

# **Framing the Peril, March 2020: How Kenyan and Ugandan Media reported about their first COVID-19-cases**

by  
Johannes Wolf,  
KAS Research Assistant, 2020

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60 Hume Road  
Dunkeld,  
2196  
Johannesburg



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## Framing the Peril

March 2020: How Kenyan and Ugandan Media reported about their First COVID-19-cases

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Kenya confirmed its first COVID-19 case on Friday, 13 March which made the country the first East-African nation hit by the pandemic. As the spread of the disease continued around the continent, it seemed only a question of time until it reached neighbouring Uganda. There, measures were taken in advance – for example by closing schools from 20 March onwards, until its head of state Yoweri Museveni eventually had to announce the first case within the country on Sunday, 22 March. By 1 April, the country had 33 confirmed cases according to the World Health Organization (WHO), Kenya had 50.

As the comparatively low numbers show, both East African nations were still in the early stages of an epidemic likely to grow. Nevertheless, these developments seemed only a few weeks behind those in Europe, East Asia and North America. With a rising number of cases in both states, the media's coverages grew as well and governmental measures became stricter and stricter. Two days after the outbreak in Kenya, its government closed schools. The next week, passenger flights were banned, which Uganda did as well the same day, 22 March. In addition, the country closed its borders in general. Kenya's president Uhuru Kenyatta announced a dusk to dawn curfew starting from 26 March, heavily enforced by the police authority. Uganda surpassed that with a 14 days general curfew starting on 31 March. All of these governmental actions were widely discussed in a media landscape struggling with only partial freedom of the press. Journalists in both countries had to work under circumstances hardly imaginable for colleagues in western nations. However, that is a good reason to take a deeper look into the work of Eastern African media. How did they cover the first COVID-19 cases in both Uganda and Kenya?

Kenya's Daily Nation published 38 articles about the virus online on 13 March alone, the day of the first confirmed case in the country. Across the border, New Vision reported about Uganda's first case nine days later with nine articles while the private broadcasting company NTV uploaded 18 reports about the subject on YouTube the same day. Such a large amount of

articles and reports on the subject makes universally valid judgements about the media coverage difficult. Necessarily, we have to narrow our sample:

Firstly, we have to set a time frame. For this purpose, we set the 13 March 2020 as the starting point of our investigated period. Although both countries were affected indirectly by the pandemic and its economic consequences in the period before, this day has to be considered a turning point since the Coronavirus hit East Africa directly for the first time – thus turned an abstract threat into a concrete one. We close our time frame on 31 March, the first day of the Ugandan lockdown since this measure can be regarded as the climax of increasing constraints to daily life. In between, we have a two-and-a-half-week time period to look at.

Secondly, we curtail our view on print media and further on two major newspapers from each country. We choose the *Daily Monitor* and the *New Vision* from Uganda on the one hand and Kenyan *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* on the other. While *Monitor* and *Nation* belong to the same private publishing house, the Kenyan *Nation Media Group*, *Vision* and *Standard* are both owned by partly state-owned companies. All those newspapers are published in English and are therefore easy to study, especially since they put a large number of articles about the subject online within our timeframe: 2,054 at all. Even though this sample may not be complete, it is large enough to allow conclusions to be drawn about all the publications. On the other hand, web releases by major broadcasting companies are most commonly either short clips or hours of not-anymore-livestreams. Therefore, it is much more difficult to do empirical studies based on the material we find online.

However, even with these two restrictions we had to look at a sketchy number of articles, as mentioned in the paragraph above. It should be noted that most articles are simple factual reports about case numbers and governmental measures around the world. At this point, I should acknowledge as well that all the newspapers mentioned reported about the cases themselves appropriately – they “did a good job”; the interesting part is the comparatively small number of editorials, commentaries or similar opinion style forms. Accordingly, I want to concentrate our research on opinion pieces since they give a certain structure to the raw body of information – they are *framing the peril*. Basically, this paper is about the way Ugandan and Kenyan print journalists estimated the development of the new coronavirus in their countries and around the world in mid and late March 2020.

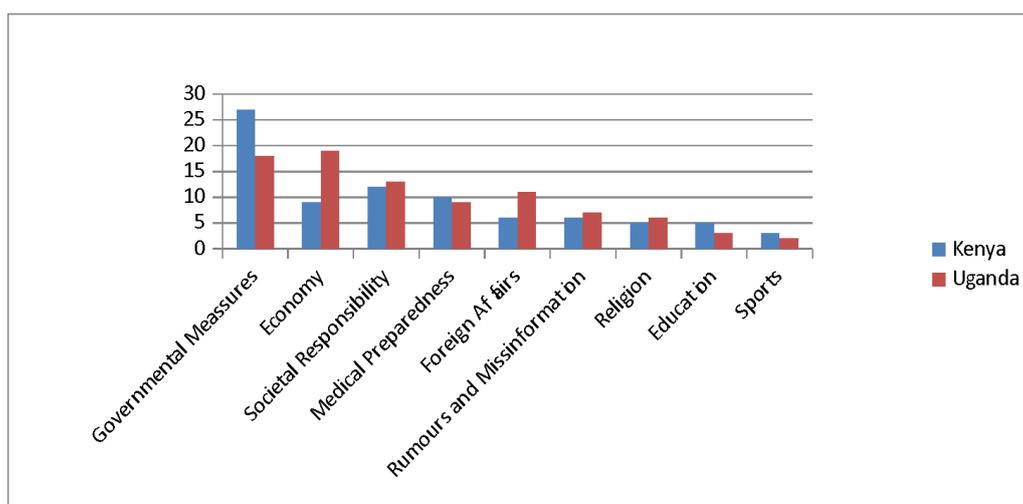
Before anything could be said about this, some empirical studies had to be done. Therefore, as many articles as possible from the four newspapers mentioned were collected. Such a task was the easiest for the Ugandan *New Vision* since its search form was not limited to 100 articles as those of the other publications. Therefore, further articles were found by using a search engine, sending a search request for every single day within the time frame. In the end, 617 *Daily Nation* articles were found, 646 were published in *The Standard*, 346 for the *Daily Monitor* and 445 for the *New Vision*. As mentioned above, these figures are in themselves of limited value, but they can represent a corpus *pars-pro-toto*. For example, the overall lower number of Ugandan articles in the corpus is due to the lower number of articles published before 22 March. After the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the country, this rises sharply to the same level as in the Kenyan newspapers.

However, the hermeneutic part of this study takes place. In a first step, the total number of articles was divided into wire service articles provided by news agencies or foreign newspapers, and native releases. It was found that wire stories in both Kenyan journals made up almost a third of all publications: 31.77% for the *Nation* and 32.97% for the *Standard*. Delightfully, the Ugandan media are considerably different already at this point, as the percentage for the *Daily Monitor* is at 22.83%. This gap is even greater for *New Vision*, where a majority of 51.01% of all articles published consisted of wire articles.

In a second step, a partial sample is formed from this body of 2054 articles, which includes all opinion pieces. Usually these are indicated by special labels such as *opinion* or *commentary*. However, some of them appear in editorials or letters as well, which make this task much harder. Altogether, 172 Opinion pieces were found within the entire sample, 83 for Kenya (*Daily Nation* 39 and *Standard* 44) and 88 for Uganda (*Daily Monitor* 57 and *New Vision* 31). Therefore, as the differences are small, there does not appear to be any identifiable correlation at this point. Such an impression is reinforced by the fact that in Kenya the newspaper considered more pro-government published more commentaries, while in Uganda the opposite is true. Since this raw body is obviously not meaningful as such, the existing partial corpus must also be further subdivided.

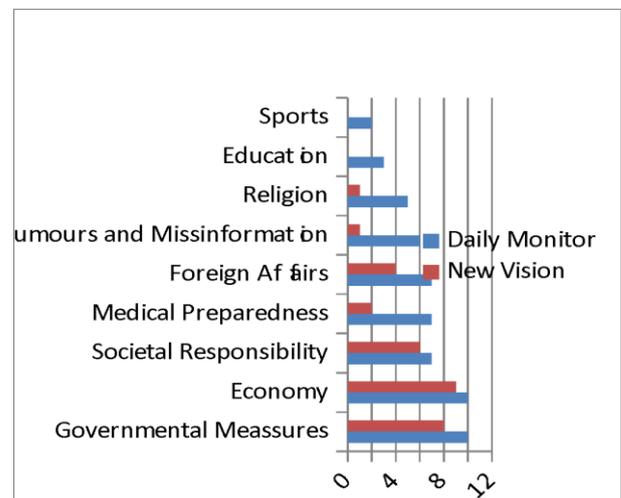
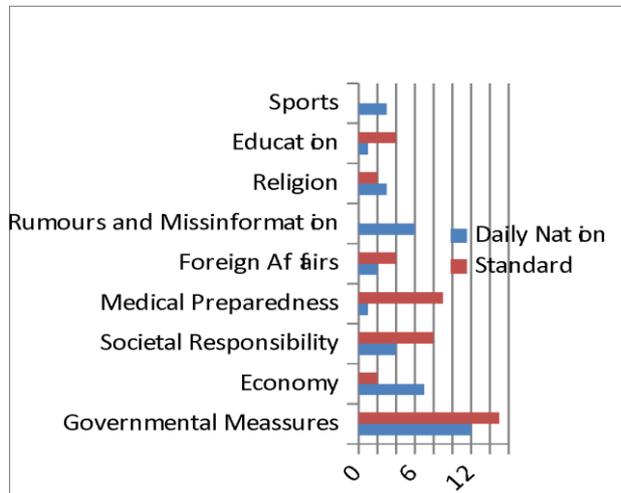
In a third step, a number of subcategories in which the individual articles are to be classified are created to this end. Such categories are Religion, Rumours and Misinformation,

Economy, Foreign Affairs, Governmental Measures, Medical Preparedness, Education and Sports. For obvious reasons, it is not always easy to clearly assign an article to just one category. For example, a development in foreign affairs typically touches a country's economy and vice versa. Therefore, it should be specified that comments on the economic situation fall into the first category if they concern a group of states, but into the second if they refer to the situation in either Kenya or Uganda. A similar problem arises when a distinction must be made between Governmental measures, medical preparedness and societal responsibility. In this paper, the first category therefore includes all opinions on concrete steps such as hygiene recommendations, travel restrictions or curfews. On the other hand, political decisions that have influenced the state of the health care system in the past are classified in the category Medical Preparedness. The third category, on the other hand, includes comments which deal with the effects of the State measures on the entire society or single social classes. For the remaining groups it is easier to differentiate. Since comparatively few articles deal with questions of education, faith or sport, these can be grouped into separate categories without further fragmentation. A comparatively small number of articles deal in a metajournalism-like approach with rumours and misinformation and has to form its own category as well. If all articles are assigned to one of these categories, the following distribution results.



As Graph 1 shows, the distribution of opinion pieces for major subjects is similar for both countries as the most popular topics remain the same. Nevertheless, the diagram shows one main difference as well: Ugandan Newspapers reported significantly less frequently on governmental measures, but, however, more broadly on Economy which constitutes the biggest

category. Another clear gap can be seen on foreign affairs, which were discussed more commonly on the Ugandan side of the border as well. Another interesting finding is the huge number of opinion pieces on religious subjects as the topic was featured more frequently than education, especially since most of those articles actually deal with theological questions: Is the virus god’s punishment? Does prayer help? What do Islamic authorities think about the crisis? On the other hand, not a single article discussed political steps influenced by religion, such as the refusal of Tanzania’s head of state John Magufuli to close churches and places of worship in late March.



If we look at breakdowns within the countries, further observations can be made. Firstly, it is striking that rumours and misinformation were almost exclusively discussed in Newspapers who are regarded as critical of the government. Apart from that, the similarities between *Nation* and *Monitor* are noticeably small, even though they belong to the same publishing group - apart from the fact that both considered sports issues worthy of discussion. For most categories, however, no correlation can be established with the country, the individual newspaper or its positioning in relation to the authorities. Medical preparedness, for example, is broadly discussed in *The Standard* and the *Daily Monitor*, but less frequently reported in *Daily Nation* and *Vision*. Similar, though less pronounced, distributions are obtained for Governmental Measures, Societal Responsibility, Foreign Affairs and Education. If we take a further look into what the articles are actually saying, it does not surprise a lot that *Monitor* and *Nation* are way more sceptical about the measures of their government as the rivalling newspapers are. Ugandan

*Monitor* for instance published three commentaries criticising either the administration's plans or communication, the *New Vision* not a single one. However, it is way more interesting that Kenyan newspapers seem to be way more critical, as six of such articles are found in the *Daily Nation* and yet three in the *Standard*.

In summary, the opinion pieces are dominated by the same topics in both countries with the Ugandan focus on economy as the main difference. Worth mentioning are the importance of religion and the lack of reporting due to Rumours and Misinformation in *Standard* and *Vision* as well. The task of the research was the preparation of figures to compare the reporting of two countries using the examples of major newspapers. This paper thus provides an empirical basis for later in-depth investigations.

*Johannes Wolf is a KAS scholar who studies Language, Literature and Cultural studies for a Bachelors degree at Technische Universität Dresden. Focussing on politics and foreign affairs, he works as a cub reporter for local newspapers and radio stations. He was a research assistant in the KAS Media Africa offices in Johannesburg in February and March 2020.*