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Effect of Journalism on Higher Education Researches

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Abstract: The primary goal of journalism and education is to ensure a well-informed citizenry for socio-political democracy and development (Severin and Tankard, 1992; Cobley, 1996; Crotty, 1998). It is therefore imperative to increase the mutual understanding between educators and journalists regarding the critical role each plays in our society. In Kenya, the most accessible forms of print media by which journalists and educators communicate to the public are the newspapers. Fully-fledged print media in Kenya dates back to 1901 when the East African Standard Newspapers was established. With time, other media houses including the Nation media group, Kenya Times, and The People, among others emerged and grew to become prominent. The newspapers and magazines have helped not only to report news but also to advertise and disseminate different types of information to the public (Njau and Radeny, 1995). Although journalism and education have a shared goal, questions abound about how the technocrats in both fields can work together to achieve this goal.

Keywords: journalism, education, researches

Introduction

Already, a number of works on how journalists disseminate research in Kenya and other African countries exist (Kasoma, 1996; Krabill, 2001; Pratt, Ha, and Pratt, 2002). However, these works make limited reference to the policies that govern print media decisions to publish research findings, frequency of such publications, and particularly the relationship between the media houses and the academy where most of the research they publish is done. Despite the fact that most journalists often interpret and write about continuing and completed research in the newspapers, their accounts are sometimes dismissed as hearsay or simply unreliable (Pratt, Ha, and Pratt, 2002). Additionally, few works exist on the role of print media in dissemination of research in Kenya in the last five years. It is therefore sensible to investigate the role of the print media, particularly the newspapers, not only in breaking news about vital research findings but also unearthing leads to potential research gaps to enhance higher education.

Method

The relevant data for this study were collected from June to August 2003. Data were obtained by analyzing media stories on research as reported in Kenya's mainstream print media published since the year 2000. The selected daily newspapers were the *Nation*, *The Standard*, and the *Kenya Times*. The content analysis technique was used to collect and analyze the data. In content analysis, the investigator "examines the

communications that have been produced at times and places of his or her own choosing” (Servein and Tankard, 1992). The researcher, with aid of two research assistants, physically identified research articles published in three major newspapers in Kenya from the year 2000 to July 2004.

Modified coding categories based on those suggested by Pratt, Ha, and Pratt (2002) and Krishnan, Durra and Winkler (1997) were used. The categories were identified based on a cross-section of print media format of stories: News stories, commercials, commentaries, editorials, biographies/autobiographies, cover stories, fiction, first person accounts, informational stories, research accounts, interviews and obituaries. Since this study strongly leaned toward one category - research articles - only the related category and format types such as commentaries, editorials, personal accounts and cover stories were emphasized, particularly where they made reference to research articles previously published. The following criteria was used in selecting and including articles in the sample frame for analysis:

- Empirical data presented by research and research identification in article.
- Statistical data provided.
- Analytic commentaries carrying actual data or quoting directly from research reports.
- Provided data on higher education or a particular subject having to do with it.
- Information about the research methods used.
- Policy statements citing research as basis.

Results

Results of this study indicate that the newspapers indeed disseminated research, there was increasing trend in the publication of research articles, articles reported on a wide range of subjects, and journalists dominated in reporting research findings. In accordance with Parigian’s (1992), the subtitles used in this section were established based on the nature of data presented. The subtitles include: Trends of published research articles, subject areas reported in research, and authorship of research articles.

Discussion, trends, and policy implications for print media and higher education

The results of this study a substantial proportion of the research studies reported were conducted by higher education institutions or personnel, particularly by university professors and advanced graduate students. Table 3 three shows that a majority of the studies on the education sector overwhelmingly dealt with issues in basic and secondary education. This explains the relative dearth of research on higher education in Kenya, and therefore a weak base for policy formulation (Pratt, Ha, and Pratt, 2002).

Some of the issues that never featured in the newspapers included academic programs planning, employee welfare, and productivity of both academic and non-academic staff at institutions of higher education. For instance, although the newspapers ran numerous opinion polls on political topics and on issues of corruption, trade disputes, and politics, there was no single opinion poll on public views about higher education. Thus, journalists deal with nebulous audiences whose needs they must, however, meet. “The responsibility of editors is to strike the balance among the functions of informing, instructing, and entertaining. Different ones do this different ways to suit

what they believe to be the desires of the particular audiences” (Agee, Ault, and Emery, 1991).

Apparently, the irrevocability of the editors’ judgement in matters of publication renders it difficult to consider interest areas of the diverse audiences, particularly those interested in specialized research. However, as revealed in this study, the publication of articles written by non-journalist authors specialized in other fields is a trend that not only acknowledges the interdisciplinarity of journalism but also offers opportunity for dissemination of authoritative research work.

The Kenya government hardly responded directly, vide policy change and implementation, to research studies conducted in institutions of higher education. As a result, most research in higher education has largely remained a domain for scholarly discourse and academic articulation. Even at institutional level, limited effort has been made to utilize research on higher education to moot new ways of educating and conducting research. As Severin and Tankard (1992), and Agee, Ault, and Emery (1991) put it, effective communication using the mediums that elicit the greatest and most accurate impact is critical in disseminating information, including research findings.

It is thus not a wonder that policy in higher education, as in other levels of education in Kenya has been driven, to some extent, by media advocacy part of which is research-based. In Kenya for instance, two Education Commission Reports, the 1988 Kamunge Education Report and the 1994 Mungai Education Report brought positive reforms in education in terms of access and funding (Republic of Kenya 1988; Akala, 2001, 2002). Both commissions were established following vigorous media advocacy. One of the celebrated reasons of this success was the fact that the Commissions carefully weaved the local interest with the global demands made by IMF/World Bank to ensure that the resulting recommendations and policy comfortably located Kenya in the global map of higher education (Sawai, 2002). The commissions’ findings and the resultant policy changes on one hand and the suggestions made by other IMF/World Bank-related research were greatly publicized and amplified in the print media (Akala, 2003). The unsaid part of this success story is the impact the print media (newspapers) had on educators and the general public – the providers and consumers of higher education. Nonetheless, Njau and Radeny (1995) observe that NGOs operating in Kenya regarded independent print media as credible sources of information for policy makers.

Generally, the results of this study underscore the importance of journalism, particularly print media, which is most accessible to Kenyans has, in helping to agitate and inform the government on issues of critical importance. Further, the results also reveal new trends that describe the intricate ways print journalism works to disseminate research. One of the new trends in print journalism in Kenya is the emergence of critical debate in newspapers that stimulates and strengthens research and research priorities. For instance during the analysis of the newspaper articles, it became clear that whenever research on crucial topics such as participation of women in higher management (Bendera, et. al., 1998; Akala, 2000), and the management of HIV/AIDS were reported, they triggered analytic debates in subsequent issues of the

same paper and the other newspapers. In most cases, journalists, subject professionals, and the lay public participated by publishing analytic pieces that questioned or supported the research findings reported in these areas. However, of greatest interest to this researcher was the colossal number of research gaps and priorities that emerged from the media discourses that ensued. The growing quality of debate and research in the print media has tended to increase the credibility of these publications even within academic realms where certain newspapers are now accepted as credible sources. This is a major but deserving policy shift in the conduct of research and publication of academic research.

Another new trend in print journalism is the steadily growing position of the daily newspapers as the central market place for research ideas. Although the credibility of journals remains invincible within the academic circles, evidence from the journalistic print media in Kenya suggests that newspapers take precedence in disseminating research findings. For instance, while identifying the numerous research gaps, conducting, and reporting research findings within the realms of the academy – unfamiliar to most ordinary Kenyans – is fathomable, it is amazing how this is simplified and undertaken in a short time through the journalistic print media, making the researchers' work less laborious. Referred research journal articles take long in the editorial bureaucracies such that they are often overtaken by other research by the time they are published and disseminated. Thus the new trend of research revealed in the print media strengthens it as the "ideas market-place" where producers (researchers) and consumers (education and public policy-makers, professionals, lay public, and interest groups) exchange ideas on how research can better address their crucial needs at overwhelming speed. This trend clearly carries policy implications not only about the editorial pace in academic journals but also the entire organizational structure of agencies and professional groups that publish higher education research.

The analysis of research-based articles in Kenyan newspapers also reveals a new trend where a steadily increasing number of researchers publish their work as journalistic pieces for quick dissemination and consumption by the wider public. It seems that this is a strategy to ensure that the findings are not only used timely, but also that their worth is not overtaken by new research (Agee, Ault, and Emery 1991; Kasoma 1996). The publication of individual researchers own research as revealed in Table 3 is a major shift in the policy of professional journalism. However, it not only adds to the newspapers' credibility but also it works out the new trend towards enjoining research professionals from higher education to journalism in ways that mutually benefit them. Further, it creates great advantages for the public through immediate access to new research and involvement in its discourses. Needless to say government bureaucrats and technocrats studiously watch journalistic print media research reports and debates to understand the new trends and concerns of the society (Njau and Radeny 1995). For these reasons the bureaucrats and technocrats form task forces that originate numerous decisions and policy recommendations built on analysis of authentic research pieces reported in newspapers, alongside other sources.

Another growing trend in Kenya's print journalism is the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary reporting strategy. Thus between the years 2000 and 2004 the newspapers maintained a largely multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach in publishing research. This is less common with referred journals where specialized or very closely related fields appear in one issue. As indicated in Table 2, research in a wide range of topics, including health, politics, education, agriculture, conflict, and economy, among others were reported.

Table 3 indicated that professional journalists still dominated in the reporting of empirical research. But the substantial inclusion of reports written by non-journalist professionals and organizations revealed the divide existing between journalism and other researchers. In essence, that fact that 51.2% of the journalists' reports were research studies conducted by academics from tertiary institutions explains the inescapable relationship between journalists and researchers. The study also revealed that print media appreciated contributions from professional researchers and professional organizations, among them higher education researchers. Equipping higher education researchers with journalistic skills can strengthen this trend. This can be achieved through further education and training, with the creation and implementation of policies to guide collaboration among different professionals and disciplines. The trained "researcher-journalists" would then form part of the editorial staff at media houses, thereby adding credibility to research articles that feature in newspapers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study leave no doubt that journalism enhances dissemination of higher education research. However, the discussion in this paper did not, by any means, seek to extol the credibility of newspapers beyond referred journals. Rather, it has clarified that the editorial traditions of referred journals and the commensurate bureaucratic delays are among the challenges that these journals face in the wake of the fast and popular print journalism. The results presented in this paper indicate that print journalism forms the complex, but often neglected, channel through which education policy-makers, educators, consumers, and other non-partisan enthusiasts of higher education can participate and/or be sensitized about the innovations and progress in higher education. Accordingly, there is need to strengthen the role of the newspapers in disseminating research not only from and about higher education but also many other fields and levels of education. Only then will we make research data readily available to all for analysis and use in education and public policy.

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