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# FIRST-LEVEL AGENDA SETTING: A STUDY OF PRESS VS. PUBLIC OPINION IN KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

The present research examines media agenda setting effects in a Kenyan context in 2013 and 2014. Specifically, focusing on the first level of agenda setting, the study investigates whether two national daily newspapers influenced public opinion on six issues of national importance: corruption, devolution, economic crisis, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment. Moreover, the study examines whether the newspapers' agendas are related in connection to the coverage of the six issues. Findings indicate that the two newspapers had little influence on the opinion of the Kenyan public regarding the six issues. This is based on a low correlation of +.30 between the two newspapers' agendas and the public agenda. However, the agendas of the two publications were strikingly similar—yielding a perfect correlation of +1. This means in their news coverage, the newspapers gave similar weight to the six issues.

**Keywords:** agenda setting theory; Kenya; media agenda; media effects; public agenda; public opinion



## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1968 seminal study (McCombs and Shaw 1972) in Chapel Hill, agenda-setting theory has remained a central fixture in media effects research across various geographical regions (Al-Haqee and Melkote 1996; Camaj 2014; Hyun and Moon 2016; Onyebadi 2012; Sevenans and Vliegthart 2016; Shehata 2010; Zhou et al. 2016). To borrow Walgrave and Aelst's (2006, 88) words, the agenda-setting notion has "provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and communication research." For sure, agenda setting is a living testimony that illustrates the powerful function of the mass media in shaping public opinion on issues of national importance. The centrality of the concept in mass communication research is explained by the fact that in its 40-plus years, agenda-setting studies have increased over time, inclusive of all three levels (first, second and third) (Kim et al. 2015). Similarly, Kim et al. (2015) found that important concepts such as the need for orientation, agenda melding, inter-media agenda setting, policy agenda and agenda building, have been explored in agenda-setting research. Generally, these examples offer strong evidence that the traditional agenda-setting research is still robust in the current Internet age and social media landscape (Zhou et al. 2016).

In Kenya, the focus of the current study, the relationship between the media and citizens is often displayed in the public sphere, mostly focusing on integral issues that relate to the country's development. Theoretically, the relationship between the media and citizens could be seen through the prism of media agenda setting, which describes the very powerful role of the media in influencing public opinion. In open democracies, citizens not only acquire vital information about various topics from the mass media, but they also learn how much importance to attach to the issues in news.

Therefore, the present research examines the function of the Kenyan press in setting the agenda on issues of public interest in 2013 and 2014, a period when the government of President Uhuru Kenyatta came into power. Focusing on the first-level agenda setting, the study investigates whether two leading Kenyan national daily newspapers (*Daily Nation* and *The Standard*) influenced the public opinion on six important issues—corruption, devolution, economic crisis, poverty, security, and unemployment. In addition, the study also examines whether the agendas of the two newspapers are related in relation to the coverage of the six issues.

Though hundreds of studies on media agenda setting have been conducted in different geographical locations (Canel et al. 1996; Lennon 1998; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Takeshita 1993; Wanta et al. 2004), this type of research is scarce in Kenya, and generally in Africa. This is something of great concern because since the 1968 seminal study, agenda-setting theory has "engendered more than 400 published studies" (Davie and Maher 2006, 358), yet very little has been done in an African context.

Thus, the present research attempts to narrow this research gap. The study will provide useful new knowledge on the relationship between the media and the Kenyan public. That is, the study will help establish whether the two influential local newspapers

shape public opinion in a country where, according to Ismail and Dean (2008, 320), citizens consume “news and information voraciously.” Relatedly, Maina (2006) points out that Kenyan citizens have become increasingly reliant on the media for information and rate news outlets with greater credibility than other sources. This is interesting because previous research (Ileri 2009, 2012) indicates that the Kenyan media have finite influence on public opinion. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the growth of agenda-setting research in Africa, a region lagging behind in media effects studies.

Though agenda-setting research in the developed world has moved beyond the first and second levels to new frontiers such as agenda melding and network agenda setting, this isn't the case in Kenya or Africa. Therefore, this fact necessitates the need to examine agenda-setting research at the very basic level (first level) in an African setting. Generally, the place of agenda-setting effects in Kenya and Africa remains largely unknown, if not inconclusive. This is despite the fact that agenda setting is one of the highly researched theories in mass communication (see Weaver 2007).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The agenda-setting theory describes the influential role of the media in telling the public what issues to think about. Through news media, citizens learn how much importance to attach to certain issues and not others. This is so because mass media confer status on issues (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948), and increase levels of importance assigned to issues by audience members (Scheufele 2000). At the core of agenda setting is the salience of issues—the “degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important” (Dearing and Rogers 1996, 8). As such, Dearing and Rogers (1996) explain that the agenda-setting process involves competition among the proponents of a set of issues to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites.

Since its inception during the 1968 US presidential election, the concept of agenda setting has remained an important area of research in mass communication. The concept has been used widely to explain the media agenda-setting effects in various fields—such as politics (Kim and McCombs 2007; Tan and Weaver 2009), healthcare (Ogata et al. 2006), the Internet (Roberts et al. 2002; Schiffer 2006), family health (Ali et al. 2014), civil rights (Winter and Eyal 1981), terrorism (Wanta and Kalyango 2007) and business (Carroll and McCombs 2003). The theory constitutes three main agendas—the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda. When the agenda-setting process takes place, the three agendas are interconnected (Rogers et al. 1993), influencing one another. Zhou et al. (2016, 568) explain that while the media agenda and the public agenda are often researched together, the public agenda is an “implied outcome and is more often studied by political scientists and sociologists.”

For many years, agenda setting was analysed at two levels: the first level and the second level. However, a third level called network agenda setting (NAS) has recently

been introduced (Guo 2013; Guo and McCombs 2011a, 2011b). The first level explains how people's perceptions about the most important issues in their country are affected by the salience of those issues in news media reports (Camaj 2014). On the other hand, the second-level agenda setting explains that by focusing on certain attributes while describing issues or objects, mass media draw their audiences' attention to those properties (Weaver et al. 2004). In the same vein, Guo et al. (2014) explain that both the first and second levels of agenda setting theory demonstrate a hierarchical rank order of the salience of individual discrete objects and attributes being transferred from the media to the public agenda. Therefore, by affecting the prominence of an issue or object and their attributes, mass media influence whether people really regard it as worthwhile to hold an opinion about that issue (McCombs 2004).

Of importance to note is the contention between agenda-setting and framing scholars on whether the second-level agenda setting is indeed framing. Entman (1993, 52) defines framing as "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or treatment recommendation for the item described." Though this debate hasn't reached a consensus, Weaver (2007), clarifies that even if there are similarities between framing and the second-level agenda setting, the two are not identical processes. Weaver (2007, 145–47) explains:

Both are more concerned with how issues or other objects (people, groups, organizations, countries, etc.) are depicted in the media than with which issues or objects are more or less prominently reported. Both focus on the most salient or prominent aspects or themes or descriptions of the objects of interest. Both are concerned with ways of thinking rather than objects of thinking. But framing does seem to include a broader range of cognitive processes—such as moral evaluation, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendation for treatment of problems—than does second-level agenda setting.

The third level of agenda setting proposes that the salience of networked relationships among objects and/or attributes can be transferred between the media and public agendas as well as between different media agendas (Guo et al. 2014). Relatedly, Guo et al. (2014) clarify that news media are not only successful at telling us what to think and how to think about it, but also are capable of telling us how to link these objects and attributes with one another. Network agenda setting hypothesises that "the salience of interrelationships among objects and/or attributes can be transferred to the public agenda" (Vu et al. 2014, 671). Therefore, the model encourages researchers to move beyond analysing which objects and attributes are covered most frequently in the news and to further investigate how journalists bundle these elements to make sense of the world (Guo et al. 2014). This model traces its theoretical roots to Carroll's (2005a, 2005b) descriptions of the network of associations between a company and its attributes.

Linking the theory to research, McCombs (2004) says that studies of agenda setting around the world have approached this mass communication phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. Consequently, McCombs (2004) developed the Acapulco Typology—a

four-part typology that describes the different perspectives of approaching agenda-setting effects research. The typology is defined by two dichotomous dimensions. The first distinguishes between two ways of looking at agendas, whereas the second dimension differentiates between two ways of measuring the public salience of items on the agenda, aggregate measures describing an entire group or population versus measures that describe individual responses (McCombs 2004).

The two dimensions combined explain the four perspectives on agenda-setting research. Perspective one—named “competition”—encompasses the entire agenda and uses aggregate measures of the population to establish the salience of items. McCombs (2004) explains that perspective two is similar to the early agenda-setting studies with their focus on the entire agenda of issues, but shifts the focus to the agenda of each individual. This perspective is called “automaton” “because of its unflattering view of human behavior, essentially a return to the hypodermic theory of mass media effects” (McCombs 2004, 31). Perspective three is known as the “natural history” and it narrows the focus to a single issue on the agenda, but like perspective one, it uses aggregate measures to establish the salience of the item (McCombs 2004). McCombs (2004) named it natural history because its focus is on the history of a single issue on the media and public agendas. Perspective four, called “cognitive portrait,” also focuses on the individual, but narrows its observations to the salience of a single agenda item (McCombs 2004).

Summing it up, the future of agenda setting appears positive in terms of trends, topics, media, method, and the use of other theories to enhance its explanatory and predictive power (Zhou et al. 2016). In fact, even with the advent and proliferation of new communication technologies such as the Internet and social media, the theoretical contour of agenda setting has continuously evolved (Conway et al. 2015; Rogstad 2016; Yun et al. 2016). This is against a backdrop of concerns that the theory is likely to lose some of its relevance because of the ever-fragmented media environment where the media may not have the unifying capacity to set the public agenda (Zhou et al. 2016).

For instance, scholars have raised concerns that touch on time sequence among media agenda, public agenda, and political agenda (Kosicki 1993), environmental contributing factors to public agenda (Megwa and Brenner 1988), and a lack of explanatory mechanisms in current research (Takeshita 2005). However, according to McCombs and Shaw (1993), a successful theory is capable of generating a steady growth of its literature, able to integrate and accommodate a few other theories, and is capable in many areas. There is no doubt that agenda setting is one of the few theories in communication that has attained such status (Zhou et al. 2016). This is because agenda setting “is being used, investigated, refined, and applied in many domains and international settings” (Zhou et al. 2016, 570).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For close to five decades, the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public has been studied widely and hundreds of studies, both political and apolitical, have supported this proposition. Such studies have cut across different geographical settings, civilizations, time spans, multiple forms of news media and a wide array of social issues. To mention a few examples, agenda-setting research has been conducted in various nations, for example the United States (Funkhouser 1973; McCombs 1977; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver et al. 1981), Israel (Sheafer and Weinmann 2005), Kenya (Ileri 2009, 2012; Onyebadi 2012), Egypt (Mohamed and Gunter 2009), Sweden (Shehata 2010), Venezuela (Chaffee and Izcaray 1975), and Saudi Arabia (Al-Haqee and Melkote 1996).

The three earliest studies undertaken in the US (McCombs 1977; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Weaver et al. 1981) confirmed that the mass media play a major role in shaping public opinion. The original McCombs and Shaw (1972) study—the most-widely cited—found a near-perfect correlation of  $+0.98$  between the salience of the five issues on the media agenda and their importance on the public agenda. This, according to Dearing and Rogers (1996) provided empirical evidence that matched McCombs and Shaw's beliefs that the media have power to influence public opinion. Shaw and McCombs (1977) conducted the second agenda setting study in Charlotte, North Carolina during the 1972 presidential election. As in the seminal study, they found a correlation between the media and the public agendas (Spearman  $\rho = +0.51$ ). Research on agenda setting effects entered its third phase in the 1976 US presidential election where Weaver et al. (1981) reported a healthy correlation of  $+0.70$  between the media and public agendas.

Funkhouser (1973) further confirmed the agenda-setting hypothesis in the US when he analysed the relationship between the news coverage of the issues of the 1960s and public opinion. He concluded that a considerable relationship between the media and public agendas existed. Sheafer and Weimann (2005) found the influence of media on public opinion to be true in Israel. The research covered four elections and focused on agenda building, agenda setting, and priming. For agenda setting, Sheafer and Weimann found that television coverage of issues influenced public opinion on the most important problems facing Israelis. For example, they found that when the media chose to focus on the economy at the expense of security, the public followed suit.

Moving to the Arab world, Mohamed and Gunter (2009), found a positive correlation between the media and the public agendas in Egypt (Spearman  $\rho = +0.74$ ). The study examined the main Egyptian newspapers' (state and opposition) coverage and the public agenda. The study content analysed the two main daily newspapers—*Al-Ahram* (state publication) and *Al-Wafd* (opposition newspaper)—and 400 Egyptians were interviewed for public opinion. Mohamed and Gunter's study mirrors the McCombs-Shaw (1972) research and it presented similar findings—almost four decades later—further supporting the basic agenda-setting assumption. However, in Saudi Arabia, Al-Haqee

and Melkote (1996) failed to find evidence of agenda-setting effects. They content analysed two newspapers and two television channels and surveyed 500 citizens. The researchers attributed the findings to the tight state control on the press and the absence of a democratic leadership.

Elsewhere, Shehata (2010) found evidence of agenda-setting effects during the 2006 Swedish national election campaign. Importantly, the researcher concluded that media agenda-setting effects grew stronger as the election closed in. This important conclusion is also supported in Lennon's (1998) research in Argentina's 1997 legislative elections. The study reported that the correlation of four issues rose from a  $-.20$  in the early days of election campaigns to a robust  $+.80$  as the election day drew nearer. Unemployment and urban congestion topped the public agenda in Pamplona, Spain in 1995 (Takeshita and Mikami 1995). The public agenda match with the local dominant daily newspaper and the second most popular daily was  $+.90$  and  $+.72$  respectively. The public agenda correlation with television news was  $+.66$

The few agenda-setting studies done in Kenya have reported mixed results—in support of and not confirming the agenda-setting assumption. Onyebadi (2012) found a strong correlation of  $+.88$  between the media and public agendas during Kenya's 2007 troubled presidential election. For example, tackling poverty, creating employment and combating corruption were the top three issues in the two dominant daily newspapers—*Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. The same issues received similar importance from Kenyan voters. In the same election, Ileri (2009) found no significant evidence of correlation in the salience of issues between three newspapers (*Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The People Daily*) and the public (Spearman  $\rho = +.13$ ). He concluded that the three newspapers didn't set the agenda during the election. He attributed this to the two-step flow of information theory where Kenyans tend to consider as important issues given more attention by leaders from their respective ethnic communities. This is despite the fact that Kenyans are known to be very good consumers of political news.

However, the correlation between the media and the public on the attributes of presidential candidates Mwai Kibaki, Kalonzo Musyoka, and Raila Odinga was substantial:  $+.50$ . On the other hand, Onyebadi (2012) reported a higher mean correlation (Spearman  $\rho = +.76$ ) between the media and the public agendas on the attributes of the three candidates. Ileri (2012) compared the agenda-setting roles of newspaper columns and editorials in Kenya in 2008 and 2009. He found negative correlations between the agendas of the columns and editorials and public opinion. Similarly, a study in Venezuela also found no evidence of agenda-setting effects (Chaffee and Izcaray 1975). The researchers attributed the results to the large differences in education attainment and media access among different population demographics. However, Shehata's (2010) study discounts Chaffee and Izcaray's observation. Findings from Shahata's study showed little evidence to support the view that education had a bearing on the causal relationship between the media and public agendas. Consequently, this study advances three research questions and two hypotheses:

**RQ1:** How do the two newspapers compare in their coverage of the six topical issues examined in this study?

**RQ2:** Does the frequency of the top three most covered issues vary significantly by each newspaper?

**RQ3:** Based on the first-level agenda setting, which of the two newspapers had greater influence on public opinion in regard to the six topical issues examined in this study?

**HP1:** The issues given prominence in the newspapers' news in the 2013–2014 period were also given similar consideration by the Kenyan public.

**HP2:** There is a strong correlation between the issue agenda published in the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* in the period under study.

## METHODS

Quantitative content analysis was used to measure media agenda in this study, while surveys were employed to determine Kenyans' public agenda on six issues under examination: corruption, devolution, economic crisis, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment. The use of content analysis and a survey in agenda setting research dates back to the seminal 1968 study (McCombs and Shaw 1972) conducted in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Following the original study, several agenda setting studies have successfully used the two data-collection methods to establish the relationship between the media and public agendas (Ghanem 1997; Golan and Wanta 2001; Kioussis 2005; McCombs et al. 1995; McCombs et al. 2000; Onyebadi 2012).

### Content Analysis

Content analysis is a widely used quantitative data-collection technique in communication research. It is described as a data-collection technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson 1952; Wimmer and Dominick 2006). Krippendorff (2004, 18) defines content analysis as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use.”

The texts that were content analysed in this research were sourced from two elite Kenyan newspapers, *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. The two publications were preferred because they are the leading English national dailies in the country, with high circulation numbers and readership. As both dominate national newspaper readership with a share of 88.9 per cent (Media Policy Research Center 2015), the publications are arguably the standard-bearers in newspaper journalism in Kenya. *The Standard* is the oldest mainstream newspaper in the country, established in 1902, and it enjoys a readership of about 40 per cent (Media Council of Kenya 2005). However, recent

figures indicate that the newspaper audience share stands at 24.7 per cent (Media Policy Research Center 2015). Established in 1960, *Daily Nation* is the most influential newspaper and agenda setter of news in Kenya. It is arguably *The New York Times* of Kenya's newspaper industry (Onyebadi 2008) and commands over 55 per cent of the newspaper circulation in Kenya (Media Council of Kenya 2005; Media Policy Research Center 2015). *Daily Nation* and its sister publication *Sunday Nation* have a daily print run of about 185,000 and 230,000 copies respectively (Onyebadi 2008).

The sampling period for content analysis was from November 22, 2013 to January 21, 2014—eight weeks leading to the public opinion poll which surveyed Kenyans on the most-important issues facing Kenya. It is during the eight-week period when salience transfer of the six issues under study took place, followed by a public opinion poll conducted as from January 22, 2014. This is so because the span of time involved in the transfer of issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda is generally in the range of four to eight weeks (McCombs 2004). From the sampling period, news stories on page one to five and the back page were content analysed to establish a frequency count of the six issues. Typically, the selected pages carry the most important news stories in Kenyan newspapers. Editorials, commentaries, and opinion articles were excluded from the study.

The unit of analysis was the paragraph. Each variable (issue) was counted once in a paragraph even if it appeared more than once. A story that started on the front page and jumped to another page was treated as a front-page news story. The same applied to stories published in other pages. Based on agenda-setting theory, each issue was coded as a “social problem” facing the country. An issue is a social problem, often conflictual, that has received mass media coverage (Dearing and Rogers 1996). Therefore, an issue must have been presented in the newspaper news as a problem facing Kenyans. Within the sampling period, *The Standard* had 456 stories, while *Daily Nation* had 440, totalling to 896. From the 896 articles, 672 of them (three-quarters) were selected to create the sample size—each publication contributing 336 stories. The articles were selected using simple random sampling, a probability technique that allows for the generalisation of results.

Two coders were trained in the coding procedures and the definition of the six variables. *Corruption* refers to when a person illicitly puts personal interests above those of the people he or she is committed to serve and fails to adhere to the ideals to which he or she has supposedly subscribed. Some of its characteristics include partiality, absence of integrity, fraudulent conduct, immorality, etc.

*Devolution* is the transfer of power to a lower level, especially by central governments to regional administrations. In this case, it is characterised by the fight for resource allocation and teething problems associated with the transition from the central government to the devolved system of governance. Since 2013, Kenya has 47 new devolved governments (county administrative units) based on the country's new constitution which came into force in 2010. Therefore, the country is still faced

with problems associated with the transition from the central administration to county governments.

*Economic crisis* is a long-term bad economic state characterised by unemployment, high inflation, weak currency, low prices, low levels of trade, etc.

*Insecurity* denotes where people are exposed to danger or threat. It is characterised by terror attacks, violent robbery, murders, mass killings, kidnappings, carjacking, arson attacks, cattle rustling, bandit attacks, increased criminals, riots, insurgency, human-rights abuses, property destruction, guerrilla tactics, political violence, ethnic violence, and a lack of peace, etc.

*Poverty* is defined as the state of being extremely poor and is characterised by poor wages, unemployment, and no access to basic goods and services, e.g. food, housing, etc.

*Unemployment* is the state of being unemployed or not having a job and is characterised by a loss of jobs, high unemployment rates, closure of companies, retrenchments, etc.

Before engaging in the analysis of all the articles, the coders conducted a coding pretest of the six social issues. Ten per cent (34 articles) of the *Daily Nation* stories were used in the inter-coder reliability exercise. Though Dimitrova and Stromback (2005) content analysed coverage of the Iraq War by *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden) and *The New York Times* (US), they used 10 per cent of the stories appearing in the latter to measure inter-coder reliability. Wimmer and Dominic (2006) recommend that 10 to 25 per cent of sampled data is sufficient to test inter-rater reliability. The pretest yielded a mean Kappa's inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.82. The acceptable reliability using Kappa is .75. Consequently, the reliability coefficients for each issue were as follows: corruption .78, devolution .85, economic crisis .87, insecurity .80, poverty .78, and unemployment .82. The coding of the 672 articles yielded 9,709 paragraphs which were content analysed—with *Daily Nation* contributing 5,001 (51.5%), and *The Standard* 4,708 (48.5%). On average, 4,854.5 paragraphs were analysed per newspaper, and a mean of 14.4 paragraphs were analysed per news story.

## Survey

A survey is a research technique that uses a standardised questionnaire to collect information about attitudes, opinions, behaviours, backgrounds and lifestyle characteristics from a sample of respondents (Poindexter and McCombs 2000). The public opinion survey for this study was conducted by Strategic Public Relations and Research, one of the leading polling organisations in Kenya. The poll was conducted from January 22, 2014 to January 24, 2014. A total of 2,471 Kenyans aged over 18 years were polled. They were asked the typical agenda-setting survey question: What is the "most important problem" facing the country today? Based on a confidence level of 95 per cent, the poll's margin of error was +/-2.4. The sample size from the country's 47

counties was selected using a combination of multi-stage and multi-phased sampling techniques. These sampling approaches helped to capture the heterogeneous nature of Kenyan population demographics.

The sampling involved four stages. Stage one involved dividing the country's population along strata delineated along the 47 counties. In stage two, the second stratum was developed along the sampled electoral areas within the counties. Stage three involved first developing a stratum along rural-urban electoral areas in each county. This was followed by drawing random samples of electoral areas based on rural-urban locations in a county. Rural electoral areas were over-sampled because about 65 per cent of the Kenyan population resides in the countryside. In stage four, samples of respondents were drawn from voting centres within an electoral area. A starting point in each electoral unit was randomly drawn, whereby every fifth household was included for interviews.

## Correlation Measurement

To establish the relationship between the issues reported in the newspapers and the survey responses, the Spearman rho rank-order correlation statistical tool was employed. Spearman's rho is used to measure the strength of association between two sets of rankings (Weaver 2003). The correlation strength varies from -1 (a perfect negative correlation) to +1 (a perfect positive correlation) (Weaver 2003). Over the years, Spearman rho has remained central in measuring correlations in agenda-setting research (see Gyotae et al. 2003; Onyebadi 2012; Tan and Weaver 2009; Weaver and Elliot 1985).

## FINDINGS

This study's first research question examined how the two newspapers compared in the coverage of the six issues under scrutiny (corruption, devolution, economic crisis, insecurity, poverty and unemployment). Table 1 shows that except for the poverty and unemployment issues, *Daily Nation* gave more coverage to the other four issues than *The Standard*. However, of much interest is that the rank order of issue salience was identical between the two publications.

The second research question asked whether the frequency of coverage of the three highly reported issues significantly varied by each newspaper. As indicated in Table 1, the top three issues that received high prominence in the newspaper news were corruption, insecurity, and economic crisis—taking a combined share of over three-quarters (78.2%). Notably, *Daily Nation* provided more coverage on the three issues than *The Standard*. *Daily Nation*'s coverage was statistically significant on corruption and insecurity, but not on economic crisis. Table 2 indicates that *Daily Nation*'s corruption coverage ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ) was significantly higher than that of *The Standard* ( $M$

= 2.9, SD = 3.69)  $t(129) = 2.7, p < .001$ . *Daily Nation* also provided significantly more coverage on insecurity (M = 5.5, SD = 5.23) than *The Standard* (M = 3.2, SD = 3.83)  $t(129) = 2.7, p < .001$ . On the other hand, the coverage by the *Daily Nation* on economic crisis (M = 2.9, SD = 3.11) was not statistically significant compared to that of *The Standard* (M = 2.5, SD = 2.33)  $t(129) = 1.0, p > .005$ .

**Table 1:** Issue frequency distribution between *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*

Issue	<i>Daily Nation</i>	<i>The Standard</i>	Total	Per cent
Corruption	505	370	875	37.3
Insecurity	360	216	576	24.5
Economic crisis	208	177	385	16.4
Devolution	194	132	326	13.9
Poverty	70	74	144	6.1
Unemployment	20	21	41	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,357</b>	<b>990</b>	<b>2,347</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2:** Paired samples t-tests comparing the significance on issue frequency between *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*

Issue	<i>Daily Nation</i>	<i>The Standard</i>	Standard error mean	Significance
Corruption	M = 3.9, SD = 2.81	M = 2.9, SD = 3.69	.389	$t(129) = 2.7, p < .001$
Insecurity	M = 5.5, SD = 5.23	M = 3.2, SD = 3.83	.799	$t(129) = 2.7, p < .001$
Economic crisis	M = 2.9, SD = 3.11	M = 2.5, SD = 2.33	.434	$t(129) = 1.0, p > .001$
Devolution	M = 3.7, SD = 2.65	M = 2.5, SD = 2.63	.491	$t(129) = 2.4, p > .001$
Poverty	M = 2.4, SD = 2.31	M = 2.6, SD = 2.75	.771	$t(129) = -.18, p > .001$
Unemployment	M = 1.5, SD = 2.40	M = 1.6, SD = .96	.799	$t(129) = -.10, p > .001$

Hypothesis 1 and research question 3 are interrelated. Consequently, hypothesis 1 examined whether *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* influenced the opinions of Kenyans on the six issues. Table 3 shows that largely the newspapers' agendas had minimal influence on the public opinion, yielding a positive correlation of +.30. For example, the most prominent issue in the newspapers was corruption, but the economic crisis highly occupied the minds of Kenyans. However, the newspapers and the public agendas matched on two issues: insecurity and poverty, ranked second and fifth respectively. Therefore, the correlation of +.30 between the newspapers and the public is a definite, though small relationship. This means that *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* had little influence in shaping the opinions of Kenyans in regard to the six issues under examination. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is not confirmed.

Relatedly, research question 3 asked which of the two newspapers had more influence on the public opinion. Table 4 shows that the rank order between each newspaper and the public opinion was identical (for each issue), resulting in the same correlation of +.30. Hypothesis 2 predicted a strong correlation between the two newspapers' agendas. As Table 5 shows, the issue rank order between the two newspapers' agendas was identical for each issue, yielding a perfect correlation of +1. This means that the agendas of the two publications were similar in their coverage of the six issues. Hypothesis 2 is therefore confirmed.

**Table 3:** Combined newspaper issue rank vs. public opinion

Newspapers' issue rank	Issues	Public opinion issue rank
1	Corruption	4
2	Insecurity	2
3	Economic crisis	1
4	Devolution	6
5	Poverty	5
6	Unemployment	3

*Spearman rho = +.30 (>.05)*

**Table 4:** Issue rank between each newspaper and public opinion

<i>Daily Nation</i> rank	<i>The Standard</i> rank	Issues	Public opinion rank
1	1	Corruption	4
2	2	Insecurity	2
3	3	Economic crisis	1
4	4	Devolution	6
5	5	Poverty	5
6	6	Unemployment	3

*Spearman rho for both Daily Nation and The Standard vs. public opinion = +.30 (>.05)*

**Table 5:** *Daily Nation vs. The Standard* issue rank correlation

<b>Daily Nation rank</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>The Standard rank</b>
1	Corruption	1
2	Insecurity	2
3	Economic crisis	3
4	Devolution	4
5	Poverty	5
6	Unemployment	6

*Spearman rho for both Daily Nation and The Standard vs. public opinion = +.30 (>.05)*

## DISCUSSION

Two major conclusions can be drawn from the current research findings: first, generally, the two newspapers had little influence on the public regarding the issues that dominated the year 2013 and 2014 (corruption, devolution, economic crisis, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment), and second, there is a similarity in the agendas of the two publications. The first conclusion can be analysed in relation to the top issues on the media agenda and the public agenda, as well as the perfect correlation (between the newspapers and the public agendas) on the insecurity issue.

While the top issue on the media agenda was corruption, issue number one on the public agenda was the economic crisis. Therefore, one is left to wonder why there is this disconnect between the two agendas in regard to the top issue in the newspaper news. That is, why are Kenyans not considering corruption as a major problem, when it is the most frequent issue in the newspaper news? This is despite the fact that Kenya is one of the most corrupt nations in the world—and “hardly a day passes without the media highlighting corruption in the government” (Jarso 2010, 35). In the same vein, the vice continues to immensely impact various aspects of the nation’s life. For instance, millions of children are denied access to education as public funds are embezzled with reckless abandon (Standard Team 2009).

The disagreement on corruption—the most salient issue in newspaper news—can be explained from two perspectives: newspaper sales and the obtrusive-unobtrusive issue dichotomy. Regarding the first perspective, it is a well-known fact that corruption stories sell well in the Kenyan market. This is because such stories always involve top government officials or prominent Kenyans, including politicians and businesspeople. Concerning the second perspective: yes, the Kenyan media are awash with stories of graft taking place in government offices, but it can be argued that Kenyans see it as official corruption—not directly affecting them.

It is assumed that the effects of official corruption in the government offices might take time to be felt on the ground. So, in this regard, corruption is viewed as an unobtrusive issue that doesn’t affect citizens’ lives directly, and may require greater orientation from the media and other sources to directly link it to problems facing people.

On the other hand, directly or indirectly, many Kenyans might also be beneficiaries of sleaze, hence seeing corruption as a non-issue. For example, a survey conducted in 2014 and 2015 showed that half of Kenyan youth condone corruption and adore successful beneficiaries of the vice (Capital FM 2016).

On the other hand, Kenyans put high premium on the economic crisis, which qualifies as an obtrusive issue. This is so because an economic crisis is characterised by such things as inflation, high prices on basic commodities (e.g. food), and unemployment, to name a few. Generally, these are issues that Kenyans, social-economic class notwithstanding, experience on each passing day. For example, when the price of milk goes up, the end result is that Kenyans have to pay more for the commodity. The last five years have witnessed many street demonstrations over increased prices for basic goods (see Irin News 2011). In 2011, a demonstrator in Nairobi said (Irin News 2011):

I am here to demonstrate because things have gone high, things like maize flour, sugar and kerosene. I want to ask the government to help the poor people because they are the ones who are in trouble—they are getting very little money.

This finding that Kenyans place high consideration on obtrusive issues is also consistent with Ileri's (2009, 2012) studies. For example, Ileri's 2009 study shows that Kenyans considered the unemployment issue as the most important problem facing the country, yet the most salient issue in the local media was corruption. In the period following the 2007 post-election violence, Kenyans surveyed named high prices on basic goods as the major problem facing the country (Ileri 2012). On the other hand, the media placed high emphasis on stories of justice for the victims of the 2007 election violence.

In the present study, the issue of insecurity received similar high priority in both the media and public agendas—ranking second. This is a perfect example of agenda-setting effects, though based on one issue of national importance—terrorism. For the last five years, the issue of security has been of great concern to every Kenyan and the media as well. Since Kenyan troops' incursion into Somalia in late 2011 following a spate of attacks from *al-shabaab* militia, the country has witnessed several terror attacks, including the one on the Westgate shopping mall in upmarket Nairobi which left 67 people dead (Gettleman and Kulish 2013). On April 2, 2015, 147 students were massacred after *al-Shabbab* gunmen attacked Garissa University College, throwing the country into a state of panic and mourning (Mutambo and Hajir 2015). As such, apart from corruption stories, no other news items have continued to receive high media salience than security stories in the last three years—more so terror news. This is the reason why Kenyans place high consideration on the issue of security.

The present study found that the agendas of the two newspapers were identical in rank order for each issue. This finding relates to Dearing and Rogers's (1996) observation that it is hardly surprising that national newspeople generally agree on the news value accorded to a particular issue. This is so because journalists in a particular country are likely to have attended the same journalism schools, took similar courses, read similar

textbooks, experienced similar internships, and worked together at one time or another during their careers (Dearing and Rogers 1996).

The similarity in news coverage between the two Kenyan newspapers can be attributed to two things: media routines and inter-media agenda setting. Media routines are the patterned, routinised, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their work (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). As such, the news reflects the routine practices because the news production process is constructed partly based on media routines (Lau 2004). Shoemaker and Reese (1996) have identified one common media routine in news production: the practice where journalists rely heavily on each other for ideas. This is also a very common practice among Kenyan journalists that might also explain why *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* gave priority to the same issues.

In their work, Kenyan journalists covering various news beats always counter-check from each other for information, facts, and the angle to take in a story. Also, with the increase of television channels in the country, it is now a daily practice in Kenyan newsrooms for journalists to monitor major stories of the day on television. This is a practice that is most common during the 1pm and 7pm news bulletins on national television networks. The practice is also extended to online news, where journalists keep track of news traffic on their competitors' news sites. Today, unlike 10 years ago, it has become increasingly difficult for the Kenyan newspapers to deliver scoops—courtesy of increased television networks, online news, and social media. Therefore, these routine practices are likely to lead to a standardised way of news production in the Kenyan media—hence resulting in similar priorities in newspaper stories.

*Daily Nation* is the newspaper of record in Kenya—hence the agenda-setter in news. As such, other media organisations are most likely to follow what *Daily Nation* is covering. This might explain the similarity on issues given prominence in *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, the former acting as the agenda-setter. The fact that *Daily Nation* covered the top issues in greater depth than *The Standard* can be termed inter-media agenda setting at work. The inter-media agenda setting is not a Kenyan thing, however. Several agenda-setting studies (Breed 1955; Gilbert et al. 1980; Reese and Danielian 1989; White 1949) have examined who sets the media agenda and how such an agenda is set. Gilbert et al. (1980), for example, found that *The New York Times* leads other newspapers' agendas across the United States. And Reese and Danielian (1989) found that major media coverage tended to be similar in content and amount.

## CONCLUSION

The present research examined media agenda setting effects in a Kenyan context in 2013 and 2014. Specifically focusing on the first level of agenda setting, the study investigated whether two national newspapers influenced public opinion on six issues: corruption, devolution, economic crisis, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment. Moreover, the study also examined whether the agendas of the two publications were related. Findings

indicate that the two newspapers had little influence on the opinions of Kenyans on the six issues. This is based on a low correlation of +.30 between the newspapers' agendas and the public agenda. However, the agendas of the two publications were strikingly similar—yielding a perfect correlation of +1. This means the newspapers gave the same weight to the six issues.

Though the findings are crucial in advancing the knowledge of media agenda setting in a non-Western context, the study suffers some limitations which future research should address. First, only two dailies were content analysed, yet there are five daily newspapers in Kenya. Though *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* are the most prominent newspapers, it would be a good idea to include other dailies in future research. Second, this study focused on print media only; thus future research should include television and radio news. With the recent increase of television channels in Kenya, the function of television news in agenda-setting theory cannot be ignored. Emphasising the power of visual communication, Perlmutter (1999, 178) has noted that “news that really matter is what is visually prominent.” Importantly, the special qualities of visuals make television news a very effective medium for agenda setting. Social media and citizen journalism platforms are also becoming prevalent in the coverage of matters of public concern in Kenya. As such, future research should consider incorporating them into agenda-setting studies.

Lastly, and going by the research findings of this study, the place of agenda-setting theory in a Kenyan setting remains unclear. The few agenda-setting studies (Irerer 2009, 2012; Onyebadi 2012) that have been done locally have generated mixed results, making it difficult to conclude whether agenda-setting effects work in a Kenyan context. There is no doubt that Kenyans are known for reading newspapers with great interest as well as watching news on television and listening to radio news. Therefore, to clear this uncertainty whether agenda setting is effective in Kenya, more studies should be carried out—both at first and second levels of agenda setting. This is a challenge that communication scholars in Kenya should deal with in future research. To achieve this, communication scholars in Kenya should collaborate with local polling firms to ensure that in their public opinion surveys the research organisations incorporate questions related to agenda-setting hypotheses. This is important because one of major limitation to do agenda-setting studies in Africa is lack of survey data on socio-economic and political issues.

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