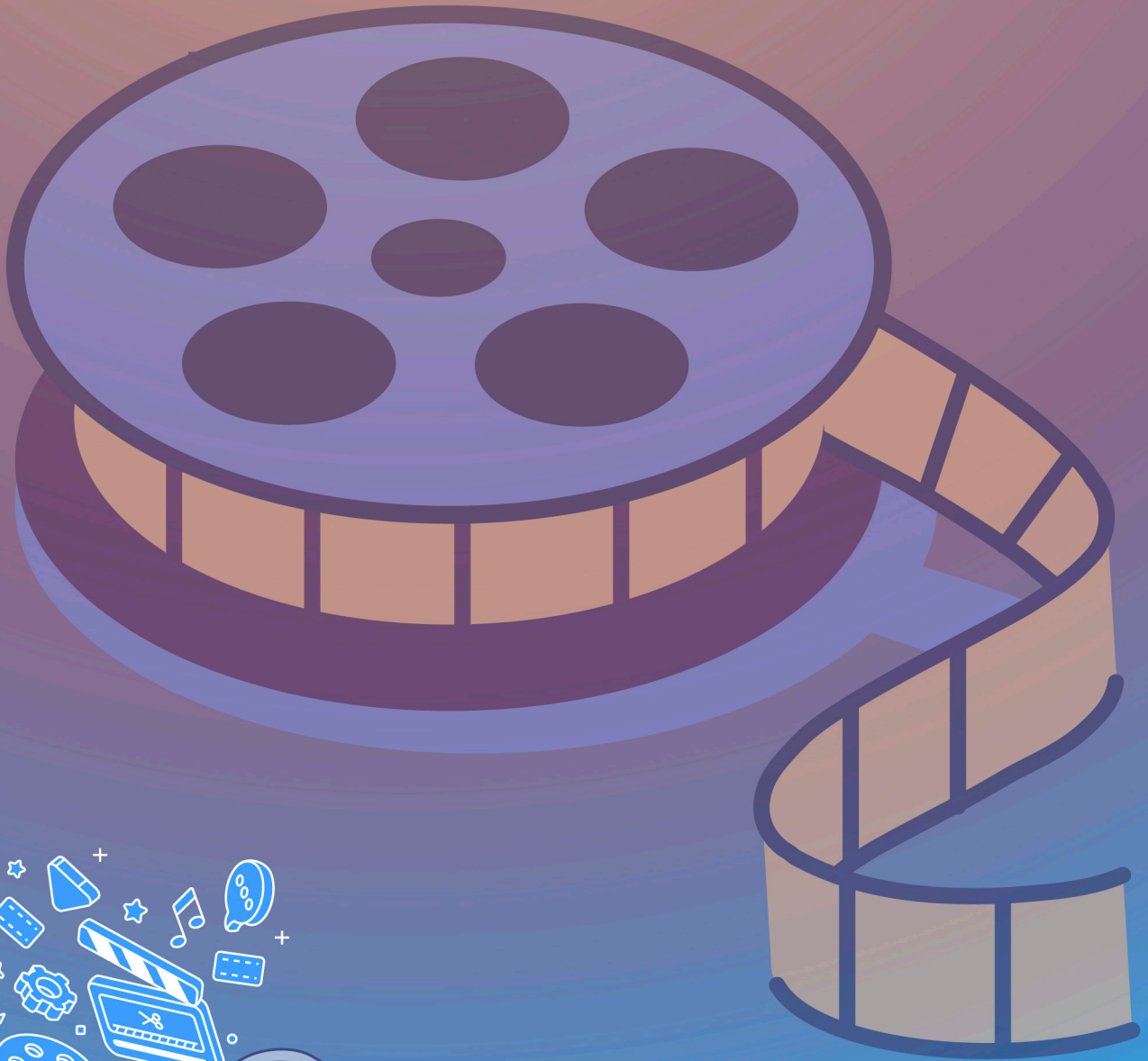




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A Comparative Study of the Watchdog Role Among Kenya's Leading Television Stations

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ABSTRACT

Television remains the main source of news for most Kenyans, giving it real influence over how the public understands governance and accountability, but little research has systematically compared how Kenya's leading stations perform this watchdog function. This study used the Watchdog Theory as its theoretical framework and employed quantitative content analysis to compare watchdog performance across KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV. Systematic random sampling selected 50 watchdog-relevant news stories aired between July 2025 and June 2026 from the stations' official YouTube channels, which were coded for topic focus, scrutiny applied to power, and sourcing patterns. The study found that corruption and public finance dominated coverage at all three stations (42% of stories) but received the lowest average scrutiny of any topic, while government officials were the most cited and most dominant source in total (78% and 44% of stories, respectively). Station profiles diverged sharply, with NTV showing the highest scrutiny and interpretive voice, Citizen TV drawing on the broadest source mix while relying most heavily on government officials as its dominant source, and KTN averaging the lowest scrutiny despite producing the only investigative-level stories across the sample. In light of the foregoing, Kenyan television kept corruption visible but rarely subjected it to critical scrutiny, and all three stations leaned heavily on official sources despite differing formats and ownership structures. These findings support watchdog theory's premise that Kenyan television performs a monitorial function, though unevenly across stations. The study recommends that Kenyan newsrooms expand investigative-strand formats and diversify their sourcing beyond government officials, especially for corruption and public finance stories, which tend to combine high coverage volume with low critical scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION

Media around the world are expected to act as public watchdogs, monitoring the conduct of government, business, and other powerful institutions on behalf of citizens (Kalogeropoulos *et al.*, 2024; Bennett & Serrin, 2005). This monitorial function, often described through the metaphor of the fourth estate, rests on the idea that journalism operates as an independent check on power that formal institutions such as courts and parliament cannot always provide on their own (Marquez-Ramirez *et al.*, 2020; Cook, 2005). In Kenya, television has long been one of the most used platforms through which citizens receive news. However, recent survey data show that social media has grown rapidly and now rivals or surpasses television in reach (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2026; Media Council of Kenya, 2025b). This shift means broadcast stations retain influence over how the public understands governance and accountability issues, but that influence is no longer uncontested.

Three stations, KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV, have for over two decades formed the core of Kenya's television news landscape (Media Council of Kenya, 2024; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). Citizen TV, owned by Royal Media Services, draws the largest national audience (Media Council of Kenya, 2025b); KTN belongs to the Standard Group, and NTV is run by the Nation Media Group. Each of these parent companies has, at different points, faced accusations of

political or commercial capture that could compromise the independence journalism needs to hold power to account (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). All three stations were also shut down together in early 2018 after they aired opposition leader Raila Odinga's symbolic swearing-in ceremony. This episode drew attention both to the willingness of these stations to cover politically sensitive events and to the risks they can face for doing so (Freedom House, 2025; International Press Institute, 2019).

Despite the importance of these three stations to how Kenyans learn about corruption, governance failures, and abuse of power, most existing research on Kenyan media's watchdog performance treats the press in general terms or focuses on a single station or a single event, such as an election period (e.g., Munyi, 2025; Ismail & Deane, 2008). A systematic, comparative examination of how KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV cover accountability issues in their routine news output remains largely missing from Kenyan media scholarship.

Problem Statement

Kenya's constitution and the Media Council of Kenya's code of conduct assign the press a duty to hold power to account (Media Council of Kenya, 2025a; Republic of Kenya, 2010). Yet concentrated media ownership tied to political and business elites, heavy reliance on government advertising, and reported editorial

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interference all work against that duty (Besley & Prat, 2006; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2015; Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2019; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). Because KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV differ in ownership and market position, and because their operating conditions keep shifting amid station closures and advertising disputes (Reporters Without Borders, 2024), these pressures likely affect the three stations unevenly, but whether they actually differ in the scrutiny they apply to power, the sources they rely on, and the topics they investigate remains unknown. Claims about which station performs the watchdog role well and which one falls short therefore rest mostly on commentary and anecdote rather than structured evidence, a gap this study addresses by systematically comparing watchdog-related content across the three stations over a defined period.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study was to compare the watchdog role performance of KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV. The study was further guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the level of accountability-focused coverage across KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV.
2. To assess the level of scrutiny applied to power across KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV.
3. To determine the sourcing patterns used across KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV.

Theoretical Framework

Watchdog Theory

This study is anchored in the normative watchdog conception of the press, also known as the fourth estate. The watchdog theory of the press holds that news media function as an independent check on power, a role that formal institutions such as courts and parliament cannot always fulfill on their own (Cook, 2005; Marquez-Ramirez *et al.*, 2020). McQuail (1994) traces this idea to a liberal view of the press as a forum for public debate and a permanent investigator of wrongdoing, a role popularly summarized in the notion of the fourth estate. Schultz (1998) situates this expectation historically, arguing that the watchdog ideal developed alongside liberal democratic theory as a counterweight to the concentration of political and economic power, with journalists positioned as proxies for a citizenry that cannot itself monitor every exercise of authority.

Bennett and Serrin (2005) define watchdog journalism more concretely as the independent scrutiny of government, business, and other powerful institutions, carried out so that citizens and officials alike receive timely information on matters of public concern. Applied to KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV, this theory sets the normative standard against which the three stations' coverage will be judged, namely how far each station goes in questioning power rather than simply relaying official accounts of events (Ibelema, 2012).

Watchdog performance is not, however, uniform across

media systems. Waisbord (2000) shows that watchdog journalism takes different forms depending on a country's political and economic context, often emerging unevenly and under greater constraint in societies with weaker press protections than in the consolidated Western democracies where the concept was first theorized. Hanitzsch *et al.* (2011), drawing on a comparative survey of journalists across eighteen countries, similarly find that watchdog orientations vary systematically with a country's level of political stability and press freedom, a pattern directly relevant to Kenya's hybrid media environment. Within this literature, Coronel (2010) narrows the watchdog role to the specific case of corruption, arguing that the media carry a threefold responsibility: raising public awareness of governance failures, investigating wrongdoing that would otherwise remain hidden, and sustaining pressure for institutional accountability once abuses are exposed.

Mellado (2015) translated this normative standard into a set of measurable content dimensions, including the intensity of scrutiny applied to power, the presence of the journalist's own interpretive voice in a story, and reliance on sources independent of official channels (Sigal, 1973). These dimensions map directly onto the three specific objectives of this study, which examine accountability-focused coverage, scrutiny of power, and sourcing patterns across the three stations.

Kalogeropoulos *et al.* (2024) add that audiences themselves hold clear expectations of this watchdog function, which means departures from it are not simply an academic concern, but something viewers are positioned to notice and judge. This audience dimension reinforces the normative stakes of the present comparison, since a shortfall against the watchdog standard registers in the content itself and potentially in the trust and news engagement of the public that relies on it (Sun & Payne, 2025). The watchdog theory therefore gives this study both its normative yardstick and its coding categories, consistent with the broader view that journalism's standards should be assessed against explicit normative models of democracy (Strömbäck, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on the definition of watchdog journalism from Bennett and Serrin (2005) introduced above, this definition places the watchdog role at the center of what Norris (2012, as cited in Kalogeropoulos *et al.*, 2024) calls the long-established liberal conception of the press as an independent guardian located in civil society. Cook (2005) extends this idea by treating news organizations as a political institution with its own routines and incentives, rather than a neutral mirror held up to events.

Comparative research shows that watchdog performance is uneven across countries and media systems (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2011). Using the measurable role-performance dimensions Mellado (2015) proposed, outlined above, Marquez-Ramirez *et al.* (2020) compared watchdog journalism across transitional, advanced, and non-democratic countries and found more watchdog content

in more democratic media systems, cautioning that a strong watchdog press is not automatically a positive force since aggressive reporting can sometimes serve narrow partisan interests rather than the public interest. Audience research adds a complementary picture. Analyzing survey data from thirty-eight countries, Kalogeropoulos *et al.* (2024) found that positive evaluations of watchdog performance are associated with higher trust in the news, though audiences in countries with lower press freedom were somewhat more likely to avoid news they perceived as aggressively adversarial.

On the question of corruption specifically, empirical research lends support to the threefold responsibility Coronel (2010) assigns to anti-corruption reporting, outlined above. Camaj (2013) tested a related proposition empirically using cross-national data covering more than one hundred countries and found a strong association between higher levels of media freedom and lower levels of corruption, an association that grew stronger where independent judiciaries were also present, confirming earlier cross-national evidence that a free press is associated with lower corruption (Brunetti & Weder, 2003). Survey evidence from Kenya itself reinforces this at the level of audiences. Using a nationally representative sample of twenty-four hundred respondents from the 2019 Afrobarometer survey, Sun and Payne (2025) found that news consumption increased Kenyans' perception of corruption, but only among respondents who also supported a free press. Put together, these studies suggest that watchdog coverage does not operate in a vacuum, and that its production and effects are shaped by the same structural conditions, ownership, funding, and press freedom that determine how much watchdog content gets produced in the first place.

Kenya's media landscape illustrates these structural conditions directly. A small number of large groups, including Nation Media Group, Standard Group, and Royal Media Services, dominate the television market, and ownership remains closely tied to political and business elites (Ogola, 2011; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). Government advertising forms a large part of media revenue (Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2019; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) documented cases in which advertising was withdrawn in apparent response to critical coverage; more recent reporting confirms these pressures have persisted, with several Standard Group television channels forced to close in 2024 (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Ireri and Ochieng (2020) found that Kenyan newspapers rewarded politicians who criticized government or commented on corruption with greater coverage, more so than gender, ethnicity, or party size predicted visibility, suggesting Kenyan outlets do reward adversarial commentary with coverage, at least in print; whether the same holds for KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV remains untested. Kenyan journalists themselves describe an accountability system that exists on paper but is

inconsistently applied. Interviews with reporters, editors, and news managers at two Kenyan media houses found that despite formal codes of ethics, implementation was often weak, and journalists reported frequent interference from advertisers, politicians, and media owners (Obuya & Ong'ondo, 2019).

The shared 2018 shutdown noted above remains one of the clearest examples of Kenyan television facing consequences for adversarial coverage, and suggests a shared willingness, at least in that instance, to carry politically sensitive content despite the risk. Whether this willingness extends to everyday coverage of corruption, governance, and public expenditure, rather than a single high-profile event, has not been examined through systematic content analysis, a gap in the literature this study is designed to fill.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a quantitative content analysis design, grounded in a positivist orientation that treats media content as an observable phenomenon that can be measured objectively, to compare watchdog coverage across KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe *et al.*, 2014). The population was the main news, current affairs, and investigative programming of the three stations, comprising main evening bulletins, standalone news-segment uploads, and dedicated accountability or investigative strands, accessed through their official YouTube channels and aired between July 2025 and June 2026.

Each station's channel was searched using the keywords "corruption," "scandal," "graft," "audit," "Parliament," "governance," "accountability," "public funds," "investigation," and "service delivery" to build a sampling frame of watchdog-relevant stories. This search yielded a combined sampling frame of 193 qualifying stories (64 for Citizen TV, 66 for KTN, and 63 for NTV), from which systematic random sampling was used (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014), applying a separate sampling interval within each station's portion of the frame, to draw a total sample of 50 news items, 16 to 17 per station, a combined sampling fraction of approximately 26%. The 7 stories used for pilot coding (described below) were drawn from this frame prior to the systematic draw and were removed from the frame before the final sample of 50 was selected, so the pilot cases and the final analytic sample of 50 do not overlap.

A story qualified for inclusion if it addressed a watchdog topic such as corruption and public finance, governance and accountability, human rights, or service delivery, and aired between 1 July 2025 and 30 June 2026 on one of the three stations' main news, current affairs, or investigative programming, including the main evening bulletin, standalone news-segment uploads, and dedicated accountability or investigative strands. It also had to be publicly accessible on the station's official YouTube channel, form a distinct segment organized around a single topic or event, whether uploaded individually or

identifiable as a discrete segment within a full bulletin upload, and be broadcast in English or Kiswahili. Promotional segments, sports results, weather updates, entertainment or human-interest stories, items shorter than 30 seconds, and duplicate uploads were excluded. The unit of analysis was the individual news story, coded for topic area, the level of scrutiny applied to power, ranging from descriptive to critical or investigative treatment, the presence of the reporter's own interpretive voice, source type, distinguishing government, opposition or political, civil society or expert, and citizen sources, and a single dominant-source variable recording whichever source category received the most airtime or attribution in the story.

Two trained coders independently coded a pilot sample of 7 stories, drawn from the sampling frame prior to and separately from the final sample of 50 (equivalent to 14% of the final sample size), before coding the full sample; intercoder agreement for each coded variable was assessed using Cohen's kappa against a threshold of 0.70 (McHugh, 2012), with all variables meeting or exceeding this threshold. Coded data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies and percentages, and cross-tabulations to compare the three stations across topic categories, scrutiny levels, and source types. Because the study analyzed publicly available broadcast material rather than human-participant data, informed consent was not required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final sample comprised 17 stories from Citizen TV, 17 from KTN, and 16 from NTV. Program format

differed by station: Citizen TV's stories were spread across main bulletins (9), discussion-interview segments such as DayBreak (6), and standalone uploads (2); KTN's sample was dominated by standalone segments (15), with two investigative-strand stories; and NTV's sample combined standalone segments (12) with discussion-interview appearances on Fixing the Nation (4). Average story duration was longest for Citizen TV ($M = 439$ seconds), followed by NTV ($M = 418$ seconds) and KTN ($M = 307$ seconds), though all three distributions were right-skewed by a small number of long-form discussion segments.

Accountability-Focused Coverage

Across the pooled sample, corruption and public finance was the leading topic area (42% of stories), followed by service delivery (24%), governance and accountability (20%), and human rights (14%). This ranking held at each individual station, with corruption and public finance the single largest category for Citizen TV (47.1%), KTN (41.2%), and NTV (37.5%). Beyond this shared emphasis, the three stations diverged in secondary topic priorities. NTV devoted proportionally more coverage to human rights (25.0%) than KTN (5.9%) or Citizen TV (11.8%), while KTN allocated the largest share of any station to service delivery (29.4%), compared with 23.5% at Citizen TV and 18.8% at NTV. Coverage of governance and accountability was comparatively even across the three stations, ranging narrowly between 17.6% and 23.5%. In total, watchdog-relevant coverage at all three stations concentrated heavily on corruption and public finance, with human rights consistently the least-covered topic area station-wide except at NTV.

Table 1: Distribution of Topic Area by Television Station

Topic Area	Citizen TV	KTN	NTV	Total
Corruption and public finance	8 (47.1)	7 (41.2)	6 (37.5)	21 (42.0)
Governance and accountability	3 (17.6)	4 (23.5)	3 (18.8)	10 (20.0)
Human rights	2 (11.8)	1 (5.9)	4 (25.0)	7 (14.0)
Service delivery	4 (23.5)	5 (29.4)	3 (18.8)	12 (24.0)

Note. Values are number of stories and column percentage of each station's sample coded to that topic area. $n = 17$ for Citizen TV and KTN, $n = 16$ for NTV, $N = 50$ total.

This concentration on corruption and public finance supports the claim by Coronel (2010) that anti-corruption reporting forms one of the media's core watchdog responsibilities. It also lines up with the Kenyan survey evidence from Sun and Payne (2025) that news consumption raises audience perception of corruption among viewers who also support a free press, since a supply of corruption coverage this large gives such Kenyan viewers ample material from which to form such perceptions.

Scrutiny Applied to Power

Scrutiny of power was coded on a four-point scale ranging from descriptive (1) to investigative (4). The mean score across the full sample was 2.02, indicating that watchdog coverage clustered around a contextual rather than critical or investigative treatment of power. Mean scrutiny differed by station: NTV recorded the highest average scrutiny score ($M = 2.38$), followed by Citizen TV ($M = 1.88$) and KTN ($M = 1.82$). The distribution

underlying these averages varied considerably. At Citizen TV, coverage was bimodal: 47.1% of stories were purely descriptive and 35.3% were critical, with comparatively few contextual stories and no investigative stories. KTN's coverage skewed towards the lower end of the scale, with 47.1% descriptive and 35.3% contextual, though KTN produced the only investigative-level stories in the sample (11.8%, both drawn from its investigative strand). NTV's coverage clustered at the critical level, with 56.3% of its stories coded as critical, the highest proportion of critical treatment at any station, and only 18.8% purely descriptive. Consistent with this pattern, the reporter's own interpretive or evaluative voice was

present most often at NTV (62.5% of stories), followed by Citizen TV (47.1%) and KTN (29.4%), the station with the least critical and least investigative coverage in total. When scrutiny was examined by topic area rather than station, governance and accountability stories ($M = 2.30$) and human rights stories ($M = 2.29$) attracted the highest average scrutiny. Corruption and public finance stories, despite being the most frequently covered topic in total, received the lowest average scrutiny of any topic area ($M = 1.81$). This suggests that much of this coverage reported audits, court proceedings, or official allegations descriptively rather than interrogating them critically. These patterns reinforce the claim by Mellado (2015) that

Table 2: Scrutiny Applied to Power and Journalistic Voice by Television Station

Measure	Citizen TV	KTN	NTV	Total
Descriptive (1)	8 (47.1)	8 (47.1)	3 (18.8)	19 (38.0)
Contextual (2)	3 (17.6)	6 (35.3)	4 (25.0)	13 (26.0)
Critical (3)	6 (35.3)	1 (5.9)	9 (56.3)	16 (32.0)
Investigative (4)	0 (0.0)	2 (11.8)	0 (0.0)	2 (4.0)
M scrutiny score	1.88	1.82	2.38	2.02
Journalistic voice present	8 (47.1)	5 (29.4)	10 (62.5)	23 (46.0)

Note. Scrutiny of power was coded on a four-point scale from 1 (descriptive) to 4 (investigative). Values for the four scale categories are the number of stories and column percentage; M is the mean scrutiny score. Journalistic voice values are the number of stories and the percentage in which the reporter's own interpretive or evaluative voice was present. $n = 17$ for Citizen TV and KTN, $n = 16$ for NTV, $N = 50$ total.

scrutiny of power and the reporter's interpretive voice are related, not independent, dimensions of watchdog role performance, since the two variables produced the same station ranking (NTV highest, KTN lowest), and support the definition of watchdog journalism by Bennett and Serrin (2005) as reporting that documents and questions power rather than simply relaying official accounts. The moderate, unevenly distributed scrutiny profile is also broadly consistent with cross-national evidence that watchdog orientation tracks a country's political stability and press freedom (Waisbord, 2000; Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2011). That corruption and public finance stories, the most frequently covered topic, received the lowest average scrutiny of any topic area echoes the interview-based finding by Obuya and Ong'ondo (2019) that Kenyan journalists face persistent, if inconsistently applied, pressure from advertisers, politicians, and media owners, since reporters appear more willing to cover corruption stories in volume than to interrogate them critically.

Sourcing Patterns

Government or state officials were the most frequently cited source category in total, appearing in 78% of stories and identified as the dominant source in 44% of stories sample-wide. Reliance on government sourcing was

highest at Citizen TV, where 94.1% of stories cited a government source and 52.9% treated government as the dominant source, the highest such share of any station. KTN and NTV drew on government sources somewhat less exclusively (64.7% and 75.0% of stories respectively) and made comparatively greater use of civil society or expert sources. Such sources appeared in 35.3% of KTN stories and 31.3% of NTV stories, compared with only 17.6% at Citizen TV, and were coded as the dominant source in 35.3% of KTN stories and 25.0% of NTV stories, versus 0% at Citizen TV. Opposition or political sources appeared more often in Citizen TV's coverage (47.1% of stories) than at KTN (29.4%) or NTV (37.5%), and were the dominant source in 29.4% of Citizen TV stories compared with 11.8% at KTN and just 6.3% at NTV. Citizen or ordinary-person sources appeared at broadly similar rates across stations (52.9% at Citizen TV and KTN, 43.8% at NTV) and were most often the dominant source at NTV (31.3%). Citizen TV stories also drew on the broadest spread of source types per story on average ($M = 2.12$), compared with NTV ($M = 1.88$) and KTN ($M = 1.82$), even though Citizen TV's coverage was simultaneously the most government-dominant of the three stations.

The dominance of government sourcing across all three

stations bears out the classic observation by Sigal (1973) that routine reliance on official channels is a structural feature of newsmaking rather than an incidental one.

Citizen TV's combination of the broadest average spread of source types per story with the heaviest government dominance echoes the caution from Marquez-Ramirez

Table 3: Source Citation Rates and Source Diversity by Television Station

Source Type	Citizen TV	KTN	NTV	Total
Government or state official	16 (94.1)	11 (64.7)	12 (75.0)	39 (78.0)
Opposition or political figure	8 (47.1)	5 (29.4)	6 (37.5)	19 (38.0)
Civil society, academic, or professional body	3 (17.6)	6 (35.3)	5 (31.3)	14 (28.0)
Citizen or ordinary person	9 (52.9)	9 (52.9)	7 (43.8)	25 (50.0)
M source types per story	2.12	1.82	1.88	1.94

Note. Values for source-type rows are the number of stories and the column percentage of each station's sample in which the source type was cited; stories could cite more than one source type, so column percentages do not sum to 100. M source types per story is the mean number of distinct source types cited per story, and the total value is a sample-weighted average across stations. $n = 17$ for Citizen TV and KTN, $n = 16$ for NTV, $N = 50$ total.

Table 4: Dominant Source by Television Station

Dominant Source	Citizen TV	KTN	NTV	Total
Government or state official	9 (52.9)	7 (41.2)	6 (37.5)	22 (44.0)
Opposition or political figure	5 (29.4)	2 (11.8)	1 (6.3)	8 (16.0)
Civil society, academic, or professional-body	0 (0.0)	6 (35.3)	4 (25.0)	10 (20.0)
Citizen or ordinary person	3 (17.6)	2 (11.8)	5 (31.3)	10 (20.0)

Note. Dominant source is a single nominal variable recording whichever source category received the most airtime or attribution in a story, so values within each station column sum to that station's total sample. $n = 17$ for Citizen TV and KTN, $n = 16$ for NTV, $N = 50$ total.

et al. (2020) that watchdog indicators do not necessarily move together, since a station can consult numerically diverse sources while still allowing officials to frame the story's dominant narrative.

Citizen TV's comparatively greater reliance on opposition or political sources is broadly consistent with the finding by Ireri and Ochieng (2020) that Kenyan newspapers reward politicians who criticize government or comment on corruption with greater coverage, extending to television a dynamic Ireri and Ochieng (2020) documented in print, a link they themselves flagged as untested. Finally, Citizen TV's comparatively lower reliance on independent civil society or expert sources, set against its position as the station with the largest audience and ownership tied to Royal Media Services, is consistent with concerns raised by Ogola (2011) and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2023) that concentrated ownership with political and business ties can push routine coverage

towards official framing at the expense of independent voices.

Synthesis Across Watchdog Dimensions

Table 5 brings the three specific objectives together by ranking the stations on each objective individually, since no station led on all three at once.

Discussion

A Shared Agenda Anchored in Corruption

Corruption and public finance were the leading topics at every station, consistent with the emphasis Coronel (2010) places on corruption as a key watchdog concern. This shared emphasis was not identical across stations, however. NTV's secondary emphasis fell on human rights and KTN's on service delivery, a difference that likely reflects each station's own programming priorities and beat structure rather than a single shared editorial agenda.

Table 5: Station Rankings by Watchdog Dimension

Objective	1st	2nd	3rd
Accountability-focused coverage	Citizen TV (47.1)	KTN (41.2)	NTV (37.5)
Scrutiny applied to power	NTV (2.38)	Citizen TV (1.88)	KTN (1.82)
Sourcing independence	NTV (62.5)	KTN (58.8)	Citizen TV (47.1)

Note. Rankings are ordered from strongest to weakest watchdog performance on each objective; for accountability-focused coverage and scrutiny applied to power, higher values indicate stronger performance. Accountability-focused coverage is each station's share of stories on corruption and public finance, the leading topic category, reported in Table 1. Sourcing independence is the percentage of stories in which a source other than a government or state official was the dominant source, calculated as 100 minus each station's government-dominant percentage reported in Table 4, so higher values likewise indicate stronger performance. No station ranks first on all three objectives at once, so no single combined ranking is presented.

If the Kenyan survey finding from Sun and Payne (2025) that news consumption raises audience perception of corruption among viewers who also support a free press holds generally, the volume of corruption coverage found here is large enough that such viewers of all three stations are likely being exposed to ample material for forming judgements about the extent of corruption in public life. Whether that exposure translates into a critical understanding of corruption, however, depends less on how often the topic is covered than on how it is treated once covered, a question the scrutiny findings below address directly.

This corruption-centered agenda sits within a broader press-freedom context that likely shapes which accountability topics stations find safest to cover in volume. The most recent assessment by Freedom House (2025) continues to classify the Kenyan press as only partly free, and the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) has documented sustained pressure on critical reporting from politicians, advertisers, and media owners; corruption and public finance stories, which can often be anchored in official audit reports, court filings, or parliamentary proceedings, may represent a comparatively lower-risk way of appearing to fulfil the watchdog role than the more institutionally pointed governance and accountability category, which appeared far less consistently across the three stations.

This distinction matters because corruption and governance, and accountability are conceptually adjacent but not identical. The former concerns individual or institutional financial wrongdoing, while the latter concerns the broader processes, oversight mechanisms, and institutional conduct through which power is exercised, a category several studies in the literature review treat as no less important to the watchdog function than corruption itself. Kenyan television's heavy lean towards this narrower, document-anchored category is broadly consistent with an audience-perception finding in the Media Council of Kenya (2024) state of the media survey, in which roughly three-quarters of Kenyans surveyed viewed government-related coverage as unfair. That finding does not itself document institutional

constraints on journalists in the way press-freedom organizations such as Reporters Without Borders (2024) and Freedom House (2025) do. It is nonetheless consistent with an environment in which stations gravitate towards document-anchored corruption stories over more institutionally pointed reporting, suggesting that the topical dominance of corruption in this sample reflects both its news value and its relative safety as a reporting subject.

Uneven Scrutiny Behind a Common Watchdog Agenda

Across scrutiny and voice, no single station performs strongest on both measures. NTV combined the highest average scrutiny with the most frequent interpretive voice, while KTN recorded the lowest average scrutiny and the least frequent voice, but was the only station to produce investigative-strand stories, both of which reached the top of the scrutiny scale. Format appears to matter here as much as station identity. KTN's investigative-level stories both came from its dedicated investigative strand and the discussion-interview segments that recur at Citizen TV and NTV, DayBreak and Fixing the Nation, consistently carried longer, more interpretive treatment than the shorter standalone segments that otherwise dominate each station's output.

Average story length by itself is a poor guide to this pattern. Citizen TV's stories ran longest on average but still trailed NTV on both scrutiny and voice, suggesting that which format a story appears in matters more than how long it runs. This pattern lends support to the argument by Mellado (2015) that scrutiny and interpretive voice are related dimensions of watchdog role performance rather than independent traits, and extends the call by Ibelema (2012) to revisit the watchdog triad by showing that scrutiny, voice, and format choices combine in station-specific ways rather than in a single uniform pattern.

This unevenness is sharpest when scrutiny is examined by topic rather than by station. Corruption and public finance stories, the most frequently covered topic identified above, received the lowest average scrutiny of any topic area, the opposite of what the threefold

model proposed by Coronel (2010), raising awareness, investigating wrongdoing, and sustaining pressure, would predict if all three responsibilities were being discharged with equal force. The pattern suggests that Kenyan television fulfils the first of the three responsibilities identified by Coronel (2010), keeping corruption visible and on the public agenda, more consistently than the second and third, investigating it independently and sustaining pressure for accountability once it surfaces. It is also consistent with the interview-based finding by Obuya and Ong'ondo (2019) that Kenyan journalists face persistent, if inconsistently applied, pressure from advertisers, politicians, and media owners, since reporters appear more willing to cover corruption stories in volume than to interrogate them critically.

Official Sourcing and the Weight of Ownership

These sourcing patterns line up with what is known about the ownership and commercial position of each station. Citizen TV, which draws the largest national audience and is owned by Royal Media Services, is the station whose routine coverage in this study showed the heaviest government dependence, a pattern consistent with the theoretical account of media capture by Besley and Prat (2006), in which the outlets with the most to lose commercially have the most reason to accommodate the sources they depend on for continued access. KTN's parent, Standard Group, had several television channels forced to close in 2024 amid advertising and licensing disputes (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Despite this pressure, KTN drew comparatively more on civil society and expert sources, yet its routine output was, on the scrutiny findings above, the least critical of the three stations. At the same time, it was the only station to produce investigative-strand content. This combination may reflect a newsroom that accommodates commercial pressure in its routine coverage while protecting a smaller, more insulated investigative unit. This concentration of ownership with political and business ties, at Citizen TV and more broadly, is consistent with concerns raised by Ogola (2011) and the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2023) that such ties can push routine coverage towards official framing at the expense of independent voices.

Unlike KTN, however, NTV's departure from government sourcing was driven less by civil society or expert voices than by ordinary citizens. Citizen or ordinary-person sources were NTV's single most common dominant source category, ahead of civil society or expert sources, pointing to a grassroots rather than expert-driven alternative to official framing. This sits alongside the shared history of risk-taking discussed earlier, when all three parent companies, including NTV's Nation Media Group, faced accusations of political or commercial capture (Reporters Without Borders, 2024) and were shut down together in 2018 (International Press Institute, 2019). That history has not translated, on this evidence, into a shared sourcing profile years later, suggesting that

willingness to air a single high-profile political event is a poor predictor of how a station sources its routine accountability coverage.

Implications for Watchdog Theory

Theoretically, these findings support the core premise shared by McQuail (1994), Schultz (1998), and Cook (2005) that television news in Kenya performs a monitorial function rather than simply relaying official accounts, since even the least critical station in this sample, KTN, produced investigative content, and corruption and public finance, arguably the most consequential of the four watchdog topics sampled, formed a plurality of coverage at every station.

At the same time, the unevenness documented here complicates the fourth estate metaphor that treats "the press" as a single institutional actor. The call by Strömbäck (2005) to assess journalism against explicit normative models of democracy is thus better served by comparing named stations than by evaluating Kenyan television as an undifferentiated whole, since the three stations examined here occupy visibly different points on the watchdog spectrum despite operating in the same national market and under the same broad legal and constitutional obligations (Republic of Kenya, 2010; Media Council of Kenya, 2025a). The findings also extend the claim by Waisbord (2000) and Hanitzsch *et al.* (2011) that watchdog performance varies with a country's political and press-freedom context by showing that this kind of variation can operate within a single hybrid media system rather than only between countries at different points on that spectrum. Finally, if the finding by Kalogeropoulos *et al.* (2024) that audience trust tracks perceived watchdog performance holds in Kenya, the station-level differences found here imply that Kenyan viewers may be forming meaningfully different levels of trust in KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV depending on which station's routine accountability coverage they follow, an audience-level implication that follows directly from, but was not tested by, the content analysis reported here.

CONCLUSION

This study compared the watchdog role performance of KTN, Citizen TV, and NTV across accountability-focused coverage, scrutiny applied to power, and sourcing patterns, and found that the watchdog role is performed unevenly both across stations and across the dimensions that make up that role. Corruption and public finance dominated the topical agenda at all three stations, consistent with the normative weight the literature places on anti-corruption reporting, but this dominant topic attracted the least critical treatment of any category, and each station showed a distinct profile rather than a uniform pattern, NTV strongest on scrutiny and interpretive voice, Citizen TV broadest in sourcing but most government-dominant, and KTN weakest on average scrutiny but the sole producer of investigative-level stories.

It is worth noting that these conclusions were drawn from a single year of publicly available programming and should thus be read as a snapshot of that period rather than a fixed description of each station. Given the foregoing, and with that scope in mind, these results support the watchdog theory's premise that Kenyan television performs a monitorial function, while also showing that this function is shaped unevenly by each station's ownership, format choices, and operating pressures rather than expressed as a single, consistent standard of press performance.

Recommendations

Kenyan television stations should expand investigative-strand formats rather than relying mainly on standalone segments, and broaden their sourcing on corruption and governance stories beyond government officials. Newsrooms should flag corruption and public finance stories for follow-up investigative treatment, since this topic combines the highest coverage volume with the lowest scrutiny. Future research should extend the sampling period, include non-YouTube output, and add interviews with editors and reporters.

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