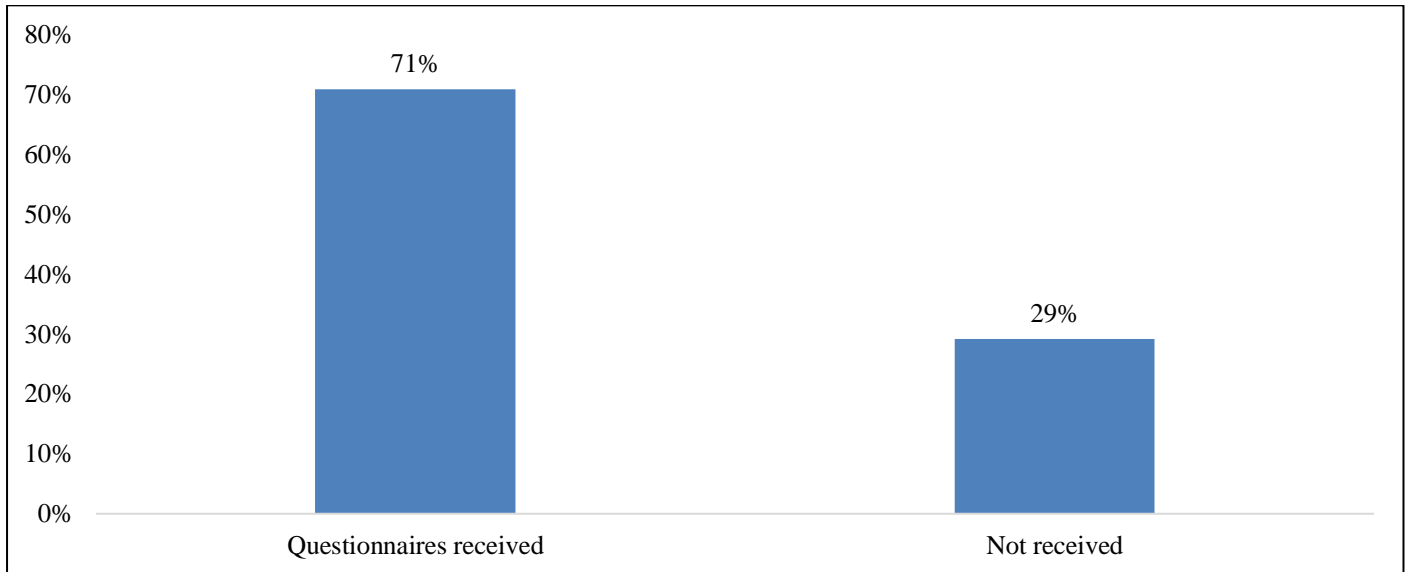


Figure 1
Response Rate

4.2 Demographic Information of Respondents

The study analyzed demographic information of the respondents who participated in the study. The findings are presented in Table 1. Out of 238 respondents, 123 (52%) were male and 115 (48%) female and this shows the responses used in this study represented the views of both male and female journalists. Most of the respondents were aged 38-48 years, followed closely by one-third who indicated their age as between 28 and 38. Additionally, 8% were aged 28 years and below, 14% were aged 48-58 years, and 5% were aged 58 years and above. Many respondents had formal education and could respond to the online data collection tool without difficulties.

Regarding area of expertise/occupation, the majority (38%) of the respondents who participated in the study worked in radio, TV (27%) and print (21%). This means there was diversity in the representation of views on media guidelines in reporting of children and how this shapes journalists' practice. As shown in Table 1, the majority (43%) of the respondents had worked for 5-10 years in the media industry. The findings also showed that 35% had been in the industry for 10-15 years, with 0-5 years accounting for 15% of the total number of respondents, and those above 15 years are 7%. The explanation could be that most of the respondents have more experience and have likely interacted with some of the available media reporting guidelines in Kenya. Also, it means that they had some information that helped them respond to the questions without difficulties.



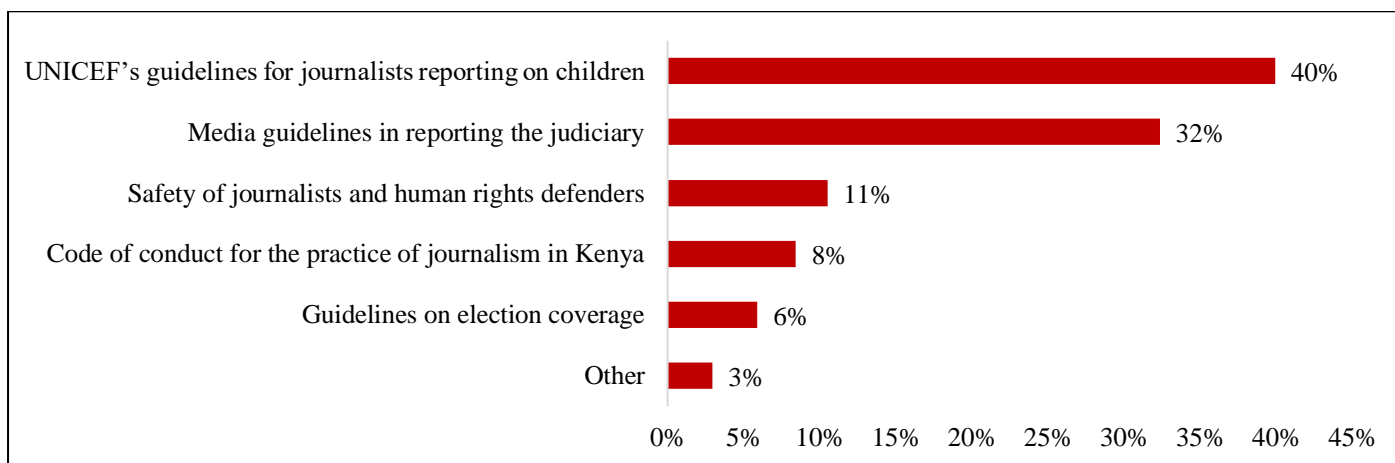
Table 1
Demographic Information of Respondents

Demographic Information	Description	Frequency	Percentages
Gender	Male	123	52%
	Female	115	48%
Age bracket	18-28 yrs.	19	8%
	28-38 yrs.	78	33%
	38-48 yrs.	96	40%
	48-58 yrs.	34	14%
	58+ yrs.	11	5%
Highest education level	PhD	13	6%
	Masters	45	19%
	Bachelors	98	42%
	Diploma	72	31%
	Others	8	3%
Are of expertise/occupation	Print	50	21%
	TV	65	27%
	Radio	90	38%
	Online	33	14%
Number of years in the media industry	0-5 yrs.	35	15%
	5-10 yrs.	102	43%
	10-15 yrs.	84	35%
	15+ yrs.	17	7%

n=238

4.3 Journalist’s Level of Knowledge on Available Media Guidelines in Kenya

This study sought to explore the journalist's level of knowledge on the available media reporting guidelines in Kenya. The findings revealed that most of the respondents (40%) had not fully interacted with UNICEF's guidelines for journalists reporting on children. Instead, a significant part of the respondents had either been trained/ sensitized on the code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya (8%) or guidelines on election coverage (6%). Moreover, 32% of the respondents said they had not fully interacted with the media guidelines in reporting the judiciary (judicial documentation), as presented in Figure 2.



n=238

Figure 2
Journalist’s Level of Knowledge on Available Media Guidelines in Kenya



4.4 Media Reporting Guidelines and the Practice of Journalism

Journalists have always come under scrutiny for ignoring children's issues, but is this the case? This study attempts to contribute to the debate by examining the implications of media reporting guidelines to the practice of journalism. In this section, the study presents the results of a survey conducted among male and female journalists. As shown in Table 2, the majority (56%) of respondents believe that journalists in Kenya understand how to report ethically and sensitively on children's issues. However, 36% do not believe that journalists have adequate knowledge of media reporting guidelines that could help journalists in their work.

Furthermore, 63% of respondents reported that the language commonly used by journalists does not adequately reflect children's issues. This study found that while media reporting guidelines are good for children, a significant 72% of the respondents said this has created panic among journalists. This may explain why some journalists opt to ignore critical stories about children that could influence how the world responds to children's issues. Journalists have the power to shape public perception and understanding of children's issues, including violence against them or education matters.

The majority (69%) of respondents believed that media content can become sexually explicit material for children and that this may affect them. However, 49% don't think such content can be sexual, which may be attributed to an increase diverse children's content across various media platforms. It seems most media organizations rely mainly on guidelines developed by other organizations. As shown in Table 2, the majority (54%) of the respondents noted that their organization does not have internal guidelines to help journalists understand how to cover stories involving children. This lack of internal guidelines may expose reporters and editors in case someone wants to take legal action or might lead to many of them being reprimanded for doing their work. The results also indicate 34% of media organizations have developed their own guidelines for reporting on children.

The study results further highlight journalists' experiences in violating the set guidelines while covering children. As shown in Table 2, the majority (60%) of the respondents reported that several journalists have faced sanctions in the last twelve months for revealing the identities of children in their articles. However, 10% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, indicating that some journalists adhered to the media reporting guidelines. This confirms that journalists with low knowledge of the guidelines or those who knowingly violate them are likely to face disciplinary measures.

The question of whether these hinder journalists' is debatable. Consequently, the results of this study show that, in most cases, journalists and editors are forced to refrain from publishing very important stories about children due to the challenges of determining which stories should be made public. This would mean that their work sometimes is complicated by the selection criteria, especially when deciding which story qualify as being in the public interest.

Table 2

Media Reporting Guidelines and the Practice of Journalism

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA
Journalists in Kenya always understand how to report ethically and sensitively on the issues of children.	25%	12%	7%	40%	16%
The language used by journalists does not reflect issues of children.	15%	13%	9%	18%	45%
The guidelines for reporting children often create panic in the profession.	13%	10%	5%	49%	23%
Media reports can become sexually explicit material for children.	16%	24%	0%	15%	45%
Besides external media reporting guidelines, our organisation has internal guidelines on reporting children.	34%	20%	11%	23%	12%
Several journalists have in the last twelve months faced sanctions due to revealing the identities of children in their stories.	17%	13%	10%	17%	43%
Journalists and editors are forced to avoid critical children's stories due to the challenge of assessing stories to go on air	22%	10%	2%	39%	27%

n=238

4.5 Discussions

This study examined the influence of media reporting guidelines on how journalists report children's stories. The data analyzed reveals the processes reporters and editors follow to produce the final stories consumed by the audience. The literature confirms that it is not always clear-cut for journalists to adhere to the set guidelines, as they must navigate lengthy news reports. This is in tandem with Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that journalism is a struggle for symbolic power, which should be analyzed as a field of struggle for truth or the right to impose particular viewpoints as newsworthy (Swartz, 2019). As demonstrated by these results, journalists encounter challenging environments in



ensuring children's stories meet the set guidelines. Distinguishing which stories qualify as being in the public interest is often left to the journalist, with support from editors who may not take responsibility in case of disputes leading to legal cases. A study by Dickinson (2008) concurs that journalists are expected to be continually multi-skilled workers, equipped for multi-media work, as they endure greater competitive pressure in the chase for fragmenting audiences. Perhaps more important is the fact that new forms of journalism are beginning to emerge that challenge conventional ideas about what journalists do, and how and where they do it (Allan, 2006).

This study notes that although journalists in Kenya are aware of the existence of media reporting guidelines, their level of knowledge varies. For example, a significant number of them are more likely to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya compared to UNICEF's guidelines for reporting on children. Section 18 of the Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in Kenya protects the coverage of children by advising journalists to avoid identifying children in stories related to sexual offenses and to avoid taking photos of children at school or other formal institutions. However, it allows journalists to consider violating these regulations when a story meets public interest or in difficult circumstances. In other words, reporters and editors have the prerogative to determine for themselves which children's stories to air. Badji and Takieddine (2020) maintain that the poor level of journalists' education, the ambiguity of the media environment, and the excesses of media practice are the fundamental reasons that have led to a lack of respect for ethical and professional practices.

Although journalists cover children's stories ethically, adhering to these guidelines has always created panic among them. About 54% of the journalists reported that their media organizations lack internal guidelines for reporting on children and rely mainly on external guidelines. These external guidelines affect how reporters and editors handle stories related to children, as they tend to avoid reporting critical issues of children for fear of being reprimanded. Di Salvo (2022) argues that reporters and editors are likely to adhere to media reporting guidelines; the risk is that unspecialized reporters may be unaware of the specific ethical rules and norms of a particular beat, potentially leading to more errors and rulings. This study did not delve into whether there was an increase or reduction in complaints against journalists for violation of journalistic guidelines. One interpretation of the findings could be to see the stability as an indication of an actual decline in the number of complaints since the number of stories on children they produce continues to increase over time.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study observes that while media reporting guidelines protect children, they can make reporters and editors ignore very important stories that could have helped change children's lives. Allowing journalists to determine for themselves what meets public interest criteria or what is of great concern, and therefore needs to alert the community, leaves them in a complex situation. This suggests that media organisations and journalists need to be specific and must adopt a rigorous approach to reporting children's issues. Whether this could delay or hinder the quality of reporting is something to consider for an in-depth investigation.

Furthermore, journalists acknowledged understanding some existing media reporting guidelines more than others (Figure 3). This could mean they have access to certain guidelines or have attended forums that exposed them to these documents. For instance, they had interacted with the code of conduct for the practice of journalism in Kenya, which has fewer guidelines fully dedicated to reporting on children. The Media Council of Kenya implements these regulations, suggesting they have undertaken sustained efforts to ensure media professionals protect children in their reporting.

5.2 Recommendations

While media professionals need to adhere to guidelines on reporting about children, this study proposes a sustained debate on how these guidelines positively and negatively influence their reporting and profession. Furthermore, advocates for media reporting guidelines on the coverage of children should consider organizing sensitization forums for media professionals to enhance their skills in balancing public interest issues with critical issues that may lead to accusations or reprimands, for highlighting issues that increase the level of attention from government agencies or other stakeholders. Therefore, balancing coverage of children should include information about preventive programs for journalists, similar to sensitized media coverage of other areas such as elections or suicide. This could involve suggestion boxes or forums for feedback from journalists on their experiences with the guidelines.



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