

The Role of Mainstream Television Programs in Sensitizing the Kenyan Publics on Climate Change Issues: A Case of *Earthwise* on NTV

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ABSTRACT

Climate change (CC) is one of the most significant challenges of our time, with far-reaching impacts on ecosystems, human health, agriculture, and food security. In Kenya, the effects are evident in recurrent floods, prolonged droughts, biodiversity loss, and declining agricultural productivity, threatening livelihoods and national development. This study evaluated the role of NTV *Earthwise* programming content in sensitizing the Kenyan publics on climate change issues. Agenda-setting and Framing theories formed the theoretical foundation, with a qualitative content analysis research design being employed on twelve *Earthwise* episodes broadcast between September 2023 and September 2024 on NTV's YouTube channel. The twelve episodes were purposively sampled, and the data was transcribed and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that *Earthwise* contributes significantly to sensitizing the Kenyan publics on Climate Change by contextualizing scientific information within relatable local realities and showcasing practical adaptation strategies. However, its broader impact is constrained by limited geographic coverage, an imbalanced framing of Climate Change issues, and a focus on presenting visual images of Climate Change without previous context. Future studies on this topic should consider including audience-centered research methods to provide a comprehensive view of the role of media in sensitizing the Kenyan publics on Climate Change issues.

Keywords: Climate Change, Sensitization, Modes of Presentation, Agenda-setting, Framing, Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Media content has massive discursive power that substantially affects public opinion and can build consensus and generate consent. Thus, while the media is acknowledged as a source of knowledge for the publics, it also serves as a crucial tool for changing the public's perception concerning any issue. Besides, the media can easily shift the public's attention from an issue of vital significance to matters of mass consumption and subservient significance. As a result, the media establishes an epistemic society by informing the public and raising questions through fabricated or actual audiences.

Mikhaylov et al. (2020) opine that Climate Change remains a critical global challenge that influences myriad environmental, ecological, socio-economic, and socio-political disciplines. This leads to a gradual rise in the average global temperature and an increase in extreme weather events. As a result, talks about Climate Change, particularly the rise in the Earth's temperature, have become intense globally. Although multiple factors contribute to the global Climate Change issue, the onset of the Industrial Revolution is one of the significant factors that substantially amplified the issue of climate change due to the increased emission of greenhouse gases from industrial activities, thus necessitating increased public sensitization to the human contribution towards Climate Change.

The multiple problems caused by climate change have attracted the attention of global agencies, including the United Nations (UN), which has formulated measures to address the issue of climate change in collaboration with the press and media. According to the UN, climate change is the current defining issue, which is characterized by shifting weather patterns that affect global food security and cause a rise in sea levels, increasing the risk of experiencing catastrophic floods. Essentially, the UN acknowledges that climate change

has a wide range of impacts that warrant formulating and implementing drastic action plans to address the climate change issue.

Background information

There has been a growing concern about the escalating Climate Change-related adverse impacts in Kenya, ranging from frequent floods to severe droughts; however, the media is still recognized for its role of sensitizing the public on climate change (Kenya News Agency, 2024). Besides, a recent Convention on Climate Change (COP27) hosted by Egypt unveiled an urgent need to reduce emissions drastically since the world desperately needs a substantial leap in climate change ambition. One of the major emphases during the convention was increased efforts in preventing global temperature increases above the 1.5 °C limit (United Nations, 2024). The Africa Climate Summit, which was held in Kenya in 2023, focused on addressing the increasing exposure to climate change and its related costs. Thus, the summit emphasized the need for urgent actions to mitigate climate change-related problems due to the anticipated escalation of climate change-related crises, particularly regarding their intensity and frequency (Africa Climate Summit, 2023).

In 2023, COP 28 took place in the United Arab Emirates, where representatives from about two hundred countries agreed to start preventing the use of fossil fuels, a significant source of greenhouse gases contributing to rising global temperatures (Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership, 2024). The media and press's role in these meetings is indispensable since they convey the meetings and conferences' proceedings to the public and alert the public on climate change issues from Climate Change-related global agencies (United Nations Climate Change, 2024).

The media has long been acknowledged as a significant public knowledge and opinion driver. Its ability to highlight, prioritize, and contextualize issues enables it to shape societal discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Kenya, the media outlets include broadcast, print, and digital, which possess significant potential as agents of change, particularly in promoting environmental conservation (Njeru, 2023). With their extensive reach and influence, media platforms can serve as powerful tools for disseminating information, fostering public dialogue, and catalyzing action on climate change. Unfortunately, a recent study on climate change issues in Kenyan print media using the case of Standard and Daily Nation newspapers unveiled a lack of significant focus on mitigation efforts, and the climate change stories are not placed strategically on the front pages (Mungai, 2021).

The mainstream television continues to command broad audiences despite the rise of digital platforms (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). Programs such as *Earthwise*, a weekly environmental show on NTV, are important in bridging the knowledge gap between climate science and everyday citizens. This study examines *Earthwise* as a case study of how television content can sensitize the Kenyan public to climate change issues, focusing on its agenda-setting, framing strategies, and modes of presentation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda-Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory is a theory of mass communication that posits that the media influence the public's perception of what is important. This theory was first formally developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, based on their study of the 1968 United States presidential election. They found that the issues covered by the media in most news are also the issues that the public considers most important. McCombs and Shaw argue that the media do not directly tell people what to think but influence what they think by paying more attention to some issues and less attention to others; the media shape the public's agenda. The cognitive aspect of agenda-setting theory is associated with the media coverage's influence on its audiences' mental processing and comprehension.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping the public's perceptions and priorities by deciding which climate change issues to highlight and how to frame them (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021). In the context of Kenya, where climate change poses significant challenges, the media has the potential to amplify the urgency of

afforestation and reafforestation measures to help alleviate the adverse impacts of climate change (Oluoch, 2023). The study explored how the media agenda-setting process operates in the context of climate change in Kenya, shedding light on the issues that receive prominent coverage and how they are presented to the public. Agenda-setting theory suggests that media exposure to a given topic influences the public's view of its significance. In other words, the frequency of the media's exposure to a given topic influences the public's perception of the importance of that topic. Therefore, media literacy and critical thinking skills are crucial in navigating the complex landscape of consumption of media programming content and in promoting a well-informed citizenry to engage in shaping the public's discourse on a given topic of interest.

Framing Theory

The framing theory, which was originally proposed by Erving Goffman in 1976, was used to guide the study. This theory postulates that people's underlying assumptions influence how they perceive the world, and framing acts as a means of selective control (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). Thus, framing theory goes beyond agenda-setting to include specific issues and put them in a wider scope. In other words, as agenda-setting emphasizes the subjects' prominence, framing focuses on the causes of issues, thus expanding the research's scope. It is worth highlighting that "frame," which denotes how a subject is presented to the audience, influences the audience's understanding choices (Kuan et al., 2021).

Framing theory consists of two fundamental frameworks: social and natural. Although the two frameworks are different, they both help people make sense of media information. In particular, social frameworks help people make sense of media information by attributing events to interactions of social participants' desires and by recognizing other people's influence in shaping events. Conversely, natural frameworks help people make sense of information by defining events as physical occurrences. In other words, the natural frameworks concentrate on the literal interpretation of events and overlook any potential description associated with social actions or human influences (Lynas et al., 2022). Therefore, natural frameworks are vital foundations for social frameworks, as they influence how individuals interpret, process, and portray data. According to Goffman, individuals skillfully employ these two frameworks even when they are not consciously aware of them.

The comprehension of the framing theory helped assess how the NTV's *Earthwise* programming content presented Climate Change-related stories, the language employed in presenting the content, the key sources of information covered in the program, and the overall narrative in the content through social and natural frameworks. Goffman's framing theory is essential in the research as it offers valuable insights into how the Kenyan public perceives and interprets the NTV's *Earthwise* programming content, with significant implications on how the content shapes their understanding and perspectives about climate change issues.

The integral role of the media in decisions of how to present climate change matters to the public is undeniably great, considering the fact that the media remains the key source of information and opinion for millions of people who can be identified as readers and viewers of multiple media outlets. In other words, the public gathers most of its information from the mass media, including television and newspapers, due to the media's ability to reach many people (Boykoff & Rayan, 2007).

The media is increasingly using images to present climate change issues. Images including diverse art forms on climate change have facilitated the concretization of scientific data on climate change, thus helping enhance the viewers' comprehension of complex climate change issues. Moving images, including computer-generated visualizations and films, are also gaining prominence as important modes of presenting climate change issues to the public (Wang et al., 2018).

O'Neill & Smith (2014) showed that using visual images to present climate change issues has multiple benefits and demerits. The visuals help the audience visualize climate change issues of the past and present, and stimulate the imagination for future climate change issues. Additionally, whether stylized or not, news editors still have to make decisions on the reality aspects that are made more or less salient in the climate change-related images before presenting them to the audience. Thus, the climate change images that are presented by the media do not depict objective reality but are normative ways of illustrating a specific way of perceiving the world. Additionally, the visual images, particularly from television documentaries, often focus on convincing

the audience and inviting them to bear witness to the changing global climate. As a result, the editors of such visuals focus on amplifying some features to attract their audiences' attention and persuade them while diminishing others.

Luo et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the effects of agenda-setting by the news media using empirical studies on agenda-setting published from 1972 to 2015. A total of sixty-seven studies met the inclusion criteria. The outcomes of this meta-analysis unveiled strong news media agenda-setting effects. Thus, a significant media focus on a given issue in society results in the public's perceiving that issue as significant. At the same time, diminished media coverage ultimately leads to negligible public attention towards that issue.

The research on framing climate change by Schmidt et al. (2013) discovered that the media used various frames to communicate about climate change. According to this research, most environmental associations and the media used predominantly negative scenarios when framing climate change. Besides, they offer a few effective and practical approaches for the public to take, increasing the risk of the audience tuning out the message. Schmidt et al. (2013) further explored the influence of media framing on public perception of climate change using the desktop research method and unveiled that media framing had a significant influence on public perception. At the same time, the findings showed the existence of a methodological and conceptual gap pertaining to the media's influence on its audiences' perception of climate change. A preliminary empirical review showed that media framing had a significant influence on the public's perception of climate change. In particular, the media framing of climate change shapes how the public comprehends and engages with the climate change issue.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative content analysis research design, which explores a detailed and systematic examination of multiple dimensions of the NTV's *Earthwise* programming content to unveil the media's role in sensitizing the Kenyan publics on climate change matters. Qualitative content analysis allows a holistic and in-depth examination of the NTV's *Earthwise* programming content, which in turn allows for the retrieval of underlying themes, the frequency of their coverage, the affective and cognitive aspects, the social and natural contexts embedded in the programming content, and the modes of presenting the climate change matters. *Earthwise* was selected as a case as it is one of the few Kenyan TV programs dedicated to climate issues. Twelve episodes aired between September 2023 and September 2024 were purposively sampled from NTV's YouTube channel. Qualitative data was collected using the qualitative content analysis code, with each episode being transcribed and coded based on three dimensions: agenda-setting (themes highlighted), framing (narratives emphasized), and modes of presentation (delivery techniques). Reliability was ensured by re-examining codes across multiple viewings of each episode, while validity was enhanced through alignment of codes with established theoretical constructs. Ethical considerations included fair use of broadcast material and acknowledgment of producers' contributions. Although limited to one program, the approach provides deep insights into media practices in Kenyan climate communication.

FINDINGS

To examine the diversity of agenda set by NTV's *Earthwise* programming content in the bid to sensitize the Kenyan publics on Climate Change issues

The analysis examines how *Earthwise* set a diverse agenda on climate change issues to sensitize the Kenyan public. This reveals that the program consistently covered a wide range of climate-related themes. These include the causes of climate change, such as deforestation, poor land-use practices, and carbon emissions; the effects of climate change, such as prolonged droughts, recurrent floods, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss; and adaptation measures like water harvesting, drought-resistant farming, and agroforestry. The program also gives attention to the importance of environmental conservation, particularly through reforestation, community-based conservation projects, and ecosystem restoration, while acknowledging challenges in alleviating the effects of climate change, such as a lack of resources, weak policy enforcement, and limited community awareness.

By presenting these recurring themes, *Earthwise* elevates climate change to the public agenda, making it a continuous topic of discussion rather than an occasional headline. Unlike event-driven news reports that focus mainly on disasters, *Earthwise* creates continuity by embedding climate change within broader national development and livelihood concerns. For instance, it consistently links climate change to agriculture, which directly affects Kenya's food security and economy. This not only highlights environmental concerns but also emphasizes their social and economic significance.

However, while the agenda is diverse, some aspects are less visible. Issues such as government climate policies, international climate negotiations, and systemic structural responses are not given as much coverage compared to localized community actions and environmental conservation efforts. The program thus focuses more on immediate and visible challenges rather than long-term institutional or global dynamics.

Overall, *Earthwise* demonstrates success in setting a broad and diverse agenda that resonated with Kenyan realities. By bringing multiple climate themes to public attention, it created awareness across different dimensions, though with limited emphasis on policy and governance frameworks.

To analyze the framing of Climate Change by NTV's *Earthwise* programming content in the bid to sensitize the Kenyan publics on climate change issues

An examination of how *Earthwise* frames climate change issues to make them understandable and relatable to Kenyan audiences reveals that the program uses three dominant frames: economic development and competitiveness, morality and ethics, and collective and individual adaptation solutions.

Through the economic frame, *Earthwise* links climate change directly to livelihoods, especially in agriculture. Episodes demonstrate how droughts and floods reduce harvests, threaten food security, and affect household income. By emphasizing agriculture and economic productivity, the program highlights climate change as not only an environmental issue but also an economic one that directly influences Kenya's growth and competitiveness.

The moral and ethical frame portrays climate change as a matter of shared responsibility and justice. This framing calls on individuals, communities, and leaders to take moral responsibility for protecting the environment for future generations. For example, some episodes highlight conservation as a duty rather than a choice, urging people to engage in tree planting or water preservation as part of their ethical obligation to society.

The adaptation solutions frame showcases how both individuals and communities respond to climate change. Practical examples include farmers practicing crop diversification, communities constructing water storage systems, and experts recommending long-term adaptation strategies. These frames offer audiences tangible, relatable actions they could emulate, thereby countering feelings of helplessness.

While these frames are effective in drawing audience attention, there are some gaps. The framing often underplays political accountability, policy interventions, international cooperation, and mitigation strategies such as renewable energy adoption. By focusing heavily on adaptation and moral responsibility, the program risks presenting climate change primarily as a local or personal issue rather than as a systemic and global challenge. Thus, *Earthwise* frames climate change in ways that connect it to everyday Kenyan life, ensuring the issues are not abstract but practical, moral, and economic. However, this framing leaves out broader political and structural contexts.

To assess the presentation modes of NTV's *Earthwise* programming content in the bid to sensitize the Kenyan publics on climate change issues

The modes of presentation that *Earthwise* employs to communicate climate change show that the program primarily relies on interviews and live broadcasts with visual imagery, both of which played crucial roles in

sensitization. Interviews are conducted with farmers, community leaders, and experts. Farmers' voices allow the program to showcase real-life experiences of climate impacts, such as crop failure, water scarcity, and changing weather patterns. Community leaders highlight collective responsibility responses, such as reforestation or water harvesting initiatives. Experts contribute by interpreting these experiences scientifically, explaining causes, and suggesting adaptation or mitigation strategies. These diverse perspectives enhance the program's credibility and relatability, balancing technical knowledge with lived realities.

Visual imagery is another key presentation mode where the program frequently uses footage of degraded environments, deforested landscapes, dried-up rivers, or drought-stricken farms to demonstrate the severity of climate impacts. At the same time, it also presents positive images of restored forests, rehabilitated land, and successful adaptation strategies like agroforestry or terracing. This visual contrast creates a powerful emotional and cognitive impact. Audiences can easily see both the dangers of inaction and the benefits of proactive adaptation. The multimodal approach of combining human testimonies with visuals proves effective in simplifying complex climate science. It also creates both emotional engagement and intellectual understanding, helping audiences connect with the issues more deeply.

However, the reliance on visuals sometimes results in oversimplification, as images cannot fully explain historical or systemic aspects of climate change. For example, showing drought-affected areas without referencing long-term climatic data limits deeper understanding. Furthermore, visuals often lack context about government responses or global negotiations, leaving audiences with incomplete information. Despite these gaps, the use of interviews and visuals makes climate change communication impactful by humanizing issues through personal stories and reinforcing them with strong imagery. *Earthwise* effectively conveys the urgency and relevance of climate change to Kenyan audiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the central role of NTV's *Earthwise* program in climate change sensitization in Kenya, while also exposing certain gaps that influence its overall impact. The program shows considerable strength in setting a broad agenda on climate change. Its agenda-setting role aligns with global research that shows repeated coverage, which elevates issue salience in themes such as causes, effects, adaptation, and conservation. *Earthwise* shifts climate change from being viewed as a distant scientific matter to one tied to livelihoods and agriculture. This reflects McCombs et al. (2023), who emphasize that the media shape public attention by prioritizing specific issues. Similarly, Osindo (2014) stresses that Kenyan media play a critical role in linking environmental issues to everyday realities. However, the program's agenda leans more towards community-based and environmental perspectives while giving less focus to systemic responses such as government policies, institutional frameworks, or global negotiations. As Neondo (2021) observes, Kenyan media often underreport policy and structural aspects of climate change, thereby limiting contextual depth.

The framing analysis reveals that *Earthwise* employs economic, moral/ethical, and adaptation frames to make climate change relatable. Such approaches echo Nisbet (2012), who notes that framing defines how complex issues are understood by connecting them to familiar concerns. In the Kenyan context, linking climate change to food and livelihood security resonates with Hase et al. (2021), who show that frames grounded in everyday experiences enhance engagement. Nevertheless, as De Lara et al. (2017) caution, overemphasis on adaptation can shift responsibility onto individuals and communities while neglecting broader structural and global dimensions.

The program's use of presentation modes, particularly interviews and visual imagery, is vital in enhancing communication. Interviews with farmers, experts, and leaders provide credibility and authenticity, while visuals create a strong emotional appeal. This resonates with Wang et al. (2018), who argue that visual communication simplifies complex scientific concepts, and O'Neill and Smith (2014), who emphasize its role in sustaining attention. Still, as Osindo (2014) points out, media reliance on imagery without adequate context risks oversimplifying climate issues. Overall, the findings suggest that while *Earthwise* succeeds in making climate change accessible, engaging, and locally grounded, its effectiveness would be enhanced by more balanced framing and greater integration of policy, institutional, and global perspectives.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that NTV's *Earthwise* program plays a significant role in sensitizing Kenyans on climate change through agenda-setting, framing, and presentation modes. The program consistently highlights six key agendas: causes and effects of climate change, adaptation measures, ways of reducing impacts, the importance of environmental conservation, and challenges in addressing climate change. These agenda choices ensure frequent exposure of audiences to critical issues. Affective portrayals evoke emotions such as concern, fear, and caution, drawing audiences into deeper reflection on climate change. Cognitive portrayals, on the other hand, focus on sharing practical adaptation measures, enabling the public to engage with climate knowledge in meaningful ways. Together, the agenda-setting, cognitive, and affective approaches inform, engage, and empower audiences, thereby raising sensitization levels. The program also frames climate change in three key ways: economic development and competitiveness, morality and ethics, and individual and collective adaptation. Through economic framing, *Earthwise* connects climate change to investment opportunities, risks, and market implications. The moral and ethical frame emphasizes sustainability and intergenerational responsibility, while the adaptation frame stresses both community and individual roles in reducing impacts. These frames shape public perceptions by linking climate change to everyday realities and moral obligations. In terms of presentation, *Earthwise* uses interviews, live broadcasts, and visuals. Interviews with community members and experts provide credible perspectives, while visuals and live footage vividly illustrate impacts and adaptation practices. By combining these modes, the program simplifies complex issues and enhances public understanding. Overall, the study demonstrates how mainstream media can effectively sensitize audiences to climate change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Ensure Diverse Representation: Climate change communication should actively incorporate perspectives from different regions, communities, and subject-matter experts. Including diverse voices ensures that coverage captures the varied realities of climate change, from urban to rural contexts, and provides the public with a broader, more inclusive understanding of its impacts and solutions.

ii. Balanced framing of climate change effects and adaptation strategies: Media should balance their framing of climate change by addressing both the severity of its risks and the opportunities for adaptation and resilience. Overemphasis on threats can create fear and helplessness, while highlighting adaptation strategies and success stories can empower audiences to see climate change as a critical yet manageable challenge.

iii. Use of visual contrast: The use of strong visuals—especially contrasting images showing "before" and "after" scenarios—can make climate change more tangible. Such visual storytelling not only illustrates the damage caused by climate impacts but also highlights the positive outcomes of adaptation measures, helping audiences connect emotionally and cognitively with the message.

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