
Framing Day Zero: Peace Journalism and the Cape Town Water Crisis as a Communication Model for KwaZulu-Natal

Grace Temiloluwa Agbede¹ and Sam Erevbenagie Usadolo¹

¹Faculty of Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Abstract: This article explores the potential of peace journalism to address social crises like the Cape Town water shortages of 2017–2018 which were dubbed ‘Day Zero’. The article draws from the media coverage of the water crisis in Cape Town and suggests how it can help KwaZulu-Natal to better report conflict-sensitive social issues like water shortages in ways that offer an alternative to sensationalist reporting, which can cause fear and panic. Adopting a qualitative content analysis and framing analysis, the study advocates the adoption of peace journalism reportage that emphasis constructive narratives that promote dialogue, cooperation, and sustainable solutions. This paper further suggests that peace journalism can help build resilience, foster community solidarity, and encourage responsible water usage practices through more inclusive and solutions-oriented media reporting. The paper calls for the integration of peace journalism principles into media strategies to prevent future crises and promote long-term water security for vulnerable regions.

Keywords: community; climate change; day zero; media coverage; peace journalism

Introduction

In January 2018, officials of the Western Cape Government in South Africa announced that Cape Town was three months away from running out of municipal water. The city officials labelled the impending apocalypse ‘Day Zero’. Although many people did not expect such an extreme level and effect of water shortage in the province, the announcement was not altogether surprising as the province experienced three consecutive years of anaemic rainfall. As a result, the water levels were depleted continuously, with minimal augmentation. According to Muller (2017, 12), the municipality put several restrictions to manage the impending crisis. For example, in 2016, the Western Cape Government introduced level 2 regulations because dam levels were uncomfortably low after below-average rainfall in 2014 and 2015.

The goal was to achieve a 20% reduction in water use in all sectors, with the exception of agriculture. Unfortunately, the restrictions did not meet the desired result, and by January 2017, Cape Town’s six dams reported water levels at 42% (down from 51% at the same time the previous year). As a result, the municipality had to announce stringent level 3b restrictions from

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: agbedegrace@gmail.com

EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 23 June 2025

Revised: 01 October 2025

Accepted: 09 October 2025

Published: 19 November 2025

Copyright:

© The Author(s) 2025.

Published by Azure Academic Publishers. This is an open access article distributed under Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v7i2.3048>

1 February 2017, targeting a 30% reduction in use. Muller (2017) recalls that the limits indicated that gardens, sports fields, and parks could only be watered twice a week, using buckets or watering cans. Municipal swimming pools were also closed. At the peak of the Cape Town water crisis, public apprehension was expectedly high, with many residents storing water. Part of the reason for general anxiety may be due to the media's framing of the issue. Media coverage of social problems, especially conflict-sensitive ones like the impending water crisis, plays a significant role in shaping public perception and their understanding the problem. Depending on how the media frames issues, public attitudes can facilitate better public participation in managing and resolving the crisis or it could potentially exacerbate public fears and apprehension, capable of stirring chaos. Cortés and Quiroga (2023) highlight that news media coverage of climate change issues impacts how such matters translate into policy responses. Given the technicalities involved in reporting issues like climate change, the intersections of mass media, science, and policy are increasingly becoming a dynamic communication arena where all sides have high stakes.

This study's aim is to examine the impact of selected media coverage of conflict-sensitive issues like climate change generally, with a specific focus on the 2018 water crisis in Cape Town. The study highlights lessons that KwaZulu-Natal can glean from the water crisis that plagued Cape Town, especially from a media framing perspective. The researcher premises the study on the theoretical assumption that understanding media framing is critical to how the public understands their role in climate change and its impact. According to Lindseth (2003), media framing of climate change plays a significant role in understanding the challenge of climate change and resource allocation, and policy directions. The study utilised a qualitative research design, employing both content and framing analysis to investigate South African media coverage of Cape Town's 2017–2018 water crisis. Utilising Entman's (1993) framing theory, the study examined the portrayal of the 'Day Zeros story by two (chosen) media channels, News24 and The Guardian, emphasising language, tone, and stakeholder representation. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select related stories from these publications. The articles were analysed and situated within the peace journalism model put forward by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005).

Like Cape Town, like KZN?

Like most parts of South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) faces severe challenges posed by increasing global climate change. Specifically, the water crisis in Cape Town brought to the fore the lingering challenge of securing sustainable water resources in the country. The Department of Water Affairs 2013 indicated that erratic rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, and a growing population has led to increasing water shortages across the country, with KZN's reliance on river systems, dams, and outdated water supply networks compounding the challenge, particularly in rural areas where access to clean and reliable water is inconsistent. It is pertinent to state that over the years, there have been significant infrastructural improvements in water provision and distribution in the KwaZulu-Natal province. For example, the Umgeni Water (Umgeni Water 2021 Umgeni Water 2021) Supply System has appreciably improved the provision of water in the province. However, there are still challenges posed by fluctuating water availability that have raised concerns regarding long-term water security (Umgeni Water 2021). The South African Weather Services, in South African Weather Service 2019 its 2019 report, states that, like Cape Town, changing weather patterns linked to climate change are expected to further threaten water scarcity that could lead to challenges similar to Cape Town's nightmarish 'Day Zero'. Although the geographical and hydrological contexts differ, the lessons from Cape Town's crisis are both relevant and timely. As earlier stated, the goal of this article is to bring to the fore the Cape Town water crisis, to draw critical insights, and to examine the measures implemented to avert the disaster. It is hoped that the findings will provide relevant information applicable to KZN's water challenges, especially when situated within the framework of the peace journalism model. Weingart *et al.* (2000) remarked that the Western Cape provincial government took stringent measures such as water restrictions, public awareness campaigns, and infrastructural upgrades at the peak of the water crisis in Cape Town. Given the sociocultural, geographical, and socioeconomic differences between the Western Cape and KZN, it would be valuable to consider whether those measures taken in the Western Cape are transferable to KZN.

Literature review

Although discourses regarding climate change and its consequent impact seem to be more prevalent these days, it is, however, instructive to note that research into the effects of climate change dates back to as far as the eighteenth century. According to Boykoff and Rajan (2007), as far back as the eighteenth century, researchers investigated the relationship between deforestation and precipitation, the link between variations in the brightness of the sun or sunspots, temperature changes on earth, and how specific gases in the atmosphere influence the temperature of the planet. By the late nineteenth century, researchers began to look more specifically into humans' role in climate change. For example, according to Fleming (1998), as far back as 1896, the Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius already studied and speculated how carbon dioxide emissions could increase atmospheric temperature and the greenhouse effect.

Recent climate change debates have focused on humanity's ability to feed itself in the face of growing water scarcity and dwindling arable land. Perhaps one of the most significant manifestations of climate change is the growing importance of water security. There are fears that in the next few decades, water will be the 'next oil'. The impact on food security will be enormous. There are only two ways to increase the amount of food a country can produce. Either you coax higher yield out of land already devoted to farming, or you find extra space to grow more. Historically, agriculture has alternated between the two strategies. For the past century, however, there has been a lot of both. Today, crops are grown on nearly 40 percent of the earth's land, and it takes 70 percent of our water to do it (Specter, 2010, 113). As a result, the world needs more water today than it did some decades ago. Africa is the worst hit by climate change (Africa Union, 2015; UN Environment 2019). According to Specter 2010, p. 113), three-fourths of the farmland in sub-Saharan Africa, where a third of the population suffers from chronic hunger, has become nutritionally useless. More than 40 percent of the African continent suffers from desertification. Climate change, environmental degradation, water scarcity, and agricultural productivity are all intertwined. Cape Town's water crisis is proof that climate change is likely to bring warmer temperatures and alter rainfall patterns, placing even more stress on agriculture. Livestock already consumes 80 percent of the world's soybeans and more than half the corn. Cattle require staggering amounts of fresh, potable water. It takes thirteen hundred litres of water to produce a single hamburger; a steak requires double that amount (Specter 2010, 115).

Despite Africa's susceptibility to the adverse effects of climate change, there seems to be a sense of obliviousness and group denialism about the issue. For example, a 2018 Afrobarometer survey (see Coulibaly *et al.*, 2018) showed that climate change did not register as an important issue among Africans surveyed. Instead, other priority issues were mentioned as 'more' necessary, although these issues are all indicators of climate change. Some of the priority areas identified by the surveyed respondents included water supply (cited by 24% of respondents), food shortages (18%), and agriculture (17%). According to the Afrobarometer survey, almost six in 10 Africans (58%) have heard of climate change, including more than three-fourths of Mauritians (83%), Malawians (78%), and Ugandans (78%). South Africa (41%) is one of five countries where fewer than half of the citizens have heard of climate change. The report also states that about one in four Africans (28%) is completely 'climate change literate' - that is, they have heard of climate change, they understand it to have negative consequences, and they recognise it as being caused at least in part by human activity. Again, Mauritians lead the way at 57% - the only country where the majority of those surveyed are climate change literate. Less than one in five are climate change literate in six states - Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, South Africa, and Tunisia (Afrobarometer, 2019).

As shown in Figure 1, about 56% of South Africans who took part in the Afrobarometer (2019) survey stated that they were not aware of climate change. Given South Africa's propensity for a potential drought, the figure calls for concern. Water is the primary medium through which South Africa feels the impacts of climate change. According to the National Water Resource Strategy (Department of Water Affairs 2013), increases in climate variability and climatic extremes are impacting both water quality and availability through changes in rainfall patterns, with more intense storms, floods and droughts, changes in soil moisture and runoff, and the effects of increasing evaporation and changing temperatures on aquatic systems. South Africa has been experiencing severe drought since 2015, with associated crop losses, water restrictions, and impacts on food and water security.

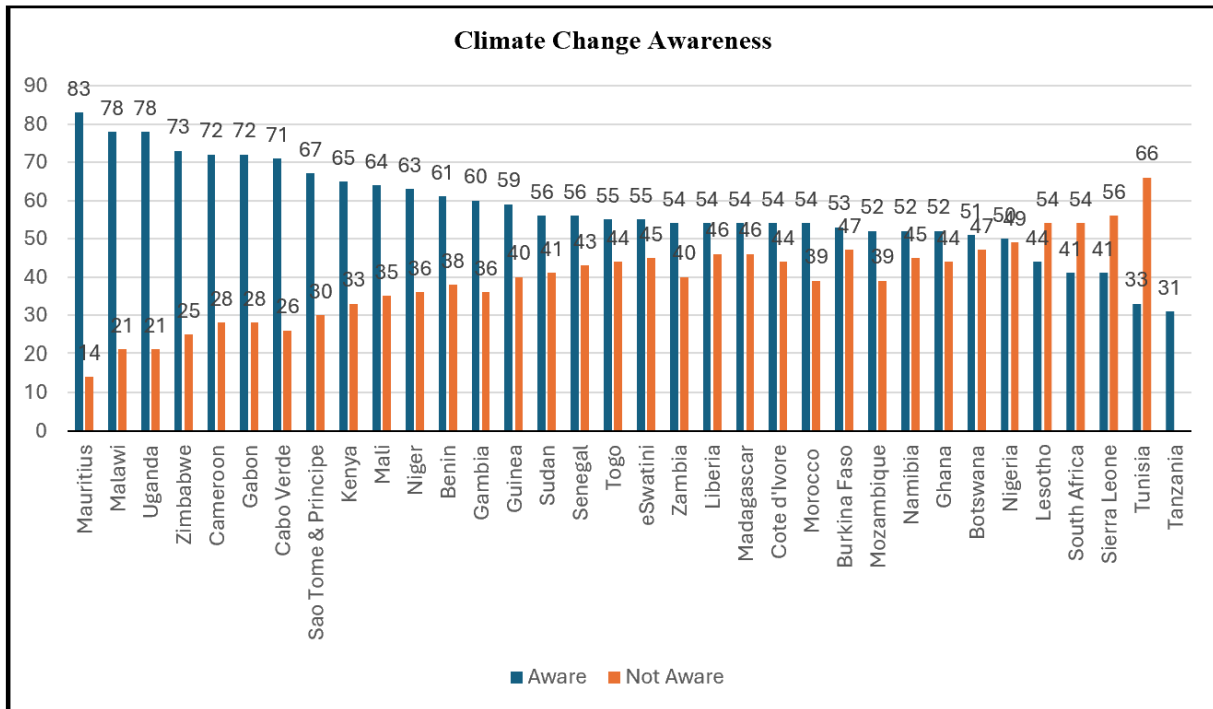


Figure 1. Afrobarometer (2019): Experience and awareness of climate change in Africa

At the core of the principle of media framing theory is the belief that the media has the propensity to make members of society pay more attention to a social phenomenon by the prominence it accords with such phenomena. Entman (1993) defines media framing as the process whereby the media selects and projects certain aspects of reality to promote particular interpretations or agenda. Persistent and intentional framing wittingly or unwittingly defines problems, diagnoses cause, and in some cases, suggests remedies. Discussed in the context of climate change and environmental reporting, framing can be viewed as how journalists frame climate-related events like the Cape Town ‘Day Zero’ crisis, floods, and droughts. These frames have the potential to shape public understanding and elicit emotional responses and policy preferences. Given the highly technical and expert-level language involved in climate change communication, Surname et al. 2007 states that journalists play very active roles in shaping how the members of the public react to climate change issues. The approach could be through the selection of particular story angles, which could be alarmist (with the potential to raise public apprehension), dismissive, or solution-oriented (which has the potential to spur members of society to positive action capable of alleviating social malaise or challenges). In South Africa, where public trust in institutions is fragile and access to scientific knowledge is uneven, media framing becomes even more consequential. Republic of South Africa, Department of Forest, Fisheries and the Environment 2018

The media was awash with messages and stories during Cape Town’s 2017–2018 water crisis. The province was in dire need of a solution, and the fear was almost tangible amongst the populace. Dubbed ‘Day Zero’, experts claimed, at that time, the province would reach a point where taps would run dry. Expectedly, headlines regarding the issue were as creative as they were frightening. For example, The Guardian (2018) had as its headline: “Cape Town Faces its Apocalypse.” Similarly, News24 2018 had as its headline: “Day Zero is coming: Are you Ready?” These headlines illustrate how the media either wittingly or unwittingly leaned into dramatic and sensationally charged language. Rodina (2019) believed that at the peak of the Cape Town water crisis, media reportage was alarmist in ways that overshadowed structural critiques. Traditional reporting, according to Rodina, paid little attention to the role of government mismanagement, delayed infrastructural upscaling, and inadequate water access as some of the remote and immediate causes of the water crisis. A peace journalism approach to reporting the water crisis would have paid more attention to grassroots coping strategies, traditional ecological knowledge, and solutions that were community-driven.

The impact of media reportage of ‘Day Zero’ was varied. The aim of these media messages was to evoke public behavior. Ziervogel 2019 affirmed that the impact of media messages was immediately felt in Cape Town, with residents reducing water use to below 50 litres per person, as recommended by the provincial government. There

were also innovative approaches adopted by the provincial government, such as the use of social media and SMS to alert the public to the overuse of water in certain parts of the city, and the need to curtail and manage water use. The media's portrayal of the crisis as an imminent breakdown rather than a preventable and manageable challenge arguably contributed to scenarios where wealthier residents installed extra external water storage facilities, further depleting the already very depleted water level. According to Booysen et al. 2019, tensions emanating from alarmist media reportage also created a 'we' versus 'them' divide between rural residents and urban dwellers. The argument by rural dwellers was that they had lived consistently without access to portable water, and that because the crisis now affected the urban population, there seemed to be action. Media framing of this divide created a sense of division, which undermined solidarity. As climate-related threats become more frequent and severe, especially in vulnerable regions like KwaZulu-Natal, adopting a peace journalism lens may be vital for promoting resilience, equity, and informed civic participation.

Theoretical framework: The peace journalism model

According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005, 5), peace journalism is the deliberate selection and reportage of stories in ways that create opportunities for society to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict. Adebayo and Makwambeni (2019) states that peace journalism uses the insights of conflict analysis and transformation to update concepts of balance, fairness, and accuracy in reporting as well as providing a new route map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover, and the consequences of their journalism. The main difference between peace journalism and traditional journalism is how conflict-sensitive social issues are framed. According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), traditional journalism focuses on events over processes, and casts binary oppositions, by presenting stories as winners versus losers, villains versus victims, which either unintentionally or intentionally, inflame tensions and hinder nuanced understanding. Peace journalism, in contrast, shifts focus from traditional reporting to a style of reporting that promotes understanding, reconciliation, and constructive solutions.

Unlike traditional reporting that focuses on events, peace journalism is people centered. It considers the impact that story frames have on members of society (Adebayo, 2018). Thus, peace journalism avoids inflammatory language and highlights peace initiatives and community resilience. Within the context of environmental issues like water security, such as the Cape Town 'Day Zero' crisis, peace journalism can frame stories in more detail, providing context and background, not as isolated disasters. Unlike traditional reporting, peace journalism frames stories as challenges embedded in long-term sociopolitical and ecological systems. Peace journalism, in this way, encourages inclusive dialogue and collaborative responses. One main feature of peace journalists is their ability to frame stories in ways that provide society with enough information to respond to conflict situations in a nonviolent manner. Peace journalism is also relevant beyond conflict situations; it can be used to maintain peace by providing varied viewpoints that will help a large section of the citizenry make informed decisions about the issues that concern them. This places an enormous responsibility on the media to be society's watchdogs (Adebayo, 2016). A major criticism of peace journalism is that it inhibits journalists from practicing fair and objective reportage. Fairness and objectivity are the universally known and accepted tenets of the journalism profession.

Without objectivity, journalism loses its respect. However, objectivity without sensitive reportage can often be the bane of journalism (Lee, 2010). Objectivity is possibly one of the biggest obstacles to journalists playing a more responsible and beneficial role in public life. Objectivity, by emphasising facts and overt events, devalues ideas and fragments experience, making complex social phenomena more difficult to understand. There are certain positive connotations associated with the term 'objectivity', such as fairness and the pursuit of truth without favour. Hackett 2010 argues, however, that objectivity is relative rather than being fixed, because whether or not objectivity is a desirable and achievable goal for reporting in a democratic society is a debatable question (2010).

Method

The researcher employed a qualitative research design involving content and framing analysis. The study seeks to examine South African media reportage of the water crisis of 2017–2018 in Cape Town, the Western Cape, tagged 'Day Zero'. Purposively sampled individual articles from News24 and The Guardian, two of South Africa's leading outlets with wide readership, served as the unit of analysis for the study. The timeframe was January 2017 to December 2018, corresponding to the build-up, peak, and immediate aftermath of the crisis. The researcher adopted a purposive sampling technique to ensure relevance to water scarcity and crisis framing, and

to limit the sample to stories explicitly addressing water scarcity, governance, and public behaviour (Krippendorff 2013). The researcher ensured that data coding followed Entman (1993) framing theory, which recommends that framing should assess narrative structures, stakeholder representation, and tone. Given that the study's goal was to provide a theoretical basis for evaluating communication models that can be applied to KwaZulu-Natal, the findings were situated within the peace journalism model (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). The model helped guide the analysis towards understanding constructive versus alarmist reporting of conflict-sensitive issues like water-related crises.

Peace journalism and 'day zero'

The interventions of peace journalism are multipronged. Peace journalism recognises that there is a problem, but it does not stop at problem identification. Peace journalism explores and presents practical and actionable solutions to the identified problems. Where individuals or groups are working to solve such problems, peace journalism gives prominence and adequate coverage to such stories. In the case of Cape Town's 'Day Zero' crisis, media reportage was both forward-looking and sometimes divisive. Unlike traditional journalism, peace journalism focuses on people instead of events. During crises, like the Cape Town water crisis, peace journalism focuses on promoting the voices of those most affected, rather than an undue focus on the government statements or positions. It should also be noted that peace journalism recognises that there are multiple angles and perspectives to every story. Traditional journalism often presents official government statements or views from government or public officials as the fulcrum of news stories. In contrast, peace journalism offers a more holistic understanding of issues, rather than providing simplistic binary framings. Also, peace journalism recognises that there are contexts to every story. Thus, peace journalism ensures that stories are framed within their social, political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts. This helps the public better understand the dynamics involved in stories, rather than treating them as isolated or random events.

At its onset, peace journalism was derided as impinging on journalistic integrity and objectivity. However, over the past decade, there has been increased interest in, and adoption of, the tenets of peace journalism by journalists. For example, in the Philippines, peace journalism has significantly influenced environmental narratives. Brady (2017) points out that community radio has been used to promote understanding of climate change issues. Community radio in the Philippines uses local dialects to disseminate indigenous knowledge and meteorological expertise. These broadcasts reduce fear, improve readiness, and build trust between citizens and authorities. Similarly, Okello *et al.* (2021) noted that in Kenya, a leading environmental publication, *InfoNile*, makes a deliberate effort at highlighting water conflicts in the Nile Basin. Adopting the peace journalism tenet, journalists conduct interviews with pastoralists, conservationists, and women's groups managing local resources. As earlier stated, peace journalism gives a voice to individuals, groups, and communities working for peace or the peaceful resolution of conflict-sensitive issues like water security. The focus is a reportage style that provides a multi-perspective lens that fosters dialogue rather than discord.

GroundUp in South Africa, though not explicitly branded as peace journalism, has played a very significant role in promoting and advocating for grassroots environmental justice movements. It also does a fantastic job of linking environmental crises to social inequalities. During the pollution in the Vaal River system, *GroundUp* involved community members directly affected *GroundUp* 2019 by the overflow of sewage and traced institutional accountability (2019). Peace journalism is practical, adaptable, and very methodological. It does not exist in abstractions, outside of individuals and communities. When contextualised to social issues like water crises or climate-related crises, peace journalism promotes transparency and encourages innovation by showcasing how different groups adapt to and mitigate environmental change.

Communication gaps and opportunities in KwaZulu-Natal media

KwaZulu-Natal, like most of South Africa, faces challenges associated with erratic rainfall, water insecurity, and environmental degradation. These challenges call for intentional climate-related issues reporting that is both urgent and transformative, rather than the current reportage, which is fragmented and often reactive, rather than preventative.

The local media scene in KwaZulu-Natal is very active, with media outlets like *The Witness*, *Isolezwe*, *Ukhozi FM*, and *Gagasi FM* providing detailed and exhaustive reportage of extreme weather events like floods or droughts which sometimes cause fatalities and disrupt service delivery. It is pertinent to state, however, that the style of reporting is mainly episodic reportage of crisis, rather than contextualised within a broader systemic

environmental challenge (Aiseng & Gamede, 2023). Also, during the 2022 floods in eThekweni, the media in KZN missed a golden opportunity to address underlying climate vulnerabilities or long-term adaptation strategies. Instead, the media focused on collapsed infrastructure and the political blame game, which created a people-versus-government scenario. Even on occasions when media outlets shift focus to addressing the issues of climate change, the discourse often focuses on statements or releases from official government sources, rather than engaging with individuals, groups, and community members. Given that rural water users, smallholding farmers, and informal settlement dwellers are often the worst hit during water or other environmental crises, a top-down approach to media communication often neglects everyday realities.

One of South Africa's unique features is its diversity. This diversity also plays out within the KZN media landscape. English language newspapers dominate in urban areas, while the Zulu language is the dominant mode of communication for newspapers based in peri-urban areas. Media outlets such as *Ilanga*, *Isolezwe*, and *Ukhozi FM* are common and very influential. It is significant to note that *Ukhozi FM* is the largest radio station in South Africa by listenership, with over 7.5 million listeners weekly. It is noteworthy to state that despite the availability of media messages disseminated in SABC n.d. local languages, the messages presented are not nuanced or contextualised enough to provide a good understanding of climate change issues. Beyond media content, other challenges include low levels of environmental literacy, limited access to print media, and most recently, sporadic electricity and mobile signal. Furthermore, many national climate reports and forecasts are published in English, excluding isiZulu-speaking audiences from meaningful participation in environmental discourse.

Despite these challenges, there are clear opportunities to embed peace journalism principles into KZN's media system. According to Adebayo 2015, journalists would report in a conflict-sensitive manner if they knew how to, and if they believed their reportage had the potential to cause positive change in society. The missing gap is training. To better prepare journalists for social crises like the 'Day Zero' crisis in Cape Town, media organisations must train staff on environmental reporting and peace journalism to equip them with the requisite skills to interpret data, source diverse voices, and frame climate stories in constructive and inclusive ways. Although KZN has media outlets that disseminate messages in isiZulu, climate-related stories like water crises and other environmental issues, such as drought and flooding, must be disseminated and exhaustively unbundled in isiZulu to make such issues more accessible and culturally relevant. Such a broadcast should be done in collaboration with scientists and community organisations. Media houses should be encouraged to treat climate and water issues not as occasional emergencies but as permanent beats. Peace journalism can guide editors to reframe stories from blame to responsibility, from despair to action.

Policy implications and the role of media in crisis prevention

Water security and health can be enhanced and brought to the forefront of public discourse through effective highlighting of critical issues in water governance, such as pollution, scarcity, and mismanagement. Livingston (1997) regards this concept as the 'CNN effect'. Livingston believes that when the media pays focused attention to a social issue such as water governance and security, chances are that the focus could elicit public outcry and cause policy shifts. Consistent reporting of such issues has the potential to elicit public outcry and drive policy interventions. Cottle (2014) believes that, beyond giving prominence to the stories, it is important to pay attention to how such stories are framed. Adopting frames that apply the peace journalism tenets ensures that sensationalist reporting capable of misinforming the public is avoided. Mano (2020) indicates that there seems to be an intentionality in training programmes for journalists on how to present conflict-sensitive issues better. Mano highlighted training programmes for journalists based within communities, using the 'learning-by-doing' approach, which necessitates journalists to report stories or deliver content in local languages to ensure comprehension and engagement. Such training can be mainstreamed into government communication policies at the provincial level. The KwaZulu-Natal provincial government can collaborate with the media in ways that provide opportunities for the province to support or fund training programmes for journalists. Such collaboration can be extended to institutions of higher learning.

The role of social media platforms in amplifying solution-focused narratives in water governance is essential. The world, it seems, now resides in the digital world. Social media platforms enable real-time sharing of information and grassroots mobilisation. Day et al. 2019 recalls the significant role played by social media by members of the community during the Flint water crisis in the United States. During the crisis, residents utilised social media to share personal stories and challenge government officials' statements and narratives.

This approach drew significant attention to the critical crisis and elicited policy responses from the relevant government agencies.

Call to action

The article attempted an exploration of the remote and immediate causes of the Cape Town ‘Day Zero’ crisis of 2017–2018. The thought of taps without running water across the Western Cape province sent trepidation throughout the length and breadth of the province in particular and South Africa in general. Although KwaZulu-Natal has not necessarily reached the critical levels that Cape Town reached, however, it currently faces similar climate vulnerabilities, such as erratic rainfall, aging water infrastructure, and low public awareness. The study discussed the importance of media framing to public understanding of critical social issues. Scholars (Rodina, 2019; Ziervogel 2019) believe that during crises like the ‘Day Zero’ water crisis in Cape Town, sensationalist media coverage has the potential to foster anxiety that could potentially lead to fear-motivated hoarding. Booyesen et al. 2019 recalls that more affluent members of communities in the Western Cape built storage facilities and hoarded water, thereby further alienating rural populations who had long suffered water insecurity. The media in KZN can start to implement tenets of peace journalism in their day-to-day reportage so that when social crisis occurs (as they often do), the practice would have become second nature. While conflict-sensitive reportage can be learnt, it can only be implemented through consistent practice.

The KZN provincial government, in collaboration with journalists, needs to, as a matter of policy, adopt peace journalism as a deliberate communication strategy in KZN’s climate and water crisis reporting. As stated by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), peace journalism’s propensity to prioritise context, multiple perspectives, and constructive solutions will prepare members of communities to better respond to water crises when they occur, and to better support the provincial government’s efforts at mitigating the crisis collaboratively. It can be argued that Cape Town’s media coverage leaned towards traditional journalism, which gave more credence to official government statements instead of spotlighting underreported grassroots efforts, fostering community solidarity, and tempering fear-driven public reactions. KZN needs to leverage the lessons derived from the ‘mistake’ of media coverage by the Western Cape media by shifting away from episodic, elite-focused narratives of water-related crisis, towards people-centred storytelling. In conclusion, as earlier stated, KZN has not reached its own ‘Day Zero’ yet (and hopefully, it does not). However, the signs point to the possibility of it happening in the not-too-distant future. The media can start bridging divides and amplify solutions from the lessons gleaned from Cape Town’s water crisis. It requires rethinking how crises are communicated, how resilience is cultivated, and how communities are engaged.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This study adopts an interdisciplinary scope by integrating perspectives from media studies, environmental communication, peace and conflict studies, and climate science to analyse how journalistic framing influences public understanding of environmental crises. It bridges insights from communication theory, climate governance, and social development, demonstrating how peace-oriented media practices can inform sustainable crisis communication and policy engagement in South Africa.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation (Agbede), literature review (Agbede and Usadolo), methodology and analysis (Agbede and Usadolo), drafting and preparation (Agbede and Usadolo), review and editing (Agbede and Usadolo). The authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Availability of Data: All relevant data are contained within the article. Additional materials may be made available upon reasonable request from the author.

References

Boykoff. (2007).

- Adebayo, J. (2015). Towards a peace journalism approach to reporting African elections. *Conflict Trends*, 4, 49–56.
- Adebayo, O.J.. (2016). Fostering nonviolent elections in Africa through conflict-sensitive reportage of elections. *African Security Review*, 25(3), 303–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2016.1191521>
- Adebayo, O. J. (2018). *Reporting African Elections: Towards a Peace Journalism Approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429427589>
- Adebayo, O.J., & Makwambeni, B. (2019). The limits of peace journalism: Media reportage of Kenya’s 2017 general elections. *Journal of African Elections*, 18(1), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2019/v18i1a4>
- Africa Union. (2015). *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. African Union Commission.
- Afrobarometer. (2019). Experience and awareness of climate change in Africa. <https://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad320-climate-change-in-africa/>
- Aiseng, K., & Gamede, S. (2023). Analysis of South African media coverage of the 2022 KZN floods. In *International Conference on Media Science and Digital Communication*, 2(1), 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.17501/29506530.2023.2103>
- Booyesen, M. J., Visser, M., & Burger, R. (2019). Temporal case study of household behavioural response to Cape Town’s “Day Zero” using smart meter data. *Water Research*, 149, 414–420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.watres.2018.11.035>
- Booyesen, M. J., Visser, M., & Burger, R. (2019). Temporal case study of household behavioural response to Cape Town’s “Day Zero” using smart meter data. *Water Research*, 149, 414–420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.watres.2018.11.035>
- Boykoff, M. T., & Rajan, S. R. (2007). Signals and noise. Mass-media coverage of climate change in the USA and the UK. *EMBO Reports*, 8(3), 207–211. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7400924>
- Brady, L. (2017). *Communicating Climate Crisis in the Philippines: The Role of Community Media*. Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.
- Cortés, P. A., & Quiroga, R. (2023). How academic research and news media cover climate change: A case study from Chile. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8, 1226432. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1226432>
- Cottle, S. (2014). *Journalism and Climate Crisis: Public Engagement, Media Alternatives*. Routledge.
- Coulibaly, S., Silwé, F., & Logan, C. (2018). Do Africans believe in climate change. In *Afrobarometer Dispatch*, no. 320. <https://afrobarometer.org/publications/ad320-climate-change-in-africa/>
- Day, A. M., O’Shay-Wallace, S., Seeger, M. W., & McElmurry, S. P. (2019). Informational sources, social media use, and race in Flint, Michigan’s water crisis. *Communication Studies*, 70(3), 352–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2019.1567566>
- Department of Water Affairs. (2013). *National water resource strategy: Water for an equitable and sustainable future*.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Fleming, J. R. (1998). *Historical Perspectives on Climate Change*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195078701.001.0001>
- GroundUp. (2019). *Raw sewage in the Vaal: A national crisis*. <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/raw-sewage-vaal-national-crisis/>
- Hackett, R. A. (2010). Journalism for peace and justice: Towards a comparative analysis of media paradigms. *Studies in Social Justice*, 4(2), 179–198. <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v4i2.1001>
- Krippendorff, K. (2013). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Lee, S. T. (2010). Peace journalism: Principles and structural limitations in the news coverage of three conflicts. *Mass Communication and Society*, 13(4), 361–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205430903348829>
- Lindseth, G. (2003). The framing of climate change: A review of recent research and strategies for public engagement. *Environmental Politics*, 12(4), 56–75.
- Livingston, S. (1997). *Clarifying the CNN effect: An examination of media effects according to type of military intervention* [Unpublished research paper]. Harvard University.
- Lynch, J., & McGoldrick, A. (2005). *Peace Journalism*. Hawthorn Press.

- Mano, W. (2020). Training community-based journalists for climate change reporting: Lessons from South Africa. *Sustainability Education Journal*, 5(3), 45–62.
- Muller, M. (2017). *Lessons from Cape Town's Water Crisis*. Wits University Press.
- News24. (2018, January 19). *Day zero is coming: Are you ready?* <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/day-zero-is-coming-20180119>
- Okello, C., Namanya, D., & Achieng, E. (2021). *Reporting Water Conflicts in the Nile Basin: Journalism for Peace and Sustainability*. InfoNile.
- Republic of South Africa, Department of Forest, Fisheries and the Environment. (2018). South Africa's third national communication under the UNFCCC.
- Rodina, L. (2019). Water resilience lessons from Cape Town's water crisis. *WIREs Water*, 6(6). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1376>
- SABC, S. (n.d.). <https://www.sabcsales.co.za/sabcsales/2044-2/#:~:text=The%20Broadcast%20Research%20Council%20of,listener%20since%20the%20last%20release>
- South African Weather Service. (2019). Annual climate summary.
- Specter, M. (2010). *Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives*. Penguin Books.
- The Guardian. (2018, February 1). *Cape Town faces its apocalypse: And no one cares*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/01/cape-town-day-zero-water-crisis>
- Umgeni Water. (2021). Annual report 2020/2021. Parliamentary Monitoring Group. https://static.pmg.org.za/Umgeni_Water_Annual_Report_20202021_030322.pdf.
- UN Environment. (2019). Global Environment Outlook – GEO-6: Healthy Planet, Healthy People. In *United Nations Environment Programme*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108627146>
- Weingart, P., Engels, A., & Pansegrau, P. (2000). Risks of communication: Discourses on climate change in science, politics, and the mass media. *Public Understanding of Science*, 9(3), 261–283. <https://doi.org/10.1088/0963-6625/9/3/304>
- Ziervogel, G. (2019). *Unpacking the Cape Town drought: Lessons learned*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36540.69760>