

ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2022 KZN FLOODS

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Abstract: Literature exists that studies media coverage of natural disasters. The media has the potential to influence how governments react to disasters, how emergency services handle disasters, and how people receive and react to the news of disasters. However, the media sometimes sensationalizes the news about the disasters and focus on other manifestations such as panic, looting, shock, emerging heroes and villains, human conflict, and suffering. This study aims to analyze the media coverage of the 2022 floods in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa. In particular, the study seeks to evaluate if there was media coverage of the floods and what the contents of the coverage were. The study used content analysis to examine the presence of KZN floods from three selected online newspapers, focusing on whether the floods were covered, and which issues or themes dominated the reporting of the floods. The aim here was to examine the role that the media played during this disaster in South Africa. Content analysis was used to note the number of stories covered during the KZN floods in the media, the key themes that dominated the coverage of the floods and factors that influenced the media coverage of the floods. The selected online newspapers are News24, Independent Online (IOL) and TimesLive. These newspapers were purposively selected because of their wider national readership, the ideology of the newspaper, strong online presence, and type/style of reporting. Based on the above-presented data, we argue that there was sufficient coverage of the KZN floods in South African media. The study also discovered that the following issues or stories dominated the reporting/coverage of floods: disaster management, casualties, relief measures, the role of the government, business interests, the role of opposition parties, destruction of infrastructure, and effects on social life.

Keywords: Natural disasters, Media coverage, South African media, Online media, News24, News framing

Introduction

The current study aims to analyze the media coverage of the 2022 floods in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa. In particular, the study seeks to evaluate if there was media coverage of the floods and how the floods were covered. The media under focus are online newspapers. And the timeframe of the study is 2 weeks, 11th to the 25th of April 2022.

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The province of KZN is well-known for experiencing natural disasters occasionally. From the 11th to the 13th of April 2022 the province experienced strong rainfall that killed 448 people, displaced over 40 000 people, and destroyed over 12 000 houses (Reliefweb, 2022). The floods left many people without food and clean water, health care, and psychological first aid. Consequently, the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster due to the severity of the flood.

Literature exists that studies media coverage of natural disasters (Benet and Daniel, 2002; Ewart and McLean, 2015; Dhakal, 2018). For example, Le Roux (2014) explains that the media is an essential component of disaster management. Dhakal (2018) explains that it is vital to note that the role of the media during natural disasters is to report the ongoing socioeconomic realities of the disasters and how they affect people. Other disasters such as war have also been a main focus of media coverage. For example, the Syrian war has been covered differently by the Arab press in Saudi Arabia and the Tehran press in Iran (Yousaf, Khan, Alvi, 2020). Mass media have presented diverse interpretations of those events which occurred in this war-torn area. Scholars have also studied the role of media in covering the COVID-19 disruption in developing countries. In countries such as Zimbabwe, the media was used as a platform to access news about the virus, its origins and implications for the country (Tarakini, Mwedzi, Manyuchi, and Tarakini, 2021). Therefore, the role of the news media during times of crisis cannot be underestimated. The media has the potential to influence how governments react to disasters, how emergency services handle disasters, and how people receive and react to the news of disasters.

However, the media sometimes sensationalizes the news about the disasters and focus on other manifestations such as panic, looting, shock, emerging heroes and villains, human conflict, and suffering (Dhakal, 2018). But other times the media plays an important role by focusing on cultural, educational, financial, historical, political, and social aspects of the disaster (Durfee, 2005). These views inform the aim of this paper, it is crucial to examine the ways media respond during times of crisis. Therefore, the paper aims to perform a content analysis of online newspaper articles in South Africa, to study if they covered the floods in KZN and how they covered the floods.

The role of the media is evident even in times of crisis. Hadland (2010) points out that the media's role is undeniable, and the media continues to play a powerful role in shaping, informing and being the voice of the public in times of crisis. During any time of crisis, Mirbabaie, Bunker, Stieglitz, Marx and Ehnis, (2020) argued that citizens are normally under a lot of distress, and they need a platform to access information about what is happening around them and how they can better avoid the crisis. This was largely seen during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic where the media, especially through social media, played a significant role in informing the public. Even though social media created a lot of misinformation, scaremongering, or trivialisation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mirbabaie, et al., 2020), the role of social media and the media was evident in informing and educating the public. Different government departments around the world, including South African government departments, used their social media platforms to host a live broadcast of any event and shared information from their social media accounts to ensure that there is no misinformation.

It is through the trust and the symbiotic relationship, identified by media scholars such as Fourie (2018), Croteau and Hoynes (2019), that makes the role of the media is important in times of crisis. The paper explores how the media covered the floods and whether there was agenda setting or framing of certain issues about the floods by the media. With the media being at the centre of people's

lives and social media making it easy for issues, such as the floods, to be spread out of proportion, it is important for media scholars to constantly study the work of the media to provide guidance when the media becomes a player and a referee.

Agenda Setting and News Framing Theory

The agenda-setting and news framing theory provided a clear lens to understanding how the media covers news and issues such as floods. Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, (2009) define agenda setting in the media as the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently with the result that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others. This suggests that the more media cover a certain issue, such as the KZN April floods, the more it becomes important to people. It also means that even when people are not paying attention to a certain issue but due to the media's frequent coverage of the issue, it soon starts to be important to more people. McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver, (2014:782) pointed out three levels of agenda setting and for this study, the first level provides a clear understanding of the impact of the media on the public agenda regarding the prominence of issues, political figures, and other objects of attention. The researchers found this theory relevant in exploring the possible agenda setting in the media coverage of the KZN April floods.

As indicated above, the study also employed the media framing theory as its main theoretical lens to understand the media coverage, especially of the mentioned newspapers, of the 2022 KZN April floods. Chong and Druckman, (2007) argued that the framing theory's premises are that one can view issues from different angles due to the audience's ability to construct their meaning and this results in multiple values or considerations. "Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue", (Chong, and Druckman, 2007: p.104). In communication, framing according to Tuchman 1997 in Chong, and Druckman (2007) organizes everyday reality by proving meaning to an ongoing event which provides suggestions and certain interpretations of the event. This suggests that framing in the media can shape one's perspective about an event such as the 2022 KZN April floods. Scholars, such as Scheufele, (1999) have argued differently on media's effects on its audience and one argument relative to this study is the idea that media, through framing, results in the contraction of social reality. Even though, scholars such as Cappella and Jamieson (1997) in De Vreese, (2005: p.52) argued that "frames activate knowledge, stimulate stocks of cultural morals and values, and create contexts." Arguments by De Vreese, (2005) suggest a positive side of the framing theory and one finds it important therefore to use the theory to evaluate whether the three mentioned newspapers did frame certain stories of the floods in their coverage. The theory also helps in evaluating whether the news framed these stories for a positive side or for pushing a certain agenda.

Methodology

The study used content analysis to examine the presence of KZN floods from three selected online newspapers, focusing on whether the floods were covered, and which issues or themes dominated the reporting of the floods. The aim here was to examine the role that the media played during this disaster in South Africa. The timeframe of the study is 2 weeks, 11th to the 25th of April 2022. According to Krippendorff (2004: p.21), content analysis is a methodology that provides the

researcher with “knowledge...insights and representations of facts and a practical action guide”. This explanation makes content analysis a valuable tool for gaining knowledge about the role of media during times of crisis as the methodology gives the author underlying knowledge about the issues under study.

Sampling

The selected online newspapers are News24, IOL and TimesLive. These newspapers were purposively selected because of their wider national readership, the ideology of the newspaper, strong online presence, and type/style of reporting. Sampling was obtained from these newspapers. During the studied timeframe, out of 253 stories done by IOL, 202 were about the floods, 134 stories done by News24, 100 were about the floods and 182 stories done by TimesLive, 118 were about the floods. These statistics were obtained through a keyword search of stories that have “KZN floods” on the websites of each newspaper. We excluded editorials, commentaries and opinion pieces from this data collection. The authors studied these stories to unpack how the floods were reported in the media and the issues that dominated the reporting.

All articles are taken from a corpus of online media institutions from South Africa which were available on their websites. The articles analyzed were written by different journalists over a period of two weeks. We only focused on online news institutions and excluded print newspapers. The analysis of the news articles only focused on the content of the media coverage and not the linguistic aspects of the coverage, that is, how the news was covered.

The sample selection was motivated in part by the paper’s objective to study the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods, where the media is always criticized for negative reporting. As such, we opted for this topic to see how the media covered the KZN floods. We compiled a random sample of news articles for two weeks to collate all articles pertaining to the KZN floods.

Findings

On its website, News24 (2020) states that it is South Africa’s leading source of trusted news, opinion, business, sports and lifestyle content. News24 is owned by Media24, South Africa’s leading media company, with interests in digital media and services, newspapers, magazines, e-commerce, book publishing, print and distribution (News24, 2020). IOL’s website states it is one of South Africa’s leading news and information websites bringing millions of readers breaking news and updates by focusing on politics, current affairs, business, lifestyle, entertainment, travel, sport, motoring, and technology (IOL, 2022a). IOL is owned by Sagarmartha Technologies Ltd, a subsidiary of the Sekunjalo Group. TimesLive is South Africa’s second-biggest news website, published and owned by Arena Holdings. It provides breaking news, analysis, sports, entertainment, and lifestyle seven days a week (TimesLive, 2022a).

Based on the findings of this study, we argue that there was sufficient coverage of the KZN floods in South African media. 80% of stories done by IOL were about the floods, 75% of stories in News24 covered the floods and 65% of stories in TimesLive were about the floods. The graph below shows a depiction of these statistics.

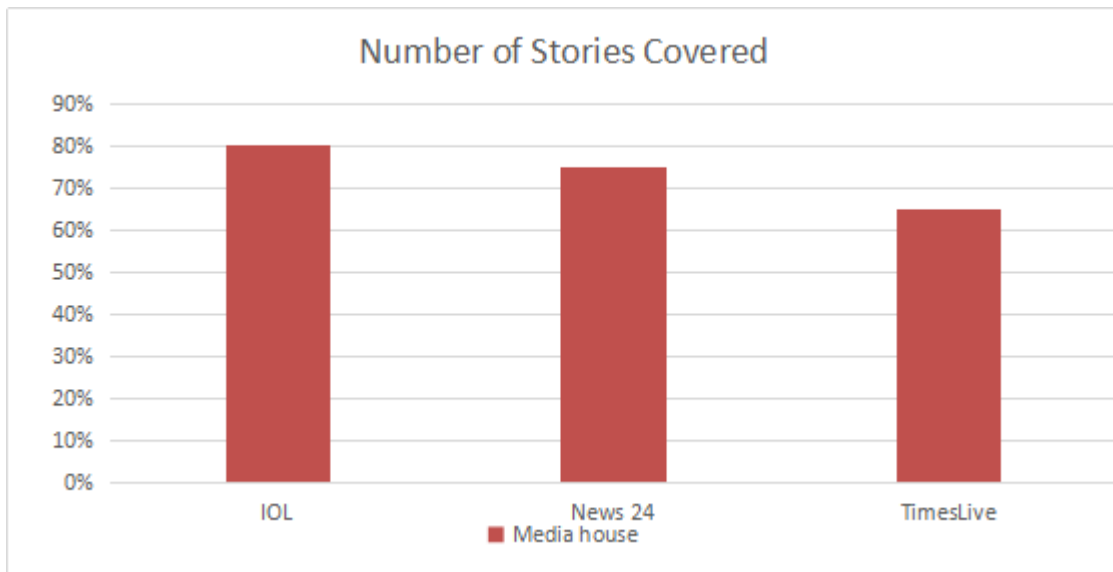


Figure 1: The number of covered stories by media houses (in percentage)

The study also discovered that the following issues or stories dominated the reporting/coverage of floods:

<i>Casualties</i>
<i>Relief measures</i>
<i>The role of the government</i>
<i>Business interests</i>
<i>The role of opposition parties</i>
<i>Destruction of infrastructure</i>
<i>Effects on social life</i>

Figure 2: Themes that dominated the coverage of the KZN floods

Casualties

One of the themes that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the casualties caused by the floods. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about casualties were covered by each online media.

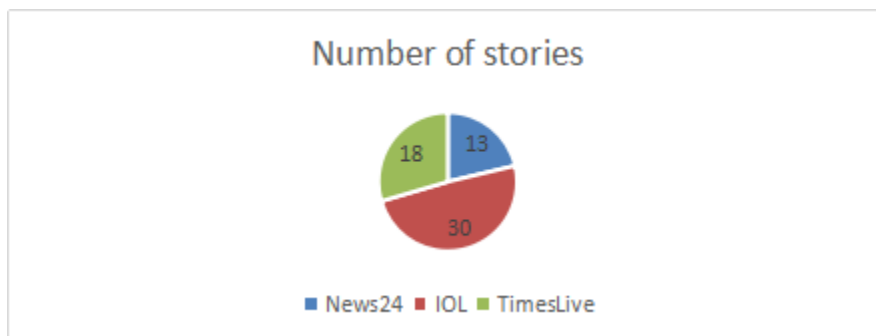


Figure 3: The number of casualty stories covered by each media house.

The data presented in figure 3 shows that IOL had more stories about causality, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

It is inevitable that the media coverage of the 2022 KZN floods included a focus on casualties caused by the floods. News24 (2022b) quoted the former premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Sihle Zikalala stating that “about 17 438 households were affected, 435 people lost their lives. We have 54 people reported missing. About 278 remain homeless, and 55 others were injured”. In another article News24 (2022c) reported that “the devastating KZN floods, which place in April 2022, claimed the lives of more than 400 people and, according to News24, have displaced more than 40 000 people – of which 7000 now remain in shelters”.

In an article by IOL (2022g) it is reported that “the recent floods in KwaZulu-Natal have caused major devastation to homes, and businesses, and left many families shattered through the loss of lives”. Another article reporting on the casualties that were experienced by the basic education sector stated that “at least 57 pupils died and five are missing. One teacher and food handler also died in the floods” (IOL, 2022I).

TimesLive’s (2022f) reporting also focused on the casualties caused by the floods. One article reported that “KwaZulu-Natal police commissioner Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi said police found a lot of bodies during the floods and were under the impression that all the people had died as a result of flooding”.

Effects on social life

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the effects of the floods on social life. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about the effects of the floods on social life were covered by each online media.

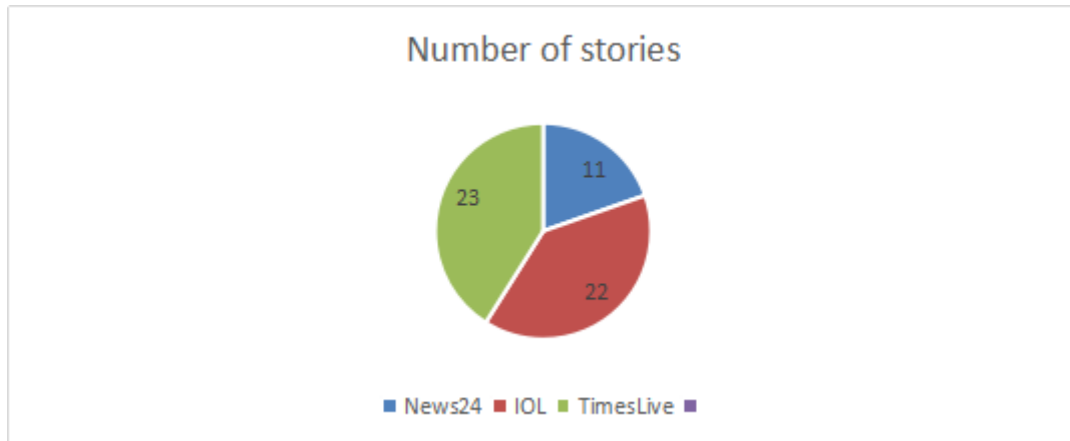


Figure 4: The number of effects on social life stories covered by each media house

The data presented in figure 4 shows that TimesLive had more stories about the flood's effects on social life, followed by IOL then followed by News24.

The coverage of the floods on News24 showed that the newspaper also focused on how the floods affected the everyday social lives of the people. An article by News24 (2022f) reported that due to the floods in one village, "a school was indefinitely closed after being flooded...Debris – including bricks, furniture, clothing materials, stationery, household items and electrical appliances – from the destroyed houses was scattered around the flowing stream". Another article reported that "several areas are inaccessible – hampering the delivery of relief aid – after bridged and roads cracked under the weight of the worst floods to have hit the country in living memory" (News24, 2022g).

The data also showed that the stories covered were also dominated by how the floods affected social life. An article by IOL (2022h) reported that "an estimated 45 000 people are currently 'displaced' and in need of food, water and shelter".

TimesLive reported on how the social lives of school learners were affected. In one article TimesLive(2022j) reported that "the minister said the department explored teaching and learning options for schools that have been severely affected, including remote learning". The article further reports that these options would not be able to cover earners in primary schools. According to the article, "she [minister of education] said this option could not be implemented for primary schools, which has prompted the department to swiftly implement efforts to reopen schools" (TimesLive, 2022j).

Destruction of infrastructure

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the destruction of infrastructure. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about the destruction of infrastructure were covered by each online media.

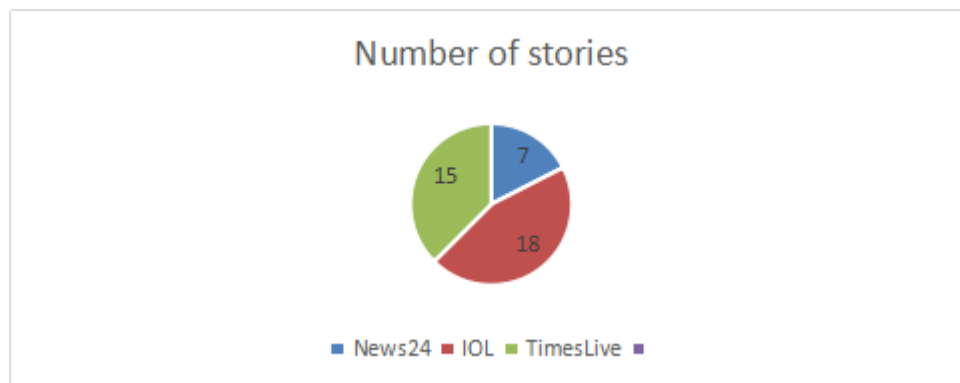


Figure 5: The number of destruction of infrastructure stories covered by each media house

The data presented in figure 5 shows that IOL had more stories about the destruction of property, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

The stories covered included how the floods destroyed the public infrastructure. News24 wrote an article focusing on the effects of floods on public infrastructure. The article stated that “nice sections of the KwaZulu-Natal passenger railway have been severely damaged by recent floods” (News24, 2022a). Another article reported that “national Department of Basic Education spokesperson Eljah Mhlanga said that of the 630 schools that were affected by the disaster, 124 suffered damaged and 72 are inaccessible” (News24e).

IOL (2022f) reported that “Ali Sablay from Gift of the Givers said when the disaster occurred in KZN, one of the most critical needs was clean, drinking water”. Another article reported that “from early estimates, at least 14 000 homes have been damaged or destroyed. Infrastructure damaged to water, electricity, and sewage systems will amount to billions of rand” (IOL, 2022h).

The collected data also showed that TimesLive’s reporting of the floods had a focus on how the effects of the floods on infrastructure. In one article TimesLive (2022e) reported how the floods destroyed public property. The article reported that “Marine operations were largely stalled by debris caused by the floods”. Furthermore, the article also reported that “Bayhead Road, the main access road to the container terminals [at the harbour] was severely damaged by the floods” (TimesLive, 2022e).

Relief measures

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the relief measures. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about the relief measures were covered by each online media.

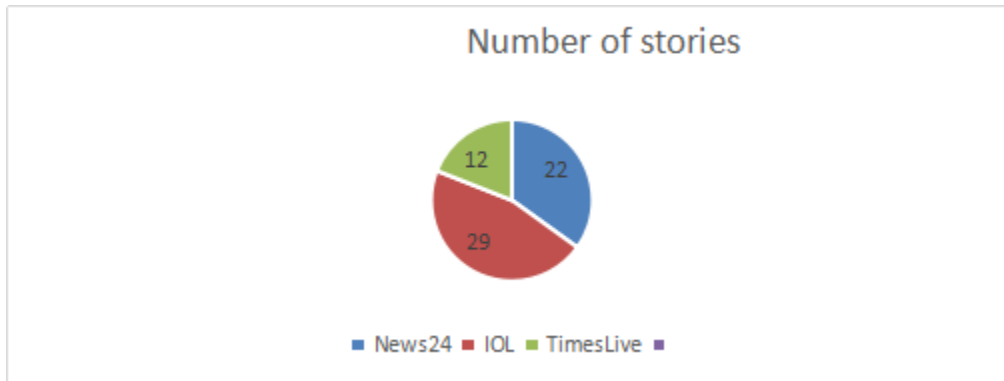


Figure 6: The number of relief measures stories covered by each media house

The data presented in figure 6 shows that IOL had more stories about the relief measures, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

The collected data also shows that the media focused a lot on how actions that would help people affected by the floods, these actions could be in the form of donations, money, shelter, or even prayers. News24 wrote articles focusing on different relief measures that have been adopted by private corporates, government, non-governmental organizations and individuals to help those that were affected by the floods. In one article News24 (2022c) reported that “in an attempt to lend a helping hand, several celebrities and corporations have donated different resources and funds to those affected by the crisis”.

An article by IOL (2022b) reports that “the South African Breweries (SAB) has pledged to donate towards assisting with relief efforts”. Another article by IOL focused on the relief measures by Gift of the Givers, a non-government organization. The article reports that “Gift of the Givers set up a drop-off collection point at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) to help families that have suffered devastating losses in KwaZulu-Natal because of the floods” (IOL, 2022c).

TimesLive also reported on relief measures that non-governmental organizations put into place to support the victims of the floods. An article reported that “non-profit organizations FoodFoward SA has issued a public challenge to retailers, farmers and manufactures to donate surplus food towards relief efforts in KwaZulu-Natal” (TimesLive, 2022h). Another article also reported that “several organizations and charities have created outreach programs to assist those most affected by the floods that swept through KwaZulu-Natal this week, with food, blankets, building materials, water and closing among the donations needed” (TimesLive, 2022i).

Business interests

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was business interests. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about business interests were covered by each online media.

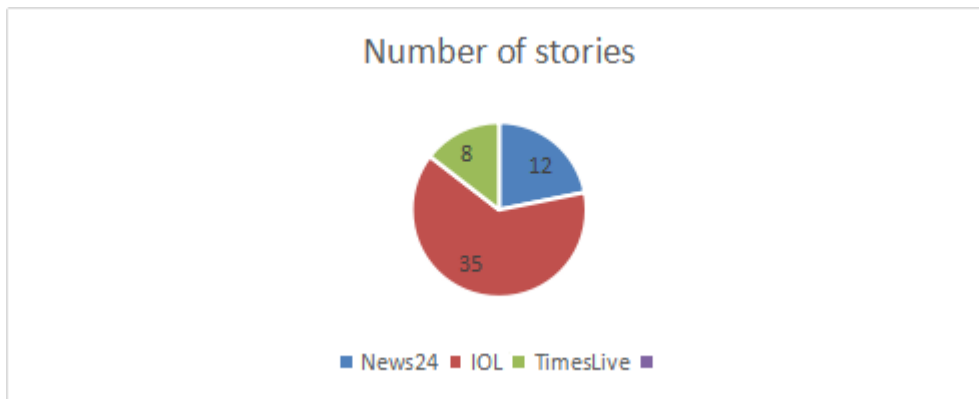


Figure 7: The number of business interest stories covered by each media house

The data presented in figure 7 shows that IOL had more stories about the relief measures, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

The collected data also indicated that there was coverage of how businesses were affected by the floods. The collected data indicated that News24 framed its stories from the perspectives of how floods affected different businesses, not only in KZN but across South Africa. An article reported that “flights cancelled at OR Tambo as KZN floods impact jet fuel supply” (News24, 2022d).

IOL’s (2022b) article reported that many liquor trading businesses in KZN were affected by the floods. Another article reported that B&Bs and hotels around Port Shepstone and Ramsgate had to cancel reservations due to the effects of the floods (IOL, 2022d).

TimesLive framed business effects of the floods from the perspective of marine-linked business. In one article, TimesLive’s (2022g) headline read as follows “floods wreak huge economic toll: Durban port operations suspended, businesses in limbo, logistics in chaos as insurance companies predict losses of hundreds of millions on rand”.

The role of the government

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the role of the government. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about the role of the government were covered by each online media.

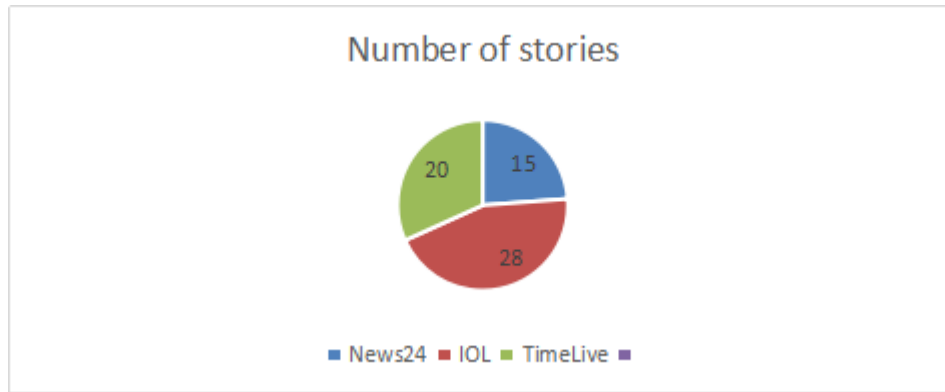


Figure 8: The number of the role of the government stories covered by each media house.

The data presented in figure 8 shows that IOL had more stories about the role of the government, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

Some stories also focused on the role of the government in these floods. News24 covered some of its stories with the government and its measures to help the victims of the floods as the main character. In one article it is reported that “the department [basic education] will send 98 mobile classrooms to the area [affected by the floods] to ensure that teaching and learning continue” (News24, 2022e). In another article, News24 reported that the government was also putting measures to help the survivors of the floods with professional counselling. The article reported that “Mhlanga said another crucial issue was getting teachers and pupils professional care so that they could deal with the trauma of what they had experienced” (News24, 2022e).

An article by IOL (2022d) reported that “KwaZulu-Natal’s Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (EDTEA), MEC Ravi Pillay said that assisting the tourism industry was a priority for the government”. The article further states that “tourism KZN was working closely with Durban tourism to ascertain the extent of the damage suffered by tourism businesses”.

TimesLive also covered the stories of the floods with an interest in the role of the government. An article by TimesLive (2022b) focused on the role of the local government in restoring water infrastructure to the communities. The article reported that “the eThekweni municipality says it is working around the clock to fix damaged water and sanitation infrastructure destroyed by floods earlier this month” (TimesLive, 2022b). Another article also took the same framing approach and reported that “eThekweni major Mxolisi Kaunda said the municipality is making progress to restore water and sanitation services” (TimesLive, 2022c).

The role of opposition political parties

The other theme that dominated the coverage of the 2022 KZN floods was the role of the opposition parties. The chart below demonstrates how many stories about the role of the opposition parties were covered by each online media.

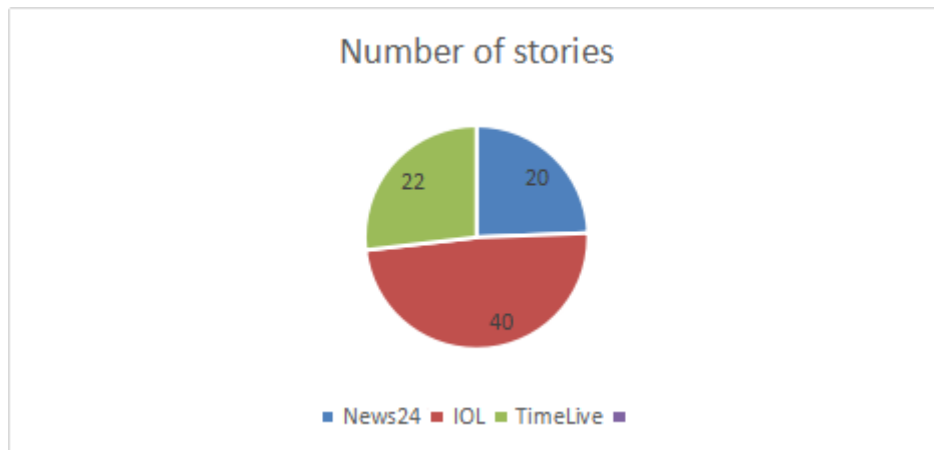


Figure 9: The number of the role of the opposition parties' stories covered by each media house

The data presented in figure 9 shows that IOL had more stories about the role of the government, followed by TimesLive then followed by News24.

The media coverage of the floods was also dominated by the role of opposition parties. The collected data shows that the media framed the opposition parties as bodies that hold the ruling party, African National Congress (ANC) accountable and represent the interests of those affected by the floods. News24 (2022h) reported that “KwaZulu-Natal Premier Sihle Zikalala was cornered in the provincial legislature in Pietermaritzburg on Wednesday as opposition political parties raised doubt about the government’s ability to spend flood relief funds without corruption”.

IOL (2022e) reported that “the IFP has called on the president to establish a survivors’ fund for all the families who had lost loved ones during the devastating storms”. The article further states that “the EFF called for land to be expropriated so it could be used for the displaced” (IOL, 2022e).

TimesLive framed opposition parties as active corruption watchdogs. In one article, TimesLive (2022d) reported that “UDM leader Bantu Holomisa is not convinced by President Cyril Ramaphosa’s pledge that no funds meant for relief and the rebuilding of KwaZulu-Natal will end up in corrupt hands”. The article further focuses on another opposition party that also reiterates its position against the government’s corruption. The article reports that “the DA said would forward specific proposals to assembly speaker Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula on how to strengthen the oversight powers of parliament and prevent the abuse of power and public money under a national state of disaster” (TimesLive, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

The world continues to face natural disasters because of many scientific reasons. These natural disasters leave communities destroyed, lives shattered and the future unstable. During these times of crisis, the role of the media becomes more important than ever. This paper has looked at the role of the media in South Africa during the 2022 flood disasters in KZN, South Africa. The authors undertook this study to examine whether the media played a watchdog role. The findings of the study indicated that the South African media were actively involved in the reporting of the floods. The study further went on to investigate the framing of the floods in the media. Here the findings demonstrated that stories that dominated the reporting/coverage of floods were about casualties, relief measures, the

role of the government, business interests, the role of opposition parties, destruction of infrastructure, and effects on social life.

The data collected showed that the media in South Africa was very important for keeping people informed and educated about the floods that hit KZN. It is important to note that different media organizations reported on the floods from different perspectives. Some focused on the floods affected the daily lives of people, how schools, roads, and bridges were destroyed and how the health sector is dealing with an influx of injured people that needed medical care. Other news organizations focused on the role of politicians, civil society, and the private sector in rebuilding the affected areas in the province, and in helping people with their daily needs such as food, clothes, and water.

As much as sometimes the media is criticized for sensationalizing the stories of times of crises such as natural disasters, pandemics, and genocides, in this case, the authors did not pick up any stories that were sensationalizing the events. The media reported on the serious issues that were affecting people, the economy, and the province.

In a rapidly changing knowledge economy, flexibility is everything (Chasi and Rodney-Gumede, 2020) and if the media is to succeed and remain a viable source of information and education, it needs to play a critical role in times of crisis as it is reported in this study. Conversely, if the media takes itself seriously, it should develop the necessary tools and capacity to cover crisis issues and events. Importantly, this way the media can also drive debates about its role and social justice in the digital era.

Overall, the selected media organizations reflected the positive role that the media continues to play in the world, especially in times of crisis. The media can spread information about natural disasters, the media can spread messages of support and it is also able to force politicians to act and help people that have been affected. With all the challenges that come with media reporting, especially in times of crisis, during the KZN floods the media proved itself to be a tool for the people.

However, the study could ascertain whether the media's coverage of the KZN floods was positive or negative. More broadly, what is now needed is qualitative and quantitative approaches to determine the nature of the coverage. This information can be used to develop the necessary interventions to reduce possible biases the media often assigns to times of crisis.

In a rapidly changing environment due to political factors, economic issues, and technological advancements, the media continues to be criticized for doing its job. At other times, the media get it wrong. But there are instances where the media should be credited for doing their job effectively. This study has demonstrated that the media has the potential to be a useful tool that can help change people's lives. As emphasized earlier, in contemporary societies, and even more in societies where the media continues to receive criticism, it has become necessary to not just criticize but to critique the media.

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