

Islam as Terrorists: Analysis of Kenyan Newspaper Stereotypes and the Driving Factors

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In the 2025 Global Terrorism Index Report, the number of countries experiencing terrorist incidents increased from 58 to 66, with an evident upsurge in attacks. Kenya was ranked among the top 20 worst-hit countries in the world. Another report released by the Kenyan government in 2024 found that more than 500 lives had been lost to terrorism between 1998 and 2023. In these attacks, the media have linked terrorism to Islam, labeling Muslims as 'terrorists'; associating them with broader violent networks, and reinforcing stereotypes that fuel radicalisation, targeting over 2 billion Muslims worldwide. These biased narratives have fostered mistrust and discrimination, affecting law enforcement and policymakers from building trust and promoting peace; thereby hindering counter-extremism strategies. Even though studies have been conducted in this area, the incessant worsening situation calls for more in-depth research to understand this phenomenon better and to provide resolutions. This study, therefore, developed two objectives to unravel the research problem. It examined how the print media reinforced stereotypes about Islam in the context of terrorist attacks, and also identified and analysed the factors that influenced print media framing of stereotypical stories about Islam in the context terrorism attacks in Kenya. Guided by framing and gatekeeping theories, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design and used a mixed-methods approach for data collection. In the mixed methods, the study utilised qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative, content analysis was conducted on 676 copies of Standard and Nation newspapers, complemented by interviews with 24 key informants drawn from journalists, religious leaders, media scholars, and counter-terrorism/security experts. For the quantitative data, the study used quantitative content analysis, which measured the frequency of words, themes, and phrases linking Islam to terrorism. Findings have indicated that media reporting often departed from formal guidelines, systematically reinforcing stereotypes that have represented Islam as terrorism sympathiser and perpetrator. This hegemonic bias has undermined counter-extremism strategies in Kenya by fueling mistrust and radicalisation. The study has therefore recommended incorporating religion-sensitive and terrorism-sensitive reporting into journalism training, strengthening media policies and guidelines, and delicensing journalists who report in a way that advances tension, terrorism, and radicalisation, among others.

Keywords: Radicalisation, Terrorism, Print Media, Islam, Muslims, counter-extremism.

Introduction

Even though the media is critical in human life, providing information that is necessary for human consumption, it is also important to note that the media can be destructive. It is a double-edged tool of communication that can be used to bring peace, and can also be misused to fuel violence.

Through framing and gatekeeping, newspapers across the globe have allowed harmful content to reach the audience, causing violence, tension, radicalisation, terrorism, religious and political tensions, and even conventional wars. These contents have achieved this using negative stereotypes that are discriminatory.

In the views of Djik (2014) and Thiong'o (2016), the media have been instrumental in inciting violence. The two scholars have given an example of the Rwandan genocide, where both radio and newspapers prominently fueled violence between the major Rwandan tribes, the Hutu and Tutsi. The role of media in promoting violence is not limited to Africa only, but it is a global issue where many countries have suffered wars because of unprofessional media coverage, especially when covering wars, violence, politics, terrorism, and other forms of conflict.

The issue of media representation of Islam as terrorists is a global phenomenon that has brought tension between Muslims and

non-Muslims. Even though it has been evident in many parts of the world, the media in the West is accused of fueling the narrative the most.

In the West, prominent media outlets such as the Washington Post, Newsweek, and the New York Times have perpetuated images of Muslims as a monolithic threat (Thiong'o, 2016), creating a scenario that Islam perpetrates terrorism, radicalisation, and violent extremism. According to Horvit (2004), such portrayals have been picked up by other news outlets outside the West, spreading this ideology that has left tension prevailing among religions.

For example, in 2010, Kenya's Daily Nation published a cartoon referencing the myth that terrorists are rewarded with 72 virgins, a claim based on a weak Hadith and widely rejected by Islamic scholars (Thiong'o, 2016). This reflects what Gramsci termed media hegemony, the idea that media serves the ideological interests of dominant groups. As noted by Journalism University (2024), media not only reports reality but also constructs it, often through selective framing that legitimizes certain ideologies while marginalizing others.

In Kenya, the issue of terrorism and the media has not been a recent phenomenon; however, the modern cases have been publicised more because of technological advancement. In his study, Kipsang (2014) warned against portraying war on terrorism as religious, as happens in Kenya. He observed that even after the Kenyan government had emphasised that the war on terrorism was not between religions, 'too much media coverage

portrays a different picture where war on terror seems religious' (p.83). Meaning, there are factors that drive journalists into this kind of unprofessional reporting. It is in this background that this study was conducted to unravel the stereotypes and factors behind such newspaper framing in Kenya.

Objectives

- To examine how the representation reinforces stereotypes about Islam in the context of terrorism in Kenya
- To assess factors influencing print media representation of Islam in the context of terrorism in Kenya.

Research questions

- Does the representation reinforce stereotypes about Islam in the context of terrorism in Kenya?
- What are the factors influencing print media representation of Islam in the context of terrorism in Kenya?

Significance of the study

This study contributes to policy and advocacy development by providing actionable recommendations for journalists, government agencies, and key media stakeholders, which include the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ), and Kenya Correspondents Association (KCA), to formulate evidence-based policies that enhance terrorism reporting in Kenya.

As it is dealing with ethical and representational issues in news reporting, the results are expected to create more responsible and conflict-sensitive journalism. To media and communication scholars, this study fills a knowledge gap that is critical because it investigates the convergence of terrorism coverage, religious bias, and media framing on the other which is the least researched field in literature.

The paper further recommends curriculum changes at the tertiary level and one of the changes would be the inclusion of religion sensitive journalism and terrorism sensitive reporting in journalism and media programmes within the learning institutions.

In its promotion of interfaith dialogue programs by media involvement the study goes in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, the promotion of peace, justice and strong institutions (UNDP, 2023). It also favors the Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 7) of the African Union that considers the idea of the creation of a peaceful, democratic, and innovative Africa (African Union, 2021). Finally, this piece of literature emphasizes the effort of the media to promote social integration, rebuke extremism, and enhance national and international security systems.

Literature Review

This segment presents a critical, thematic analysis of the literature available to date, with regards to the study. The review will be made based on the main aims of the study and the attempts to discover the main scholarly discussions, point out the areas of agreement

and disagreement and reveal the gaps that this study will aim to fill. In particular, the literature is discussed regarding the image of Islam reflected in the print media of Kenya in the context of terrorism.

It has also delved into the existence of media stereotyping of Islam, the factors that led to the stereotyping and the general implication to counter-extremism in Kenya. The review offers a platform on which to view the intricate interplay between media discourses, religious identities and national security operations in Kenya since it synthesises the available research on these themes.

Stereotypical Texts and Phrases of Print Media Against Muslims

The media has become one of the most powerful sources of information in the XXI century that shape the opinion of people, inform, frame, and present numerous stories that contribute to the interpretation (Sutkute, 2019). As described by Sutkute, stereotypes can be referred to as cognitive schemes employed by members of society to make sense of information about other people (p. 2). Though globalisation and interconnectivity have taken place, many studies show that Islam is still being depicted as being violent by nature a representation that breeds fear, lack of understanding, and divides (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017; Jamal, 2025).

In a large part of the Western media, the selective reporting continues to propagate the perception that Islam is irrational, monolithic and retrogressive. The stereotypes that have been widely used to build the

hostility against Muslims are repetitive like Islamism, terrorism and violence. According to Sutkute (2019), in the context of a situation where viewers already have existing fear of Muslims and terrorism in their minds, journalists tend to enhance fear by inventing sensational headlines and using emotionally-charged words (p. 69). One of the examples is the coverage of the Muhammad cartoon crisis around the world, where the image of a Muslim in different cultures was different.

Western leading newspapers, such as the New York Times and The Independent, portrayed Muslims as the homogenous community that endorses extremism and opposes the freedom of the press and speech, employing the terms: Muslims-Islamists/terrorists and Muslims-against freedom of press and speech (Sutkute, 2019). This linguistic encoding creates a dualistic contrast between the rational, secular West and the irrational, religious other, and plays into the ill feelings of Islamophobia.

In Lebanese and Indian media (especially in Kashmir) the media regularly covered such statements by religious leaders like imams, which tend to support Occidental accounts of opposition to Western domination. Such an approach does not only reinforce the existing stereotypes that Muslims are hostile to the Western world but also follows the general trends of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Raj, 2021).

Negative stereotyping tends to be common among Muslim women. They are usually depicted in the Western media as victimized, helpless, and powerless people of patriarchy. Popular terms are segregated, beaten, veiled, restricted, and submissive

(Canada Centre of Digital Media Literacy [CCDML], 2025). These representations diminish the multifaceted sociocultural identities to victims and deprive Muslim women of agency (Moya, 2016).

Islam has since been synonymous with terrorism in the west since the events of September 11, 2001. Such terms as Islamic terrorism, radical Islam, and jihadist have gained a place in the popular lexis (Jamal, 2025). In a meta-analysis of 300 articles published in Western media, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) established that more than 80 percent of all references of Muslims were associated with terrorism, conflict, or violence (Ahmed and Matthes, 2017, as cited in Jamal, 2025). This misrepresentation leads to the perception that Islam is an inherent violence, and this has been disproved by Islamic scholars and sociologists (Esposito, 2018).

The recent example can be in the media coverage of Israeli-Hamas war. The BBC was not deprived of controversy in the Western world when it resolved to use such terms as militants or fighters rather than terrorists to describe Hamas, and the critics accused the network of underreporting violence against Israeli civilians (Jamal, 2025). The ongoing issue in the discussion is that it is hard to reconcile objectivity and public and political considerations when covering issues related to Muslims.

Newspaper Stereotypes on Islam in Kenya

Over decades, the Kenyan newspapers have continued the stereotypes that are that Islam is a religion of war, extremism and intolerance. This portrayal has been especially

apparent in the media coverage of the terrorism in which Islam and Muslims are commonly identified as militant and radicals. Such depictions not only distort the religion but also enhance social segregation and social divisions based on religion.

One of the trends that have emerged within the Kenyan print media is being associated with terrorism in respect to mosques, madrassas, and Muslim leaders. An example can be the article published by The People Daily newspaper on July 5, 2007 under the title Radical Students Surrender: Mosque Has Long History of Supporting Militant Causes directly relating a mosque with terrorism.

The same goes with The Daily Nation (April 3, 2024, p. 6) applied the term jihadist and cleric when describing the Muslim leader, Sheriff Makaburi, to put him in an Islamic militancy perspective. In the article, Makaburi said, as per the Islam, we are granted the right to retaliate against what has been done to us-an eye with an eye (Thiong'o, 2019). Thiong (2019) has found that this selective application of the terms such as jihad when describing the conflicts in Somalia has helped to make Islam a violent faith.

Other religious expressions that have been used by the Kenyan newspapers besides the misuse of jihad include Allahu Akbar that means God is Great, but in a setting that does not imply aggression or violence. Defining such statements as battle cries, but not spiritual proclamations, the media consequently makes Allah a god in support of violence and the Prophet Muhammad a warrior (Thiong'o, 2019).

This kind of language stereotyping supports the idea that Islam is terrorism. The Star newspaper (April 10, 2024) released a report, titled Radical Youth Take Second Mosque in Mombasa, that stated that radical Muslim youth took control of the problematic Sakina Mosque in Majengo and renamed it Masjid Mujahideen. The narrative also talked about the young people cleaning the mosque with militant techniques, then repainting it; a term, which puts the Islamic practices at par with the extreme cleansing. This kind of coverage leads to a moral panic, in which mosques are being breeding grounds of extremism, not a place of worship.

Malakwen et al. (2024) state that Kenyan media tend to stick to certain lexical frames where the terms Muslim, Somali, jihadist and Mujahideen are used interchangeably to assume all religious affiliation and militancy. According to them, this advances the agenda of the terrorists as it segregates Kenya on religious basis (p. 5). Such language is repeatedly used to make it acceptable that Islam is associated with terrorism, which perpetuates Islamophobia in the discourse of the masses.

The stereotyping of the Muslims escalated after significant terrorist events in Kenya such as the American Embassy bombing in 1998, the 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall, and the 2019 DusitD2 Hotel attack. Obwogi (2021) has observed that these were not uncovered without an Islamophobic attached prism as media outlets presented the understanding of Islam as the ideological root of terrorism. He claimed that, biased media discourse has the capacity to further

Islamophobia, wider societal rifts and modify policies that marginalize the Muslim communities (p. 3).

These arguments are empirically justified. In an exploration of negative media portrayal of Muslims, Saleem et al. (2017) established that negative media reporting about Muslims is related to an increase in the popularity of discriminative policies against Muslims and this result was mediated by attitudes towards Muslims as violent or aggressive individuals.

Likewise, Abdullahi et al. (2024) claimed that the portrayals by the media that portray crimes committed by Muslims as acts of terrorism and crimes committed by other people as acts of criminality promote the society to become biased and impede interreligious unity. Thus, the use of stereotypes and biased language-using words, language phrases, and framing has consistently been used by the Kenyan newspapers to have Islam linked to terrorism. These kinds of representations do not only misrepresent the life of Muslims in Kenya, but they also play a role in the marginalization and stigmatization of a whole community. There is a need to have a change to more balanced reporting where religion identity and extremist ideology can be separated to enhance national unity and a responsible journalism.

Forces Influencing Print Media Representation of Islam in the Context of Terrorism

Nevertheless, in spite of the heavy knowledge of the media coverage of terrorism and Muslim identity, there are major gaps-

especially in the linguistic framing, tone, and the number of reported cases in various religious and ethnic groups.

Among the findings that have remained constant is that terrorist attacks by people who are of Muslim identity are disproportionately covered compared to terrorist attacks carried out by non-Muslims (Powell, 2018). Such an anomaly has far-reaching implications on both the perception and policy of the populace and is caused by a number of overlapping factors.

Censorship and Narrative Control

Media presentation does not necessarily equate to objective coverage but can be influenced by external factors like censorship by the government, editorial biasness as well as political coverage. Governments tend to shape the discourse surrounding terrorism to either keep the population at ease, or to save their own reputation at the global level.

According to Jessica (2020), the overt censorship in liberal democracies may backfire by weakening the state, but the less obvious forms of narrative control take place, including the framing or agenda-setting-still. As an illustration, through the governments, the media might be requested to underreport some terrorist attacks or overreport others based on the identity of the terrorists (Kearns et al., 2019).

Commercial Pressures and Media Competition

The news cycle and the emergence of online media have heightened the competition

between the various news organizations and as such, sensationalism has come out as a priority over reporting in a balanced manner. Violent stories, particularly those about terrorism are usually presented in an emotionally charged manner to sell them to the audience and readers. This media logic prefers drama and spectacle to context and subtlety (Altheide, 2007). Journalist houses can thus tend to over-report on Islamic extremism since it will attract more media coverage and fulfill the mainstream social anxieties.

Journalists' Perspectives and Professional Norms

The views, ideologies and training of individual journalists play a great part in the reporting process of terrorism. As Pearson et al. (2001) pointed out, such personal biases may influence how journalists interpret the events in the high-pressure contexts of reporting. They believe that journalists should make efforts to decouple fact and opinion, report various opinions and be objective. Nevertheless, the desire to conform to editorial positions, popular belief or prevailing discourse may result in skewed or partial accounts of Muslims within the framework of terrorism.

News Values and Framing

The news values concept, which defines what should be regarded as newsworthy, is an important tool in the creation of media stories. Terrorism news, particularly with an Islamic extremist theme, is especially newsworthy; all of them are high-value factors, such as conflict, negativity, and

proximity (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). Pearson et al. (2001) argue that journalists can play up difference and division instead of unity, which strengthens the stereotypes regarding Islam being inseparable to violence.

Sociopolitical and Ideological Influences

The larger ideological picture-comprising social attitudes in general, political environment, and the existing cultural discourses- influences news framing. As a structural problem in most Western countries, Islamophobia is one of the factors that lead to biased reporting whereby it is often reflected that Muslims are a monolith group and extremists (Saeed, 2007).

It has been argued that unraveling of war, crime, as well as terrorism stories present a greater newsworthiness than peace, or cooperation-related stories, as it is inherent in the societal fascination with conflict over harmony (Beckett, 2016).

Audience Expectations and Cultural Bias

The audience bias and expectation also define the media outlets. The content is usually biased to articulate or endorse the majority public views and this may create distorted representations. When questioned about what causes young people the greatest fear in a poll of 20,000 youth, the majority of 83% claimed that terrorism was the greatest cause of terror than climate change, war, and income inequality (Hassan et al., 2021). A feedback loop can be formed through such public feeling as the demand to the content about terrorism caused by the fear contributes to the

emergence of more negative images of Muslims.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping and Framing Theories

The gatekeeping theory is defined as the act of filtering information to be passed across, be it by journalists, editors or the institutional means (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). The main drivers of this process are news judgment of journalists, organisational practices, editorial policies, financial limitations, and source features (Vos, 2015).

These elements have direct influence on the stories that are reported, the manner in which they are reported and the final omissions. It is worth noting that not much scholarly attention has been given to post-publication gatekeeping, even though it is gaining significance in the digital era. According to Margareta et al. (2023), gatekeeping does not stop when the content has been published but goes on with the audience feedback, social media discourse, and editorial revision. This is a prolonged process of reaching an agreement between journalists, media organisations and their audiences and is indicative of constant power dynamics of what content is deemed acceptable or newsworthy.

As an example, a published article that seems to be empathetic to the Muslim communities may cause uproar within some political or ideological quarters resulting in alterations of the content in subsequent publications. In these instances, media houses might be compelled to conform to dominant discourses particularly in instances where such

media are threatened to their legitimacy or sources of financial support (Entman, 2007).

Although the idea of gatekeeping is based on the selection of material, the theory of framing deals with the way that content is organized and perceived. The definition of framing by Entman (1993) is choosing some facts of reality and highlighting them in communication in order to advance some problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgment, or treatment prescription. The news frames are influenced by different factors, such as organisational culture, professional norms, and external pressures such as political ideologies or expectations of the masses (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006).

Esdon (2015) stressed that framing happens on three primary levels: Journalist-centered, such as ideological, personal beliefs and experience; Media-level, such as the ownership structure and editorial line; External, such as political actors, government institutions, and economic elites. This framing process has a direct effect on the perception of the people. By the very fact that terrorism is increasingly perceived as a Muslim problem, one reinforces the negative stereotypes and contributes to the development of Islamophobic feelings (Powell, 2018).

Both the gatekeeping and the framing theories are especially applicable to the representation of the terrorism against Muslims in the media. These theoretical prisms demonstrate how choices made prior to and subsequent to publication; usually under the influence of political, commercial, or ideological forces- can propagate biased stories. Consequently, the representation of

Muslims in connection with terrorism is most frequently distorted; it helps to strengthen Islamophobic views and de-contextualised reporting. The use of the gatekeeping and framing theories is a very essential insight into the factors which affect the way Islam is covered in media in relation to the war against terrorism.

The theories can be used to identify the process by which biased portrayals are created and reinforced by analyzing both the internal (e.g., journalist beliefs, newsroom routines) and external (e.g., political pressure, audience reactions) factors influencing news content. Since Islam has constantly remained disengorgetically linked to terrorism in the mainstream media, it is important to learn these frameworks so that more balanced and ethical journalism is promoted.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and used a mixed-methods approach for data collection. In the mixed methods, the study utilised qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative, content analysis was conducted on 676 copies of Standard and Nation newspapers, complemented by interviews with 24 key informants drawn from journalists, religious leaders, media scholars, and counter-terrorism/security experts. For the quantitative data, the study used quantitative content analysis, which measured the frequency of words, themes, and phrases linking Islam to terrorism.

Data Collection Method

This study used mixed-methods approach to appropriately collect data. Mixed-methods research provides multiple ways of addressing a research problem. It entails combining elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches such as the use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, and inference techniques for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration (Johnson, 2007).

Mixed methods integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a single study, being critical 'when a research question requires a multifaceted approach that can simultaneously explore trends in data and the nuances of individual experiences' (McLeod, 2024; p.1). The mixing, as McLeod (2024) further observed, is done in a way that qualitative and quantitative approaches become interdependent and work together in order to achieve a common goal.

This study therefore mixed qualitative and quantitative by conducting newspaper content analysis, combined with key informant interviews, and then numerically counted relevant stories respectively. Since there are different types of mixed-methods approach, this study, consequently, adopted the Exploratory Sequential method. This involves two phases of data collection, with quantitative phase coming first (McLead, 2024).

McLead argued that in the exploratory sequential mixed-methods, the research begins by collecting and analysing qualitative data; gathering in-depth information from smaller groups through interviews, observations,

among others before conducting the quantitative aspect of it.

For Qualitative data, this study analysed contents of 676 Nation and Standard newspapers, and further interviewed 24 key informants who were drawn from media practitioners, religious leaders, security experts, and media scholars. Standard and Nation were selected for this study since they were the most read newspapers in Kenya, according to the Media Council of Kenya (2023) Media Performance Report. The study assessed newspapers, both weekend and daily editions, that were published between 2013 and 2020, giving a population of 4,386 copies of Nation and Standard. However, through Yamane's formula, the study analysed contents of 676 newspapers as shown below:

Yamane's (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where:

n =desired sample size; N =the finite size of the population; e =maximum acceptable margin error as determined by researcher (0.05); 1 =a theoretical or statistical constant.

The study looked at the newspapers published the whole year of the attack for every strike. The attacks happened in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2019 and two attacks in the year 2020. The strikes were-Westgate, Nairobi-Bound bus attack in Mandera, Mpeketoni, Garissa University, Nairobi DusitD2 and Camp Simba. These were the high-profile terror attacks that happened after 2011 raid on al-Shabaab by the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) (Global Terrorism Index, 2022).

Global Terrorism Index (2022) argued that after the strikes on al-Shabaab in Somalia,

out of retaliation, terrorists launched major attacks in Kenya that were hugely covered by the media. Therefore, it was important to study the contents of the two mainstream newspapers that reported the attacks.

For Quantitative data, this study used quantitative content analysis where it systematically counted and measured the frequency of specific words and phrases with perceived stereotypes about Islam in relations to terrorism; answering questions such as 'how many', and eventually identifying meaningful pattern that has helped answer research questions.

Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches of data collection in this study was superior to a single method. This was triangulation, which, as Dawadi (2020) also observed, provided rich insights into the study problem that could have not been understood and solved using only either qualitative or quantitative. According to FoodRisc Resource Centre (2016), mixing research approach in a study is better than either qualitative alone or quantitative alone as it provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of the other.

Therefore, by using both types of research, the strengths of each approach could make up for weakness of the other (Anyuor, 2022). For example, quantitative research is weak in understanding the context in which people or concepts behave, what qualitative research makes up for.

Findings and Analysis

Print Media Stereotypical representation of Islam in the context of terrorism

Stereotypes, in the view of Lipmann, are the ‘maps of the world’; showing how individuals are categorised as members of groups and assuming that the perceived characteristics of those groups, and of the individuals (Sides & Gross, 2013).

During the newspaper content analyses, the researcher counted the number of words and phrases used that were stereotypical and perceived to be representing Islam as either terrorists or aiding acts of terrorism as indicated in the table below.

Table 1: Stereotypes retrieved in the newspapers during data collection

SN	Stereotypes	Frequency	%	Nation	Standard
1	Jihadist war	33	18	11 (33%)	22 (67%)
2	Description of terrorists' attires/places & Islamic names	18	11	10 (56%)	08 (44%)
3	Reciting Islamic prayers	83	45	35 (42%)	48 (58%)
4	Islamic terrorist	49	26	22 (45%)	27 (55%)
TOTAL		183	100	78 (43%)	105 (57%)

From the key informants' table above and the newspaper content analyses, there were stereotypes used to refer to Islam and Muslims that represented them as terrorism perpetrators.

In this study, words and phrases such as ‘Islamic’, Islamic names, ‘Islamist terrorist’, ‘Jihadist war’, among others, were used in these newspapers. These are some of the stereotypical contents that portray Islam negatively in the context of terrorism. For example, there were descriptions of terrorist attires and places; attires the terrorists put on and places such as the mosques used for recruitment of terrorists.

As the news stories were sifted, these terms and phrases were allowed to reach the audience; they played a critical role in influencing the perception of the people about Muslims and Islam.

One of such was a story carried in the Nation (April 2, 2015) about the Garissa University attack titled, ‘al-Shabaab militants claim responsibility for Garissa University attack.’ In the narrative, al-Shabaab claimed that they seized Christians. Al-Shabaab’s Spokesperson claimed that, ‘when our men arrived, they released the Muslims...’ The story revealed that the war was to rescue Muslims and harm the perceived enemies, which in this case could be the non-Muslims.

This kind of story is discriminatory, stereotypical and war mongering that can easily influence the perception of people about Muslims. Such are the stereotypes that isolate Muslims from other people of the world, portraying them negatively as terrorists and criminals. Corbin (2017) observed that certain stereotypes against Islam and Muslims are demagogic propaganda that are based on flawed ideological beliefs-deeply held beliefs that are not truthful.

Another story was published in the Standard newspaper (2015) about the terror attack on the Nairobi-bound bus that was travelling from Mandera. The story titled, ‘Suspected al-Shabaab militants kill 28 people in Mandera’, did not leave any doubt that Muslims were war mongers, ready to fight non-Muslims. According to the story, al-Shabaab terrorists, who claimed responsibility, only killed non-Muslims. It read in part, ‘there were unconfirmed reports indicating all those killed were commuters perceived to be non-Muslims by the attackers...’ This news item exposes Muslims as terrorists, reinforcing negative stereotype that eventually subjects Muslims to hate crimes and fuel islamophobia (Corbin, 2017, p. 1).

The study’s interviews of the key informants revealed a state of despair, a belief that terrorism is an act conducted by Muslims. Participant N, an Islamic religious leader based in Garissa, observed that for many years, the media has misled the world to believe that terrorism is Islam and Islam is terrorism, ‘they have stereotyped us for long. Every story sentence must have a word or two identifying Islam as terrorist.’

A Participant Q, who is a Christian Pastor, argued that there was no doubt that Muslims were terrorist perpetrators, and this has made people of other religions have bad blood with Muslim brothers, ‘from the newspaper stereotypes about the terror attacks in Kenya, it is obvious that Muslims are killers, and we have therefore developed a negative attitude towards them. We do not trust them. They are the terrorists who are fighting

innocent people. Once you are not a Muslim, they murder you heartlessly. We have read it all in the newspapers.’

The use of stereotypes as Participant Q opined is a common trend in the newsrooms world over; from the West to the Global South where this study was conducted. In a report published in September 2019 by the Media Portrayal of Minorities Project (as cited in Shameen, 2021), newspaper coverage of Muslims had more negative stereotypic words and phrases about Islam globally. The Report further revealed that the mainstream media has been quick to link Islam with terrorism; that when terrorism is discussed or reported in the media, stereotypes such as ‘extremists’, ‘radicalism’, ‘jihadists’, ‘Islamism’ are highly used, equating terrorism and Islam; and eventually promoting bias against Muslim.

The effect of news coverage of Islam as a terrorist-the stereotyping- has not only affected people of Kenya, but also its impact is felt globally. Western newsrooms are perceived to be fueling it more than any other country in the world (Thiong’o, 2026). Said (in Thiong’o, 2016) argued that the American media have, in most cases, presented Islam as ‘predominantly hostile’ (p. 23). However, this perception has been viewed as wrong and untrue.

Therefore, because of media stereotypes about terrorism, Muslims have been branded as terrorists, which has caused fear and a negative attitude toward the Muslim community in Kenya. Framing news stories to produce stereotypes that portray Islam as terrorist produces ideological thinking in which some people are treated as subjects

while others remain in the higher class, as Brennen (2000) observed.

During the terrorist attacks reporting, Kenyan newspapers became part of Althuser’s Ideological State Apparatus where institutions such as churches/mosques/temples, schools, family units, trade unions, sports, adverts, press, popular culture, among others, fall. The two Kenyan newspapers, the Standard and Nation, under this study, framed stereotypical contents that are also repressive, pushing for an ideological belief that Islam are terrorists, however in a concealed way, as a discipline, censorship and socialisation.

This coincides with Althuser’s argument that press, being one of the cultural institutions, ‘that guide our thoughts, beliefs, and interests and reinforce the status quo, discouraging individuals from challenging their existing place in society’ (Brennen, 2000; p. 5). However, these ‘peaceful’ apparatuses can work hand-in-hand with the Repressive State Apparatuses-the machine of repression-such as police, courts, army, prisons, among others.

Looking at the press, the two newspapers in this study are part of the ideological apparatuses that through framing, certain stereotypes were used to portray Muslims negatively, and therefore, the audience’s beliefs and behaviour are shaped. In doing this, the media reinforces the dominant ideologies of the society.

Therefore, as Fiveable (2026) observed, this news narration ‘connects to the broader concepts of ideology, hegemony, and false consciousness’ (p.1). The findings here have answered the second objective of this study,

which was to determine print media reinforcement of stereotypes about Islam in the context of terrorism.

Globally, the media stereotypes against Islam and Muslims have created the notions that ‘all Muslims are terrorists’ and that ‘white people are never terrorists.’ Corbin (2017) dismissed these two ideas, terming them untrue and warned that people should not be judged harshly because of their race or ethnicity. He observed that media dehumanization of any Muslim terrorism perpetrator happens on the spot, while for white Christian perpetrator, the perpetrator’s humanity is retained, respected and valued.

Factors affecting news coverage of terrorist attacks in Kenya

During the process of data collection, the study found that there were factors that influenced news reporting of the terrorist attacks under this study. The journalists interviewed as key informants indicated the following factors.

Table 2: Factors influencing reporting of terrorism attacks in Kenya

SN	Factor	Frequency	%
1	Rush to break news.	8	100
2	Willful ignorance: journalists know what the law says, but they ignore	7	88
3	They don’t know the impact of insensitive terrorism reporting	5	63
4	Poor understanding of the existing	4	50

	policies, acts and laws		
5	Some journalists are sponsored in the newsrooms by terrorists & the State.	3	38
6	No proper training on news coverage of terrorist attacks	2	25
TOTAL		24	100

From the figure above, all the key informants interviewed for this study revealed a number of factors that influenced reporting of terror attacks in Kenya, namely, rush to break the news, willful ignorance, not knowing the impact of insensitive reporting, not understanding existing policies and laws, journalists being sponsored by terrorists, government manipulation, and inadequate training of journalists.

The ‘Breaking News’ Mentality

Also known in the journalism realm as ‘news addiction’ or ‘infomania’, breaking news is when journalists feed the audience with urgent news stories and news headlines. This habit promotes diminished contexts where deep analysis and research to get detailed contents are sacrificed for speed, leading to shallow understanding of complex issues in the news narratives.

During data collection for this study, some journalists interviewed argued that to them, ‘breaking news’ was a critical moment since they give ‘raw facts’ that security can probe further. They argued that sometimes, taking too long to analyse and research about a

given issue could also affect the timeliness of stories, and also give opportunities for other sources to influence news production. A Participant 4, a journalist, argued that, ‘news is ‘sweet’ when still hot; and we are happy when we serve it while still hot. This gives raw facts. Taking too long gathering details on such sensitive stories can also be influenced and eventually interfere with the contents.’

The practice of breaking news in journalism influences professional gatekeeping process. Since Gatekeeping and Framing are bureaucratic processes in the newsrooms that try to professionally clean the contents, journalists would abandon the process to write stories faster, ending up feeding the audience with contents that are not well sourced. Making phone calls or visiting and knocking offices of the sources for detailed interviews seem to be tedious to journalists who cover the attacks, forcing them to make the process of gatekeeping and writing news as brief as they can in order to pass news hurriedly to the audience.

However, some reporters and editors observed that when they break the news, and give the identity of the suspected perpetrators, they are helping the security team to reveal those perpetrating the acts of terrorism. Participant 1, an editor, argued that, ‘when an attack occurs, we are busy to break news, a scenario that hugely affect our professionalism. At that time we do not care much about ethics, laws and policies; we want to break it first and so such stories have gaps. We push our reporters to send stories. Honestly, we do not give them time to get facts right. There is also a feeling that when we

mention the identities of the ‘suspects and their hideouts’, we believe that in a way we are smoking out the perpetrators from their ‘hideouts’; not knowing we are profiling a community or a religion or faith.’

In his observation, Hassan et al (2021) said that impatience to break the news affects the journalists’ professionalism since they do not take time to get facts about terrorism. Even though breaking the news is invaluable in journalism practice, some events are sensitive and may not need impatience when covering. For example, terrorist attacks, where religion is accused of fueling the act of violence, need accurate reporting, which can effectively be achieved through proper research. Such research and enough time to gather adequate information will give journalists adequate sources for professional news writing.

In the process of hurriedly writing these news stories, the journalists, through gatekeeping and framing, produce content of their choice, with fewer voices from sources, and no detail in the narratives. This ends up feeding the audience with stories that are more likely the ideas of the media that eventually rule the world. Therefore, these are the stories that are finally ingrained in the audience’s hearts, creating heart habits, the cultural hegemony.

In his argument of cultural hegemony, Gramsci (1971) observed that such media narration captures people’s minds and hearts, changing their thinking, behaviour and attitude towards a given issue. In this case, it is not only through force and military that people’s thinking can be shaped, but media can critically play this role effectively and quietly.

As media contents capture their minds and hearts, it shapes their thinking.

So, when journalists write stories without adequate sources and different views, the content become their own voices, forcing the audience to consume the thinking of the media that could form negative belief and eventually remains hegemonic. Even though there is the freedom of press, but what happens when media’s role- the power to tell society’s stories- is in the hands of a few journalists? Journalists end up promoting cultural hegemony, dominating people’s thinking, beliefs and behaviour through the mass media itself.

This kind of dominance of people’s thoughts institutionalises hegemony which is eventually built in rules and routines in a society’s institutions, reason why Muslims reveal in this study that getting jobs, and business deals in the government institutions has become difficult because they are seen as bad people-the terrorists.

Therefore, from the data, this study found that the rush to run stories give half-baked narratives that are likely to promote tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, eventually fueling radicalisation, extremism, terrorism and hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Willful Ignorance of the law and the journalists’ mindset

This is where journalists know what the law says, but they ignore. It also involves lack of knowledge on the impact of insensitive terrorism reporting. Editors and reporters interviewed for this study argued that

journalists know the existence of some of the laws and policies governing news coverage of terrorism attacks. However, they entirely ignore them. Those interviewed argued that journalists themselves have developed the mindset that Muslims support terrorism and this has affected their way of reporting even after many laws and policies have been developed to handle this.

An editor, Participant 5, argued that since there has not been action taken against journalists breaching these laws, many reporters ignore the rule of the law and report the way they want, 'who cares about these laws? You see the stories are passed to the audience. Poor gatekeeping, but no one takes action, so the trend thrives.'

This mindset has affected journalists' way of reporting matters terrorism. As Hassan et al (2021) observed, it is during this time of ignoring laws and policies in place that journalists end up having their own views and opinions that eventually influence their performances in news reporting. Ignoring laws and policies that have been created by the government and the media stakeholders lead to the development of journalists' mindset that gives media room to practice power that controls the world.

In his argument, George Gerbner (in Jhally, 1997), observed that news stories are sometimes framed in a way that they guide the audience on what to think, believe and what is seen as values and non-values. This, for this study, is the media's power to control the people's culture-their behaviour, attitude and thinking towards terrorism attacks-associating it with Islam.

According to the findings of this study, this shaping of the audience's culture has been primarily fueled by the journalists' decision to ignore media ethics and laws aimed at controlling news reporting of terrorism attacks in Kenya. The media's power to control the society and culture is so organised and so cruel since, as Jhally (1997) quotes Gerbner, journalists don't care about the laws and about those who make those laws.

Kenyan newspapers, Standard and Nation fall under this argument; journalists ignoring the already existing laws, and instead have their own mindsets-which in this case promote the belief that Islam is terrorism sympathiser-an ideology that has globally fueled violence, hatred, and Islamophobia-breaking the world apart.

To end this, it is critical for journalists to separate facts from their imaginations and report both sides of the story (Pearson et al, 2001). Journalists' prejudice, according to Eltantawynews (2007), can affect the way Islam-related news is reported, 'journalists are likely to be influenced by their own prejudices either positively or negatively' (p. 98).

Lack of Proper Training

Lack of proper training for journalists in regards to conflict-sensitive reporting can lead to poor understanding of the existing policies, acts and laws that eventually affect journalists' performance. Study revealed that some journalists still have not undergone proper and adequate trainings about news coverage of terrorism attacks. Key informant, Participant 10, a media stakeholder and scholar argued that it is in this understanding that

learning institutions and other organisations have developed curriculum in a way that it serves the purpose to train journalists effectively in regards to terrorism reporting.

He argued that even though many workshops and training on conflict-sensitive journalism have been conducted across the country, reporters and editors still do not take their work seriously, 'many trainings have been organised even in the universities and colleges, but journalists are still messing up. Government and other stakeholders should take action against this kind of reporting because it is profiling and promotes terrorism and other forms of violent extremism.'

In their argument for the study, the key informants who were interviewed accepted that even though they have been attending trainings, most of the contents of such trainings lacked the religious detail to understand cultures and doctrines of different religions. Participant 2 admitted that, 'however, most of the trainings offered still lack the aspects of religion. They don't have detailed understanding of the doctrines of different religions so that journalists stand guided when reporting acts of terrorism. This could affect the way of reporting as reporters would not ask questions if indeed Islam sympathises with terrorism.'

Lack of proper trainings for journalists on matters terrorism attack coverage is a sensitive issue that directly affect gatekeeping and framing processes. A journalist who does not know what to pick and what not to pick for a sensitive story like terrorism narratives will remain chaotic in their thinking, attitude, and behaviour, becoming more dangerous than

weapons of mass destruction. This is a fumbling journalist who, when covering conflict, can fuel it.

It is through trainings that journalists are made aware of the importance of ethics in journalism since it is their responsibility to ensure that information dissemination is factually accurate-not distorting facts or deliberately omitting it during gatekeeping and framing processes. This is why it is vitally important to train journalists in order for them to understand different aspects conflicts and violence.

Terrorists Sponsorship and State Manipulation

The study also revealed that there are cases where journalists agreed that they were sponsored by the terrorism sympathisers, and their work manipulated by the State. They observed that some journalists in the newsrooms are paid so that they can tilt the narratives in a way that support the terrorists and or the State, eventually fueling terrorism. When interviewed, a reporter, Participant 4, disclosed that, 'terrorism sympathisers are not leaving any chance. You go with a colleague to cover an attack and write stories. The following day you look at his content, you get worried. If you inquire, you will be shocked they are paid by terror sympathisers if not terrorists themselves.'

These are the secrets in the newsrooms that indeed interfere with the news gatekeeping and the framing of the news stories. In such cases, news stories are controlled by terrorists, an elite that would also want their ideologies to be spread in the global

space. This is using media for propaganda, serving the interest of individuals or of a group. When terrorists decide to sponsor journalists in the mainstream media to popularise acts of terrorism, media becomes a battleground where terrorists and anti-terror groups shoot each other ideologically.

Another key informant, Participant 1, argued that ‘terrorists are not quiet wherever they are. They are trying to infiltrate the media-particularly mainstream media so that they can easily spread their thoughts. Therefore, in some countries such as Kenya, they still believe the traditional mass media is critical in spreading their agendas.’ This is what Andrew et al (2021) observed, arguing that terrorists have known the significance of harnessing the power of the mainstream media. Some journalists are on the payrolls of the terror attackers, while others have been sponsored to start media outlets; acquiring televisions and radios in order to promote the messages and ideologies of terrorists (FATF Report, 2015).

Away from terrorists’ sponsorship, this study further found that there is heavy government manipulation that also affects news coverage of terror attacks in Kenya. Those interviewed argued that even though government portrayed the manipulation as geared towards ending acts of terrorism, but it became too much that journalists felt they were not professionally allowed to do their work.

Participant 2 argued that, ‘we were made to believe that we didn’t know our work. The State publicly criticised us, we felt hit hard. The government stopped some live

coverages, government censorship was too much. Apart from that, State machineries are all-over, trying to dictate how we do stories. Sometimes they give us tips, threaten us, or just sweet-talk us. It is also a heavy censorship.’ Government manipulation of journalists in covering acts of terrorism forces the media to push the ideologies of the government. Some of these ideologies are good, but others could indirectly spread propaganda and instead fuel hatred and terrorism.

This has been witnessed in many countries across the globe. According to Rao et al. (2011), covering wars in countries such as Sri Lanka, India have been manipulated to portray the government positively in the face of the war. This kind of reporting will obviously annoy terrorists who will eventually hit back.

In fact, in some cases, they may attack journalists who they feel are ‘not objective and neutral’ in their reporting. Taking sides in a conflict, wars and terrorism can be deadly, with sad repercussions since those feeling sidelined will retaliate to fight both the enemy and the media. Therefore, putting pressure on journalists by the State, or by the terrorists itself, is likely to influence their performance; taking sides which eventually would jeopardize journalism and sometimes harmful to journalists.

Therefore, in terrorism reporting, mainstream media is used as a propaganda tool for both the terrorists and the government. Media, as Chomsky and Herman (1988) would argue in their propaganda model, depends on the government for some support in areas

business, taxes, enforcement, and labour policies. This makes the government the only source of information for journalists. At the level of terrorists, they use goodies to win journalists and sometimes threats and even deaths to manipulate media contents.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Conclusion

This study found that the stories were framed in a way that Islam was viewed as terrorism perpetrator. Negative stereotypes about Islam were given prominence while positive ones were given small spaces in the newspapers. Through gatekeeping and framing, words and phrases such as ‘jihadist’, ‘Islamist’, ‘Islamist terrorists’; the narratives that revealed how mosques were used as recruiting grounds, and recitation of Islamic prayers, were some of the contents that represented Islam as terrorism sympathiser.

The study further found that production of terrorism stories is influenced by many factors. This has affected hugely the operation of journalists and therefore unprofessionally doing narratives that portray Islam as terrorist religion. Consequently, the newspaper audience have a perception that Muslims are bad people; scenario that has created too much fear, fueling islamophobia in Kenya. This perception can easily trigger tensions and violence between Islam and non-Muslims; leading to more cases of Islamophobia, radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism as explained in the theory of Social Identity.

Relating to the works of Antonio Gramsci on the media and the philosophy of

hegemony, Gramsci observed that media could be used by an elite to shape the perception of the people for self-interest. It is in this understanding that this study has come up with recommendations that should be implemented developed a framework that should be utilised in order to check on the way terrorism attacks are reported.

Recommendations

Even though there is conflict-sensitive journalism initiative, it is wider and covers other conflicts including domestic and political conflicts. It could be the main reason why journalists may not feel attached to it when covering terrorism acts. Therefore, developing terrorism-sensitive journalism infused with religious journalism as a stand-alone initiative would have deeper issues that should be looked into when covering matters terrorism.

Furthermore, there is the need to have Religion Journalism in all colleges and universities offering Journalism course. Religion Journalism is kind of journalism that makes journalists to have knowledge on news coverage of different religious issues, doctrines and practices in order to promote inter-faith tolerance and to minimize cases of violent extremism, terrorism, and radicalisation that might arise because of insensitive news reporting on matters religion. This study recommends enhanced civic education and more training on the existing laws, ethics and policies related to inter-faith dialogue. The government and other media stakeholders should ensure that journalists, and local communities are educated on matters

religion and inter-religious tolerance as a way of reducing faith-based conflicts such as terrorism.

The study further recommends that Kenyan journalists should be given work license after training. It is this license that should be used to practice and in case one breaches the rules, the license should be withdrawn and the journalist stopped from practising. This has happened in some disciplines such as Law, Medicine and Teaching, and can work in journalism. Those found culpable to have their press cards revoked and not allowed to work in any media organisation or start one.

Finally, the stakeholders, security and anti-terrorism teams should organise awareness campaigns using vernacular and community media platforms such as radios across the country on matters terrorism and religion for citizens to understand different religious doctrines about terrorism perpetration.

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