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Journalism Across the Disaster Cycle: How the Daily Nation Reported Kenya's 2020–2023 Drought

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Abstract
This study examined how the *Daily Nation* reported Kenya's 2020–2023 drought across preparedness, response and recovery. Drought develops gradually, yet journalism may focus more on its visible humanitarian impacts at the expense of its preparedness and recovery dimensions. Quantitative content analysis, supplemented by qualitative interpretation, was applied to 137 articles published between 1 June 2020 and 31 May 2023. Articles were classified by content into disaster phases and reporting characteristics, including journalistic form, sourcing, framing, depth, visual representation and information orientation. They were examined through frequencies, percentages and phase-specific cross-tabulations. Qualitative textual and visual interpretation complemented the quantitative analysis. Guided by disaster communication, agenda-setting and framing theories, the study found uneven coverage of drought, with response accounting for 72 articles (52.6%), compared to 31 (22.6%) for preparedness and 34 (24.8%) for recovery. Preparedness reporting used short articles (52.6%) in the form of opinion pieces (48.4%), while response was characterised by news articles (77.8%) that were mostly government-sourced (58.3%) and predominantly employed crisis framing (45.8%). Recovery reporting was characterised by the use of features (47.1%) that were overwhelmingly solution-oriented in frame (70.6%). Recovery also presented the most actionable communication, with 52.9 per cent of the articles depicting a specific-action orientation in their communication. The findings reveal that besides changes in volume of coverage, the reporting also evolved in form and function as the communication needs of the drought evolved. The study therefore highlights the value of examining disaster reporting in relation to phase-specific information needs presented by each phase, as well as the need for sustained disaster reporting beyond impacts to enable preparedness and recovery.

Keywords: Daily Nation, Disaster Management cycle, drought communication, disaster journalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Media attention to disasters has a tendency to intensify as the humanitarian impacts of a disaster become visible, making them physically accessible to audiences. For slow-onset disasters such as drought, whose impacts are gradual and cumulative (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2019), this presents representation challenges, as some early and late stages of drought may be visually inaccessible to audiences. This is despite early drought stages being important for communicating risks, warnings and reinforcing preparedness measures, while intensified impacts draw attention to crisis and relief. This pattern may leave preparedness and longer-term recovery comparatively less visible. Examining disaster journalism therefore requires attention not only to how coverage is distributed across the cycle, but also to the forms, sources, frames, depth and action orientation of reporting at each phase.

Kenya provides an important context for examining these dynamics, as more than 80 per cent of the country is classified as arid or semi-arid (ASAL) and is therefore prone to frequent and repeated droughts (Ondiko & Karanja, 2021). Droughts cause severe food and water shortages, and the changing climatic conditions in recent decades raise concerns about their frequency and impacts (IPCC, 2021; Fleming-Muñoz et al., 2023). Timely reporting across the disaster cycle, therefore, can provide opportunities for communities and institutions to anticipate risks and respond.

Between 2020 and 2023, Kenya experienced its worst drought in 40 years (Odongo et al., 2025), following the failure of the October–December 2020 short rains and several subsequent rainfall seasons in 2021 and 2022. By 2022, more than half the country was in severe drought distress, with over four million people requiring humanitarian assistance (National Drought Management Authority [NDMA], 2023). Its scale and prolonged nature make this drought an important case for examining how journalism responds to changing communication needs in a slow-onset disaster.

Through selection and representation, newspapers influence which aspects of drought reality receive public attention and how they are understood (Duffy, 2016; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Additionally, newspapers' capacity for depth and sustained reporting over time renders them especially suitable for drought reporting. The *Daily Nation*, as Kenya's leading newspaper by circulation and reach (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2025), provides a useful case for examining the distribution and characteristics of drought reporting across the disaster cycle.

Although previous studies have examined drought representation in Kenya, empirical evidence remains limited on how media reporting varies across disaster phases to address the changing information needs associated with each phase. This study therefore examines the *Daily Nation's* coverage of the 2020–2023 drought in Kenya across the preparedness, response and recovery phases. Preparedness refers to anticipatory measures, including early warnings, risk awareness and preventive guidance; response involves immediate action and relief during active drought impacts; while recovery encompasses rehabilitation, adaptation, resilience-building and longer-term planning. Individual articles were classified according to the disaster phase reflected in their content. The study was guided by two research questions: How did the *Daily Nation* report Kenya's 2020–2023 drought across the preparedness, response and recovery phases? How did the characteristics of this reporting vary across the three phases in relation to their differing communication needs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalism's Role Across the Disaster Management Cycle

Communication is integral to disaster management, from public awareness creation and preparedness to emergency response and recovery (Dave, n.d.; Haddow & Haddow, 2013). The disaster management cycle conceptualises these activities as continuous, with different priorities before, during and after disasters (Joyce et al., 2009). Seeger and Sellnow (2013) similarly regard disaster communication as central to how people anticipate, respond to and recover from disasters. These perspectives emphasise a communication that is planned, continuous, responsive and empowering rather than confined to emergency information. Boykoff (2011), however, shows how environmental reporting is shaped by newsroom norms and wider political and socioeconomic forces, while Miles and Morse (2007) demonstrate how news selection can privilege particular aspects of disaster. While these perspectives establish communication's role and the institutional influences on reporting, they do not contemplate how newspaper coverage might vary across the phases of a prolonged drought.

Houston et al. (2019), drawing on interviews with journalists, identify distinctive journalistic functions across the disaster cycle: examining risks and preparedness measures and disseminating warnings before impacts; providing timely updates, verification and emergency information during response; and reporting reconstruction, adaptation and resilience during recovery. Mileti and Sorensen (1990) identify characteristics of effective warning messages, while Ulmer et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of communication that empowers audiences to act by extending agency. These principles provide a basis for examining whether reporting moves beyond describing impacts to offering potentially actionable information. This study operationalised observable characteristics of coverage, including sourcing patterns, depth, information action orientation and visual alignment, to assess the respective phase-specific reporting.

Drought reporting presents particular reporting challenges because impacts are gradual and cumulative (UNDRR, 2019), while established media logics favour short-term and sudden events. The Media Council of Kenya (MCK, 2016) notes that journalists are particularly effective at reporting events, which contrasts with drought's need for sustained attention. Additionally, drought does not end with the return of the rains, as recovery takes time. The challenge for the media, therefore, is keeping the drought story alive long after the visible impacts have subsided.

In Kenya, Namaswa (2021) found that newspaper coverage of drought and food security was sporadic and event-driven, with attention spiking during major impacts. This provides a foundation for understanding drought representation but leaves room to examine how reporting changes across preparedness, response and recovery. The present study addresses this gap by identifying the *Daily Nation's* phase-specific reporting profiles and considering their potential communicative value.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates disaster communication, agenda-setting and framing theories to assess how the *Daily Nation* reported the 2020-2023 drought cycle in Kenya. While Disaster Communication Theory (DCT) provides the overarching perspective for probing how the nature and form of coverage changed across the different phases of the drought, agenda- setting and framing theories facilitate assessment of the distribution as well as the character of coverage.

Disaster Communication Theory

According to Seeger & Sellnow (2013), during a crisis, communication needs differ as the crisis evolves, with each phase of the crisis presenting unique information needs. Early in the crisis, communication should be designed to meet preparedness needs in which early warning messages are disseminated, mitigation measures undertaken, and vulnerabilities highlighted. As the crisis progresses to the response phase, communication should evolve to serve emergency needs such as highlighting impacts, dissemination of relief information, situational awareness and verification of facts. The recovery phase of the crisis presents communicators with the need to focus on reconstruction measures and long-term resilience of communities (Houston et al., 2019). In this study, the theory provided the framework for examining whether reporting characteristics corresponded with these phase-specific needs. The needs were linked to observable characteristics outlined in a code sheet, including information action-orientation, reporting depth, sourcing, agency and visual alignment. They provided a basis for assessing whether coverage moved beyond describing drought impacts to information potentially useful for preparedness, response and recovery.

Agenda- setting and Framing Theories

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) informed the analysis of the distribution and prominence of coverage and the issues prioritised across phases. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) informed the examination of how drought was represented through dominant frames, language, tone and visual imagery, including crisis, responsibility, human-interest, economic and solution-oriented perspectives.

Together, disaster communication, agenda-setting and framing theories provided a complementary lens for examining the distribution, form and representation of drought reporting and its relationship to phase-specific communication needs.

The framework linked each disaster phase to communication needs and observable reporting indicators, drawing on disaster communication scholarship and the study's coding instrument.

Table 1: Analytical Framework Linking Disaster Phases, Communication Needs, and Reporting Indicators

Disaster phase	Expected communication needs	Observable indicators	What the analysis examines
Preparedness	Risk awareness, early warning messages, mitigation and preparedness	Risk information, mitigation measures, agency and action information	Whether articles communicate drought risks, provide preventive guidance and identify preparedness actions.
Response	Situational awareness, impacts, humanitarian needs and interventions	Impact reporting, emergency information, response interventions and relief guidance	Whether articles explain drought impacts, identify responsible institutions, report interventions and communicate assistance information.
Recovery	Adaptation, rebuilding, resilience and sustained attention	Recovery practices; adaptation information; community experiences and practical solutions	Whether articles communicate recovery initiatives, practical livelihood strategies, adaptation practices and longer-term resilience.

Source: Adapted from synthesis of disaster communication literature and the study's coding framework.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed quantitative content analysis supplemented by qualitative interpretation to examine the reporting of the 2020-2023 drought by the *Daily Nation.* Articles published in the *Daily Nation* between 1st of June 2020 to 31st May 2023 comprised the study's population, with each individual newspaper article forming the unit of analysis. The target population comprised news reports, special features, opinions and business reports whose content focused substantively on drought as the primary issue of focus. Quantitative analysis informed the analysis of the volume and distribution of drought coverage, while qualitative interpretation was applied in examining the visual and textual dimensions of the coverage. The two procedures were thereafter integrated through cross-tabulations of selected variables, including article type, length, sourcing, framing, visual salience, depth, primary focus, adequacy and information orientation, against disaster phase and the results were used to synthesise the reporting profiles.

Articles were retrieved from Nation Media's digital archive through a keyword search matrix using terms such as "drought", "severe drought", "drought crisis" and "drought emergency". To ensure geographical relevance, the terms were combined with Kenya-specific filters such as "Mandera", "Turkana", "Marsabit", "Baringo" and "Arid and Semi-Arid lands". The researcher initially screened a total of 150 articles using the inclusion criteria. Further screening excluded 13 articles that had either mentioned drought metaphorically or did not focus on drought as the primary focus. The final sample comprised 137 articles.

A structured coding sheet capturing variables on disaster communication, agenda-setting and framing variables was developed by the researcher. It was piloted on 32 *Business Daily* articles, and operational definitions and instructions were refined. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude were used for instrument testing, where selected articles were coded on these tools and the results were compared to the researcher's coding. Discrepancies resulting from this process were used to refine the coding sheet. The tools did not code the final data set, as it was individually coded by the researcher. Variables used in the code sheet were derived from the study's theoretical framework. Agenda-setting theory informed the analysis of frequency, placement, prominence, length and editorial investment; framing theory informed the analysis of frames, tone, language and visual representation, while disaster communication informed the phase classification and assessment of phase-specific communication needs. Table 2

summarises the variables and the operationalisation employed.

Table 2: Operationalisation of Variables for Phase-Specific Reporting Analysis

Variable	Operationalisation
Disaster phase	Preparedness, response or recovery, classified according to the dominant drought-cycle stage emphasized in the article.
Article type	Hard news, feature or opinion, according to the article's editorial form.
Article length	Short (less than 200 words), medium (200-500 words) or long (more than 500 words).
Primary focus	Food security, livelihood, government response, climate causes, economic cost, health or other according to the principal issue of focus by the article.
Main sources	Government officers, NGOs, experts or other based on the source receiving greatest emphasis
Reporting depth	Superficial, moderate or in-depth based on the extent of detail, explanation and contextual depth.
Nature of information	Informational, general action-oriented or specific action orientation- classified according to whether the article explained an issue, encouraged action without clear guidance or specified what action was required and by whom.
Communication needs addressed	Very low, low, moderate, great, very great- assessed against communication needs associated with the identified disaster phase.
Visual salience	No image, low, moderate, high- Based on image size, prominence and visibility on page.
Visual alignment	No image, poorly aligned, partially aligned, strongly aligned- assessed against the communication needs of the disaster phase identified.
Source adequacy	Not adequate, moderately adequate, very adequate- based on the sufficiency, variety and relevance of the sources used.

Source: Adapted from the study's coding sheet.

The researcher read and manually coded all 137 articles. Frequencies and percentages described overall coverage. Articles were then classified by content into preparedness, response and recovery. Cross-tabulations using the disaster phase as the organising logic were conducted against selected variables, and the results were used to examine the nature of coverage within the phases. Phase-specific percentages used each phase total as the denominator (Preparedness n=31, response n=72, recovery n=34).

Data were entered and processed in Microsoft Excel. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the overall coverage, while the cross-tabulations were synthesised to construct the distinct reporting profiles associated with each phase of the drought.

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from Egerton University's Scientific Research Ethics Committee (EUSREC), and a research permit was granted by the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). The study analysed published textual and visual material without reproducing the articles or photographs. Identification of authors or victims in the articles was not necessary to meet the study's objectives. As a result, no copyright or privacy rights were infringed by the study.

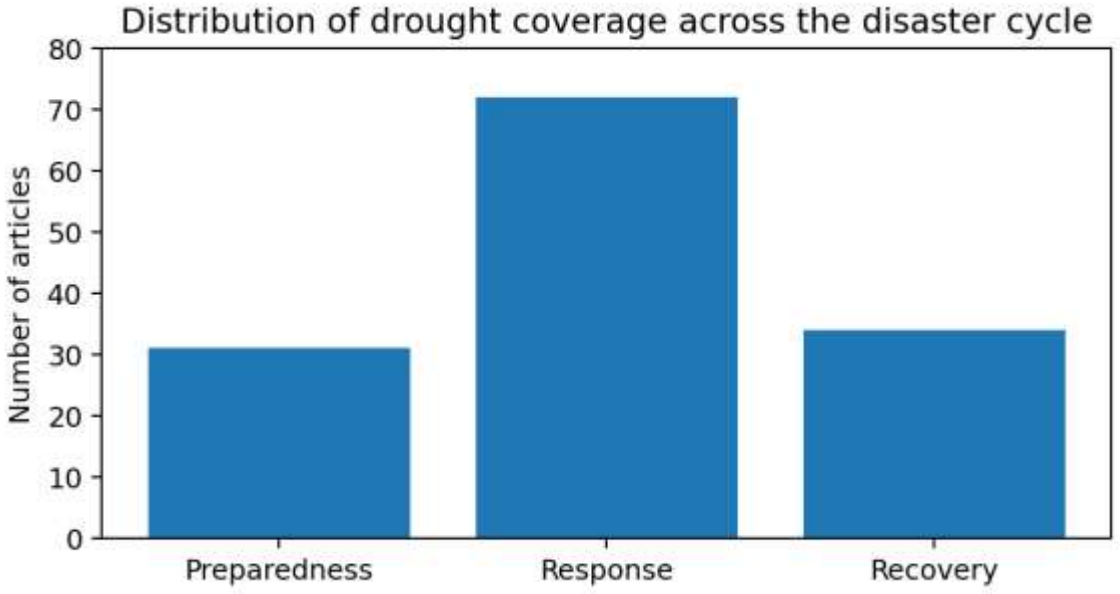
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distinctive Reporting Profiles Across the Disaster Management Cycle

The analysis of 137 articles published by the *Daily Nation* between 1st of June 2020 to 31st of May 2023 established the overall nature of drought reporting by the

newspaper in terms of volume and distribution of coverage. Coded into preparedness, response and recovery on the basis of their content, 31 articles (22.6%) addressed preparedness, 72 (52.6%) response and 34 (24.8%) recovery. These findings reveal that response accounted for more than half the coverage, while preparedness and recovery received comparatively less attention. This uneven distribution provided the basis for further examination into the profiles of coverage characterising each phase.

Response accounted for more than half the sample, while preparedness and recovery received comparatively less attention. This uneven distribution provided the basis for examining the reporting profiles of each phase.



n=137

Figure 1: Distribution of Drought Coverage Across the Disaster Cycle

Cross-tabulations examined article type, sources, length, visual salience and framing, primary focus, communication needs, reporting depth, information orientation, source adequacy and tone. The resulting profile highlights the evolving journalistic forms across the phases.

Preparedness Reporting Profile

The findings show preparedness as predominantly conducted through the opinion pages of the newspaper, with nearly half (48.4%, 15 of 31) the preparedness articles taking the form of opinions. The reporting relied mainly on "other" sources (38.7%), followed by government sources (29.0%) and experts (22.6%). More than half of the articles (54.8%, 17 of 31) were short, while 58.1 per cent (18 of 31) were not accompanied by an image. Where images were used, livelihood/economic framing predominated (22.6%), while no human suffering image was observed.

The dominant frame was the solution-oriented frame (51.6%), followed by the responsibility frame (25.8%). Food security was the primary focus (41.9%), with government response, livelihood and climate causes each accounting for 16.1 per cent. 64.5 per cent of the articles in this phase addressed communication needs to a great extent. This was assessed based on the extent to which articles addressed the phase-specific communication indicators outlined in the coding sheet. Articles were rated according to the number of applicable indicators they addressed, with higher coverage of these indicators reflecting greater fulfilment of communication needs of the corresponding phase.

Source adequacy presented a contrasting pattern, with 41.9 per cent of the articles classified as inadequately sourced. Adequacy was assessed in relation to variety and appropriateness of sources to the information presented. For instance, an opinion piece by a newspaper columnist proposing measures the government could take

to address drought was considered less adequately sourced than a feature drawing on a KALRO (Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation) professor piloting drought-resistant crop varieties.

The latter provided more authoritative and contextually relevant evidence through an appropriately qualified source. In terms of depth, most of the reporting demonstrated moderate depth (67.5%), while information was equally divided into general-action-oriented and specific-action-oriented forms, each accounting for 38.7 per cent.

Overall, preparedness reporting was opinion-led, brief and less visually invested, with comparatively limited source adequacy, despite predominantly solution-oriented framing and tone.

Response Reporting Profile

Response reporting constituted the largest proportion of the coverage, accounting for 52.6 per cent of all the articles. It was predominantly composed of news articles, with 77.8 per cent (56 of 72) classified as news. Government officers were the main source, accounting for 58.3 per cent of the response articles. In terms of length, the articles ranged from medium to long, with 37.5 per cent classified as long and 36.1 per cent as medium. Visual salience was relatively high, with 36.1 per cent of the articles having high visual salience and 34.7 per cent moderate visual salience.

Human suffering was the dominant visual frame (26.4%), followed by livelihood/economic (23.4%) and response (20.8%) frames. The dominant textual frame was the crisis frame (45.8%), while food security was the primary focus in 52.8 per cent of the articles. Communication needs were addressed to a moderate extent in 44.4 per cent of the articles and to a great extent in 34.7 per cent. Reporting depth was predominantly moderate (52.8%), although 43.1 per cent of the articles were in-depth. The nature of the information was mainly informational (41.7%) or general-action-oriented (44.4%). Source adequacy was generally moderate to very adequate, while negative tone predominated the coverage (48.6%).

Recovery Reporting Profile

Recovery reporting was predominantly conducted through feature articles, with 47.1 per cent (16 of 34) of the articles appearing as features. The reporting relied primarily on experts and local communities for sourcing, each accounting for 26.5% of the articles, followed by "other" sources at 23.5%. The articles tended to be longer, with 38.2 per cent (13 of 34) classified as long. Visual salience was high in 41.2% of the articles, while the dominant visual frame was livelihood/economic (35.3%).

The dominant textual frame was overwhelmingly solution-oriented (70.6%), while livelihood was the primary focus (41.2%). Communication needs were addressed to a very great extent in (44.1%) of the articles. Reporting was predominantly moderate in depth (50.0%) to in-depth (38.2%), while specific-action-oriented information accounted for (52.9%) of the articles. Source adequacy was moderate in 44.1% and very adequate in 38.2 per cent. Solution-oriented tone was particularly pronounced, occurring in (94.1%) of recovery articles.

Recovery reporting was distinguished by feature journalism, expert and community sourcing, longer articles, salient livelihood/economic visuals, solution-oriented framing and tone, and more specific action-oriented information.

Summary of the Reporting Profiles

Across the cycle, the *Daily Nation's* drought reporting assumed distinct profiles. Preparedness was largely opinion-led, shorter and less visually invested; response was news-based, government-sourced and crisis-oriented; recovery relied more on features, expert and community voices, and solution-oriented reporting.

The profiles also differed in information orientation: preparedness combined general and specific action-oriented information, response was more often informational or generally action-oriented, and recovery had the highest proportion of specific action-oriented information. These differences show that reporting varied by phase in form and communicative orientation, not simply volume.

Summary of Journalistic Profile Across the Disaster Management Cycle

Table 3: Presents the Aggregated, Synthesised Profiles of Preparedness, Response and Recovery Reporting on the 2020–2023 Drought in the Daily Nation

Characteristic	Preparedness	Response	Recovery
Editorial Form	Opinion	News	Features
Principal Sources	Other	Government	Experts & local communities
Length	Short	Medium-Long	Long
Visual Investment	Low	High	High
Dominant Frame	Solution	Crisis	Solution
Tone	Solution-Oriented	Negative	Solution-Oriented
Primary focus	Food security & climate causes	Food security	Livelihood
Extent communication needs were met	Great	Moderate–Great	Very great
Information Type	General–specific action	Informational	Specific action
Source Adequacy	Lower	Moderate–High	Moderate–High

Discussion

Preparedness Communication

Preparedness communication emerged as the least reported phase in this study, an observation that is consistent with disaster communication literature that suggests that disaster preparedness often struggles to attract media attention owing to its lack of immediacy and drama of visible impacts (Houston et al., 2019). The reporting in this phase relied primarily on opinion journalism, with many contributions attributed to newsroom editors, media trainees and teachers and coded as "other" sources. This limited diversity and appropriateness of sourcing may have the inadvertent effect of narrowing the evidential breadth of such communication (Gans, 1979).

While the predominance of opinion is not necessarily an indicator of inherent weakness of form, in this sample opinion-led preparedness reporting was often characterised by brief and less adequately sourced articles that tended to offer commentary or policy prescriptions rather than specific, substantiated guidance for audiences. This contrasts with the observations of Houston et al. (2019) that place an emphasis on the ability of preparedness journalism to empower audiences to better prepare for disaster.

Notably, while food security emerged as a key issue in this phase, a substantial amount of coverage explored the underlying climatic drivers of drought, attempting to offer a range of solutions. Taken together, the findings suggest that the newspaper found preparedness newsworthy enough to warrant attention but invested fewer editorial resources in reporting the phase. The unintended effect of this might be the constricting of engagement on preparedness, a situation that could be counterproductive to the longer-term goals of disaster management of risk reduction.

Response Communication

The findings returned an overwhelming profile for response reporting in which response was the most reported phase of the drought. Articles in this phase tended to benefit from the classic newsroom logics of news reporting, with news reports dominating the phase in terms of article type. In terms of framing, crisis emerged as the leading frame, with articles often employing a negative tone. These findings were remarkably consistent with the findings of Namaswa (2019), who found the reporting of drought in the Nation and Standard newspapers to rely on crisis framing and a negative tone. Additionally, the tendency for reporting to spike during response is consistent with the observations of (Houston et al. 2019) that media attention to disaster intensifies as impacts become visible.

Additionally, sourcing in this phase was dominated by government officers, reflecting newsroom traditions of reliance on official information regarding relief, policy and resource mobilisation. Such sources are preferred by newsrooms as they provide institutional authority. Their

predominance, however, may narrow perspectives from experts, civil society and affected communities.

In terms of visual salience, human suffering emerged as the leading visual frame of response. Images of people huddled at drying water points and people searching for food and water became the dominant visual frame. This imagery rendered the impacts of drought emotionally accessible to the audiences and reinforced urgency consistent with Messaris and Abraham's (2001) accounts of the role of visual framing in media.

In terms of length, response was characterised by medium to long articles, with prominent images sitting within the articles commanding the attention of the reader by being highly visually salient. This representation is consistent with the attributes of crisis reporting, suggesting that the newspaper framed the response as an unfolding crisis.

This approach aligns with event-oriented newsroom reporting observed by the Media Council of Kenya (2016), in which journalists are particularly good. This may explain why the response received greater visibility in the newspaper in relation to preparedness.

However, despite response being oriented towards impacts, the communication in this phase tended to be less oriented towards specific action for the audiences. A vast majority of the articles were either informational or general-action oriented in nature without clear information on what action could be taken and by whom. This means that while the phase provided visibility of the drought, this did not always translate into equally specific information about possible responses. As with other phases, food security remained the primary issue of focus.

Taken together, response phase reporting of the drought was effective in drawing the attention of the audiences to the crisis through news reports, official sourcing and salient images, even though the information's action orientation might have been limited. This illustrates the distinction between making drought visible and communicating actionable information that has the potential to extend agency.

Recovery Communication

Recovery reporting differed from the other phases and was concentrated largely in the newspaper's "Seeds of Gold" features section. Feature journalism framed drought more as a developmental and adaptation issue than as breaking news or a governance problem. This profile adds empirical detail to scholarship that identifies recovery and resilience as journalistic functions but says less about their characteristics in slow-onset disasters (Houston et al., 2019).

Longer, moderate-to-in-depth articles provided context and explanation, profiling farmers, climate-smart practices, irrigation and drought-resistant crops. This format allowed greater space for explaining why and how particular interventions could work.

Recovery's solution-oriented frame and tone contrasted with the crisis and loss emphasis of response, foregrounding resilience and adaptation.

Experts, including climate scientists and agricultural officers, and local communities were prominent sources. Expert accounts offered authoritative perspectives on recovery strategies, while community narratives conveyed lived adaptation experiences, connecting technical knowledge with local practice.

Recovery also had the highest proportion of specific action-oriented information. Combined with expert and community sourcing and solution-oriented framing, this reporting offered greater potential to explain both drought impacts and possible adaptation practices. Recovery thus differed from preparedness and response in that it demonstrated greater breadth and depth in the articles, as well as diversity of source and the utilitarian value of information communicated.

Phase-Specific Reporting and the Role of Journalism Across the Disaster Cycle

Taken together, the three profiles demonstrate that drought reporting was not uniform across the disaster cycle. The journalistic form fluctuated in terms of article type, sourcing, framing, adequacy, visual treatment, information, action-orientation and depth to correspond with the evolving phases of the drought cycle. Additionally, the volume and distribution of coverage assumed distinctive patterns with each phase of the drought cycle.

Notably, the journalistic function of the reporting also changed. Response reporting, for instance, documented the unfolding crisis, drawing the audience's attention to

the severity of the drought, its impacts and relief measures. Recovery assumed a more developmental role in which the newspaper highlighted adaptation strategies, experts' knowledge, foregrounded victim experiences and explored possible solutions. While preparedness received comparatively less attention, in terms of journalistic function, it assumed a more advocative role through commentary on policy actions that could be adopted to improve drought readiness.

These patterns and evolving functions are envisaged by disaster communication theory and literature (Seeger & Sellnow, 2013), which holds that crisis communication should evolve in function with disaster, to address the unique information needs presented by each phase. The findings of this study therefore reveal what an evolving journalistic function in a newsroom would actually look like. Notably, the distinct journalistic forms used by the newspaper across the phases did not offer equivalent communicative possibilities. This variation matters for disasters such as drought, because of their slow-onset nature. In this study, response coverage was overwhelmingly oriented towards visible impacts, which was important in creating awareness of the crisis in the minds of the audiences. Recovery reporting, in turn, was key in demonstrating journalism's potential to sustain attention on adaptation and resilience beyond crisis.

This study therefore highlights the importance of assessing the efficacy of disaster journalism beyond volume and distribution of coverage, suggesting that the examination of information, context, voices and form at different phases of a disaster is a prerequisite in determining the possibilities for action such communication makes possible.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study examined the *Daily Nation's* coverage of Kenya's 2020–2023 drought across preparedness, response and recovery. It established distinctive phase-specific reporting profiles that varied not only in coverage volume but also in journalistic form, sourcing, framing, depth and action orientation. The findings demonstrate the value of analysing disaster journalism across the cycle rather than treating coverage as a uniform response to disaster.

The study's contribution lies in showing how observable reporting characteristics can be examined in relation to changing communication needs. It highlights opportunities for more sustained anticipatory reporting and practical recovery communication, while recognising that content analysis establishes reporting potential rather than audience effects.

Recommendations: The findings of this study recommend the need for editors to sustain attention to disaster throughout the disaster cycle. The study also notes the need to strengthen preparedness reporting by deploying more newsroom resources such as space, time and visual salience to preparedness articles as well as improving source adequacy. Additionally, while response was the most reported phase of the drought, it was noted to offer the least actionable information. There is therefore a need to focus on the communication value of response messages in terms of their ability to empower audiences to act. Recovery reporting in this study offers a model for sustained adaptation and resilience reporting. However, there is a need to mainstream recovery reporting beyond the special features segment of the newspaper to sustain attention to adaptation and long-term disaster resilience.

Limitations of the Study

This study examined the coverage of one drought cycle across one media outlet. The findings therefore cannot be generalised across other drought cycles or multiple media outlets. Additionally, content analysis used in this study analysed published material independent of the newsroom decision-making realities that informed it. The study design also did not reflect audience effects following the consumption of media messages on drought. To overcome these limitations, future research could compare coverage across more media outlets, multiple drought cycles, and study audience effects of drought messages across the disaster cycle.

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