

African Media and the Global Climate Change Discourse: Implications for Sustainable Development

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Abstract:

The article highlights how the quality of coverage and framing of climate change in African countries contributes to perpetuating the global imbalances in the climate change discourse and overall sustainable development. Premised within the agenda-setting and framing theoretical frameworks, the analysis is informed by findings from a research, where we analyzed the coverage of climate change and environment issues in the Ugandan media. Findings reflected that media are not putting climate into proper context to raise public awareness and influence their engagement in climate debates and subsequent action. Several gaps identified related to the journalists' capacity and thus increased support for journalism training is recommended to empower journalists to put the issues in the local and global perspectives as well as their link to sustainable development. Having a better informed citizenry and positive climate responses, this should contribute to the realization of sustainable development.

Key words: Agenda-setting, climate change, news framing, sustainable development, vulnerability

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One of the concerns that has gained prominence in the global debates centres on better environment management, especially relating to the impact of climate change on developing countries with agro-based economies (BBC, 2009, 2010; Hepworth & Goulden, 2008; Leichinko & O'Brien, 2008; UNEP, 2008). Africa is among the most affected by climate change yet is least responsible for the greenhouse gases that have caused the global climate to change and the capacity to adapt is constrained by limited resources (BBC, 2009, 2010; Kumssa & Jones, 2010; Mearns et al., 2010; Tadesse, 2010; Toulmin, 2009; UNFCCC, 2007), including relevant climate information. It is noted that information flow has principally been from the rest of the world to Africa with the climate debates often taking place in industrialized nations (BBC, 2010), with African voices often absent from the international climate debates and decision-making (Eide & Ytterstad, 2011; Mearns et.al., 2010, Tairo, n.d; Toulmin, 2009). These factors have led to an imbalance in the global climate discourse with a dominance of the North and little participation by the South. Climate change being a global problem, it is important that the media coverage reflects both the local and global perspectives (Berglez et.al., 2009; Eide & Kunelius, 2010; Eide & Ytterstad, 2011; Höijer, 2010; Olausson, 2009).

Premised within the agenda-setting and framing theoretical frameworks, the article makes an assessment of the quality of climate change coverage in the African media, using Uganda as a case study. The influence that this coverage has on public awareness and engagement on climate issues is explored and how such coverage contributes to imbalances in the global climate change discourse, with the attendant implications for the realization of sustainable development in Africa. High-quality media coverage of climate change can deliver better informed publics and better informed policymakers, which should raise global awareness of the challenges developing nations face and thus contribute to promoting sustainable outcome to the intergovernmental climate change negotiations (Shanahan, 2011).

An overview of the concept of 'sustainable development' and its link to climate change follows, highlighting Africa's vulnerability, which makes it imperative for media to give adequate coverage to climate issues so as to raise public awareness to facilitate their engagement in global climate change debates and taking desired action to enhance sustainable development.

'Sustainable Development' and Climate Change

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While there is no universal definition of 'sustainable development', common to the definitions are the three pillars of; economic development, environment protection and social equity (Leiserowitz et al., 2006, Parris & Kates, 2003). The concept of sustainability focuses attention on the interrelationship between humans and the environment, with consideration to the consequences of contemporary demographic and political trends for future generations (Hessings, 1995:234). Such development should meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland Report, 1987).

Building onto the Brundtland concept of sustainable development, two dimensions have been added of equity and participation. The equity is seen in terms of inter-generational and intra-generational equity, including the global level or north and south, as well as within countries. In addition, systems should be instituted for effective citizen participation in decision-making and greater democracy in international decision making (Vaillancourt, 1995, p. 225). The assumption here is that the public get relevant information from the media to enhance their participation.

Applying these dimensions to this analysis, the interest is to find out how the global perspectives on climate are being incorporated into the coverage and how this influences citizens' participation in global climate debates. As pointed out by Engle et al. (2011), it is unclear how individuals can understand and interpret broad statements about future climate conditions when their experience is based on events at local or micro-climatic scales. Thus Ugandans will have a problem contextualizing climate issues within the global framework if their perception of climate issues is from a local perspective alone. Research has shown that media have played a key role in shaping public perceptions and policy agendas (Anderson, 2009). This is in the context where the ways in which people understand environmental problems is likely to influence both their willingness and ability to participate in solving the problem (Stamm et al., 2000) or to take the desired action towards sustainable development. In their study, Yuki & Aoyagi-Usui (2009) found that a dramatic increase in newspaper coverage of global warming was followed by an increase in public concern for the issue.

Related to sustainable development is the issue of vulnerability. While there is no agreed metric for measuring countries' vulnerability to climate change (Fussler, 2010), the meaning of vulnerability has tended to change depending on the scale, focus and purpose of each assessment, although it is increasingly being addressed in terms of regional vulnerability (Malone & Engle, 2011). The Africa region is highly vulnerable to climate change as most of the economies are dependent on

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rain-fed agriculture, implying that the welfare of the people is tightly bound to climate. Climate change means increased food insecurity; spread of diseases like malaria; soil erosion; land degradation; flood damage to infrastructure and settlements and shifts in the productivity of agricultural and natural resources (Hepworth & Goulden, 2008; Okello, 2011; Synovate & Deutsche Welle, 2007; UNEP, 2008). All these factors aggravate poverty levels, so climate change is a big threat to the realization of sustainable development in Africa.

Apart from raising awareness of climate issues generally and conveying the risks as well as the recommended responses when threats arise (Tadesse, 2010), media have a big role to play in influencing public perception and engagement depending on how the coverage links the climate issue to sustainable development from both the local and global dimensions.

A discussion on how the agenda-setting and framing theories have been applied in the analysis follows.

Agenda-Setting and Framing in Climate Change Communication

The agenda-setting and framing theories become relevant as analytical frames because science is reconstructed and not merely mirrored in the media since the depiction of events depends on a series of choices that will influence how it is codified or framed into media discourse (Calvalho, 2007, p. 223). Frames provide interpretive storylines that set a specific train of thought in motion, communicating why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible for it, and what should be done about it (Nisbet, 2009), which makes environmental issues to be perceived mainly through the filters of the media (Mehta, 1995, p. 195). Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Applying these framing functions, the analysis will examine how the climate change issue/problem is covered and assess who is targeted as responsible for the action or remedies.

Because media provide key public arenas in which social problems are framed and grow (Boykof & Boykof, 2007), it was vital in this analysis to look at the positioning of climate issues on the media's agenda, as this will influence the public perception and depending on how climate is framed, this will influence the public's attitude on their responsibility for taking climate action. Although how issues are framed is of crucial importance, media prominence alone is not necessarily a reliable indicator of influence (Anderson, 2011). Agenda-setting studies show that media coverage is partly

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responsible for focusing people's attention on environmental problems and that the level of public concern about environmental issues tends to follow the amount of media attention received (Stamm et al., 2000), which makes the analysis of media coverage of climate change within the agenda-setting framework key to understanding public perception of climate issues.

It is noted that media today are governed as commercial media enterprises, and not by national political or cultural obligation. Therefore, to understand news in the modern media landscapes, one has to see it from the perspective of news as an international industry and business (Dreyer, 2001). Basing on this view of globalisation, the analysis examines how the global perspective of climate change is integrated or domesticated in the Ugandan media by examining the use of local and foreign news sources.

Many people rely on the mass media as their primary source of information on the environment and climate change (Calvalho, 2007, Stamm et al., 2000), which makes it important to study media coverage of climate issues. Since the channels of communication have finite and therefore limited capacity, journalists have to be selective in terms of information they choose to convey (Chapman et. al., 1997) and how this is conveyed or framed. Framing involves use of words and nonverbal interactions that help individuals negotiate meaning through the lens of existing cultural beliefs and worldviews (Nisbet, 2009). Because frames make some aspects more salient while omitting others, frames exert power over their audiences through selective description and omission (Entman, 1993, p. 54). Given the context that not every event that takes place gets to draw media attention, there is need to examine how media select news content on climate change.

Among the variables that influence news content and how this is framed are the news values that are used as criteria for selection from events that take place and how these are prioritized. These news values are gained from training and enhanced through practice (Golding & Elliot, 2000, p. 633) so the orientation process a journalist undergoes in training is a crucial stage of influence in shaping news values (Severin & Tankard, 1988, p. 317; Mwesige, 2003, p. 219). Thus in this research, a matter of investigation was how the type of coverage was influenced by the training.

Climate Change Coverage in The Media in Uganda

Methodological Approach

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This article is based on findings from a Swedish-funded research study that I conducted (with Brian Semujju, a Research Assistant), in 2011/2012 that analysed the media coverage of environment and climate change in Uganda. The study examined the quality of media coverage of climate and environment issues in the Ugandan media, in terms of how far the coverage supports public awareness and engagement.

Articles in 2 national dailies with the highest circulation (*New Vision* - government and *Monitor* - private) for 5 months (February, April, June, August and October 2011) were used as sample. A manual search came out with 671 articles on environment and climate change. Although access to newspapers is lower than access to radio, newspapers tend to set the media agenda since broadcast media get their news cues from what the papers cover, particularly through the daily morning press reviews by the radio and TV stations. The two newspapers thus provided a representative sample.

The quantitative primary data from the content analysis of the articles was supplemented by qualitative data from structured Key Informant Interviews with 8 journalists and 3 editors reporting on environment and climate change from the two newspapers. In addition, a two-hour Structured Dialogue was held with 22 'Media for Nature' journalists, whose aim was to get perspectives of journalists reporting on climate issues.

To assess the quality of the coverage and its impact on public awareness and engagement, the analysis frame examined a number of variables: the categories of articles; the sources of information; the priority given to climate stories; the key actors; how issues are framed and who the media target as being responsible for taking climate action. The study explored the factors accounting for the type of coverage and identifies several capacity gaps, to which suggestions are made for improved coverage.

Category and Sources of climate change news stories

The majority of articles analyzed 367 (54.8%) were in the category of News stories and Features/Commentaries with 159 (23.7%), Letters had 125 (18.7%), and Editorials had 16 (2.4%). Almost all the stories originated from events coverage 636 (94.8%), with just a few stories originating from Investigative reports 18 (2.7%) and 13 (1.9%) originating from research reports. Examining the sources of information, almost all 619 (92.3%) were from local sources, 20 (3.0%) from foreign and 32 (4.8%) had both sources. The implication is that most of the climate information is from news stories,

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which are event-driven, based on local sources. The stories thus largely have a local perspective, overlooking the global context, which imbalance makes the public to perceive climate as a local problem. This tallies with the findings from the BBC (2009) study in 10 African countries (including Uganda) that found that there was a strong sense that environmental degradation is a localised issue for which responsibility lies with Africans themselves.

The *New Vision* Features Editor John Eremu, in a personal interview conducted by the author, explains that 'the dependency on events as sources can partly be attributed to the complexity of the subject and the difficult language associated with climate change, so journalists do not go out to do investigative reports' (Eremu, 2011) but depend on the press releases or hand-outs at the events they cover. The scientific language being a barrier is echoed in a study by Boykof & Boykof (2007), who find that the language that scientists employ plays into scientific uncertainty as a salient theme in media coverage since scientific findings usually require translation into more colloquial terms in order for it to be comprehensible.

Another factor that encourages reliance on events coverage that was disclosed by a *Monitor* environmental reporter, Robert Mayambala, in a personal interview conducted by Brian Ssemujju (Research Assistant) is that oftentimes climate and environment stories involve exposing politicians or big investors, whose businesses may suffer, so journalists may not want to antagonize these for fear of being harassed or violence inflicted on them or even putting one's life in danger (Mayambala, 2011).

Framing of the climate change issue

An important tool applied in assessing the framing of an issue is the emotional appeal used. To find out how the climate issue is framed, the emotional appeal in the articles and who the responsibility for action was attributed to were analysed. Because the headline sums up what the article is about, a textual analysis of the headlines was done. For the emotional appeal, the frames of Fear, Hope, Nostalgia and Guilt /Justice were used in the analysis.

The emotion of fear was reflected in the majority of the articles 400 (59.6%), especially relating to the unpredictable changes in rainfall patterns that adversely affected crop yields and food security, with headlines like: 'Food prices soar as Ugandans experience a long drought' (*Monitor* 23/02/11); 'Experts warn of water scarcity as wetland encroachment escalates' (*Monitor* 06/06/11);

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'Environment: What shall we leave to our children?' (*New Vision* 08/04/11). The fear reflected in most articles shows the devastating impact brought by climate change. The frame of fear in most of the climate change articles is similar to what has been observed in the Swedish media. The tone of the news stories tended to be fear-generating through use of words that establish the negative and frightful context in which climate change is discursively constructed (Olauson, 2009, p. 431).

The similarity in the emotional appeal goes to show that climate change is not just a local problem for Uganda, but is a global concern. The fear appeal renders support to the widely shared belief that nature has come to be understood as seriously threatened or has become a new global risk (Synovate & Deutsche Welle, 2007; Urry, 1999), leading to a 'threat society' where climate change has achieved the position of the most exposed threat against human kind (Nohrstedt, 2010). Unfortunately, the media in Uganda portray climate as a local issue, basing on local sources and overlook the foreign sources that would help give the global dimension

Examining how responsibility to take climate action is framed, using the frames of individual, community, government and global level, in the majority 311 (46.4%) of the articles, the nationalization approach to climate action was taken, where the government or the nation as a whole was targeted. This conforms to the findings from an assessment of the main actors in the articles, where in more than half of the articles, these were mainly government officials 377 (56.2%).

Overall, the effect of the situation where media focus largely on local sources and events and the responsibility for climate and environment action is framed as belonging to government mainly is ably highlighted in the findings of the BBC (2009) research on climate change in 10 African countries, which reflects Africa's subordinate role in the global climate change discourse. It is pointed out that nearly all the measures proposed to address international climate change are devised and debated at international fora which have barely been reported in Africa, thus, climate change is being debated more on Africa's behalf rather than by and within Africa itself. This is true for Uganda, where local and government sources are predominantly used, missing to report on global meetings and failure to report issues with both local and global perspectives or the 'glocal'. Because climate is framed as a local issue largely, this contributes to perpetuating of the imbalance in the global climate discourse as citizens also perceive climate within the local context largely, yet it is a global problem.

Ranking of climate change stories on the media's agenda

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The study found that climate stories are not given high priority by the journalists and editors. In a personal interview conducted by Brian Ssemujju (Research Assistant), the *New Vision* Deputy News Editor, Milton Olupot said that 'Climate change is a new concept to journalists making understanding of issues therefore difficult' (Olupot, 2011). This view is confirmed at the Structured Dialogue that the author held with a group of journalists who cover the environment - Media for Nature Journalists (2011), who point out that journalists prefer to cover more familiar subjects that do not require processing a lot of technical information.

Gerald Tenywa, a *New Vision* environmental journalist for over 10 years revealed in a personal interview conducted by the author that;

newspapers today target high sales and so search mainly for selling stories as a priority.

While climate stories are given attention, often times, political stories take precedent. Since less priority is accorded to the issue of climate change, journalists who bring in climate change stories get frustrated if their stories are spiked and not published. It is worse if the journalist in question is a freelance. He/she will no longer be motivated to write climate change stories (Tenywa, 2011).

Given the low prioritization of climate change on media's agenda, how can increased awareness and participation in the climate change discourse be enhanced in African countries? How can the journalism training institutions equip journalists to report climate issues in their proper context so as to contribute to the realization of sustainable development? The next section will make a review of the journalism training and highlight some of the salient capacity gaps relating to handling of climate change issues by the media in Africa.

Capacity gaps that hamper effective reporting on climate change in Africa

Communication in support of development requires a different set of abilities from those needed by traditional journalists and it is thus important that communication educators analyze the various tasks in which the trainees will be involved and equip them with the necessary journalism and development support communication skills (Sybil, 2004, p. 334). In respect of climate change, can journalists ably link this to sustainable development?

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When a study was done in Uganda to assess the curricula of the five degree awarding journalism training institutions, using a frame where the content was grouped into 2 broad categories – communication/journalism skills-oriented modules and communication–support modules, it was found that overall, skills-oriented modules constituted slightly over three-quarters of the programs (77.3%), while communication-support had less than a quarter (22.7%) (Nassanga, 2008). This imbalance has been experienced in other journalism training institutions in Africa. A study that reviewed journalism education in Southern Africa came up with similar findings. It was found that there was no willingness by the media industry to invest in courses in content knowledge on issues particular to the region, like covering HIV/AIDS or environmental issues (Deuze, 2004, p. 136).

In order to report effectively about climate change, journalists and editors need to understand the link between climate and sustainable development so as to appreciate their newsworthiness. Research has shown that while reporting of environmental issues in general has increased in quantity in Uganda, there is still a lack of knowledge about climate change among journalists (Corner, 2011; Fahn, 2009; Shanahan, 2009), which deficiency directly affected the quality of the climate stories. There is therefore need to review the training curricula and give adequate attention to communication-support modules.

Journalists usually are assigned to write stories by their editors. Unfortunately, some newsrooms have editors who have not yet appreciated the case for covering climate change issues. In a study relating to the work situation of Ugandan journalists who specialise in reporting on environment and science, they reported that there was growing public demand for stories about climate change, but they still came low down the newsroom pecking order compared with the political and business beats. Journalists complained that many editors don't understand the importance of climate change coverage, and it was a struggle to get their stories on the front pages (Rowling, 2008). This view is collaborated by findings from other studies as one of the reasons that contribute to the low media coverage of climate issues (BBC, 2010; Corner, 2011; Shanahan, 2009, 2011). So as one looks at how to build capacity of the journalists, it is important to target the editors/gatekeepers, who largely determine what goes into the media.

Some gaps are related to the journalists' capacity but others are related to the work environment. Scientists and the public do not often appreciate the very competitive working context within which journalists operate, and delay to avail interviews or information to journalists. Lack of

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adequate information to the journalists implies that environment stories cannot be put in proper analytical context.

Towards improved climate change coverage in Africa

Several UN agencies, development partners and media development institutions have supported journalists and media training institutions to improve their capacity in reporting climate change and other environment issues as they pertain to sustainable development. However, there is still need for more support for capacity building, especially to the training institutions.

Since news values are largely developed during the formative period, it is important to regularly review the curricula of journalism training institutions so that the content meets the topical concerns, like climate change.

It is equally important for journalists and editors, to give climate change issues due attention they deserve by putting them high on media's agenda, so that climate is reflected as a priority concern for sustainable development in Africa.

With more media visibility and framed within both the local and global perspectives, action on climate and environment issues will be perceived as going beyond government responsibility solely, but extending to the individual, community and global levels. The predominant 'fear' and misconception created of climate being a local issue largely will gradually be dispelled once the media put climate issues into proper context. This will lead to more public awareness and capacity for more informed public engagement, enabling more African voices to be heard at the local/national level and in the global debates, thereby contributing to correcting the imbalances in the global climate discourse and ultimately enhancing the realisation of sustainable development.

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