Digital Gatekeeping and African Sub-regional News Flow: An Analysis of News Triggers on *CNN* Africa's Mobile App, 2018–2019

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Abstract

This study provides a historical analysis of the news triggers associated with *CNN* Africa's mobile-app coverage of African sub-regions between January 2018 and June 2019. It addresses a conceptual gap in journalism research by distinguishing news triggers-signals that activate journalistic attention-from news values and subsequent processes of gatekeeping, agenda-setting and framing. Using quantitative content analysis, the study examined 329 sampled *CNN* Africa mobile posts and compared the distribution of primary news triggers across Africa's five sub-regions. Statements by news makers representing arms of government were the most frequent trigger (15.50%), followed by government-agency actions/statements (12.16%); together, they accounted for 27.66% of the sampled posts. However, trigger patterns varied across the sub-regions, with official-government triggers particularly prominent in West and East Africa and more heterogeneous combinations of triggers evident elsewhere. In terms of comparative frequency, local Africa news-media reports occurred three times more as international news-agency reports; 5.25 times as national news-agency reports and seven times more frequently as foreign news-media reports. The study concludes that news triggering constitutes a useful pre-gate analytical process for explaining how potential news subjects become visible before editorial selection, while local African media constitute an identifiable upstream pathway in international news flow. It proposes a four-stage Media Attention Cycle-Triggering, Gatekeeping, Agenda-setting and Framing-as a conceptual framework for further empirical testing. The study recommends that international news organisations diversify their information pathways beyond official-government communication by systematically incorporating credible local-media, civil-society, research and community-based signals while maintaining rigorous verification standards. The findings provide a bounded historical baseline to examine current and future trigger patterns in international news media.

Keywords: News Triggers; Gatekeeping; Agenda-setting; Mobile Journalism; African News Flow

Introduction

Millions of events occur daily. But only a few are brought to the attention of news reporters and editors. Even fewer eventually become news through the application of news values in editorial judgment. What are they that bring news subjects to the attention of international news media professionals? In this study, those initiators are conceptualized as 'News Triggers' which are defined as *pre-gate stimuli that activate journalistic attention.*

The need to distinguish between "what brings" a potential news subject to the attention of international news media professionals and what makes them "decide" to turn that piece of information into news is very cogent. Most studies, following Galtung and Ruge's (1965) Chapel Hill study of news factors, till date have dwelt on the concept of news values; giving rise to its popularity, acceptance and application both in the theory and practice of journalism. News values answer the question, 'why does an event become news?' They are concerned with media professionals' news selection decisions. Differing to that, news trigger(s) addresses the question, "what brought the event to the attention of news selection decision makers?" The distinction is critical in today's digital media environment where immediacy and source proximity heavily influence what is seen and circulated. While news value involves consideration or evaluations which are consciously made by reporters and editors, news triggers, in many cases, are initiated by agencies or agents which despite being independent and unobligated to provide news materials to news media, are dependent on news media for international visibility and voice amplification.

News value, at the primary level, looks at the intrinsic or associative attributes of an occurrence which make it worth considering during news item selection and news production. It's akin to weighing a substance on a scale to determine its weight in relation to its competition. They refer to codified heuristics by which Journalism scholars and practitioners judge news worthiness of events and newsroom editorial decisions are made (Caple, 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Auwal, 2015; Caple & Bednarek, 2013; Brüggemann, 2013; Kheirabadi & Aghagolzadeh, 2012; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001).

Unlike news value, news trigger as a concept appears not to have been given as much attention and is therefore not extensively discussed and developed in literature. Study about antecedent factors that are responsible for bringing potential news to the attention of news producers in the first instance appear limited. The

natural consequence is that there is no codified system by which we can determine best channels by which the attention of news media can be captured. This study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating the pattern of news triggers in the news covered in *CNN* Africa's mobile news posts about the African sub-regions. The study does not seek to infer *CNN* Africa's current editorial practices from historical data. By focusing specifically on *CNN* Africa mobile app posts published between January 2018 and June 2019, it reconstructs the pattern of African sub-regional news flow and the triggers associated with international news selection during a defined period. This temporal boundary is analytically important because such historically bounded evidence is valuable for establishing baseline patterns from which continuity and change in subsequent international digital news coverage of Africa may be investigated.

Agenda Setting presupposes that the media brings issues to the attention of the public and therefore triggers public discuss. But *what triggers* media's attention, that is what actions or events influence the media with regards to setting off media narratives? Like the doctrines of news values which explain the principles that guide the media in news selection decision-making have been robustly discussed in journalism, these questions need to be addressed.

Wu (2000, 2007) examined systemic determinants of news by looking at macro sociopolitical and economic factors that govern news flow. These macro factors, such as GDP, military strength, population and geographic size in themselves do not trigger news and are therefore not news triggers but are factors that affect the value journalists attach to news triggers - events or actions that come to their attention. From the perspective of the journalist, Brüggemann (2013, p. 404) categorized news triggers into "four primary ways in which news is initiated", namely, event-driven reporting, reactive/proactive reporting, follow-up/bandwagon and self-referential reporting. These conceptualization of news triggers does not cover audience perspective which would require identification of individual news triggers. Moreover, they appear to overlap with news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

Pew Research Center (1998) and Pew Research Centre (2007) reports mentioned triggers of news but did not distinguish it from news values also, or apply it as *pre-gate* construct. Particularly, the possibility that some studies may confuse news triggers with news values by using both terms interchangeably certainly does exist as it is the case in the study by Gulati (2011, p. 370) where "Story trigger" is being described as "the reason" why article got printed in the news. Also, to the best of

our knowledge, despite search engine checks, no study appears to have pre-empted that confusion of terms (see GeiB & Kepplinger, 2025; Weaver & Choi, 2014). The term, 'trigger' which is synonymous with the phrase or words like 'set off', 'prompt', 'activate' and 'start', cannot be conceptualized or applied in news media in the same sense as news value. Therefore, news triggers require theoretical specification, conceptual differentiation, operationalisation and empirical application as a pre-gate construct. It has been argued that the necessity of news values, "come into play once an event or issue is news-triggered" (Obi, Okon & Mbazie, 2023). This concept which has its rightful place in both journalism theory and practice needs to be differentiated from related journalistic concepts and be empirically tested.

In the particular case of African sub-regions, the persistent underrepresentation and narrow coverage in international news highlight the need to understand what activated media interest in the first place during a particular phase in the expansion of mobile and platform-based news consumption. scholarship on African international news flow has concentrated heavily on volume/visibility; news values; framing and determinants of foreign coverage; while less attention has been given to the proximate events, actors or communicative signals that trigger international news selection, especially comparatively across African sub-regions. The absence of systematic research into the triggers of international news coverage, particularly from mobile-first platforms, leaves a gap in understanding how African stories gain visibility. The question therefore would be, what patterns of news trigger characterised *CNN* Africa's representation of African sub-regions during the 2018–2019 period, and what does this historical evidence reveal about international mobile news gatekeeping?

This study therefore examines *CNN* Africa's mobile news flow during the defined historical period of January 2018 to June 2019. Rather than treating the dataset as representative of *CNN* Africa's current news practices, the study provides a bounded historical analysis of the news triggers and gatekeeping patterns through which African sub-regions entered an international mobile news agenda during this period. The temporal delimitation is therefore integral to the study, it establishes an empirical baseline for understanding sub-regional differences in African international news visibility during a particular phase in the expansion of mobile and platform-based news consumption.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to identify the news triggers for different sub-regions of Africa in international news flow and specifically compare how different media reports trigger international news for the sub-regions. The study is guided by two research questions, namely:

1. What news triggers characterised *CNN* Africa's mobile app coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018–June 2019?
2. How did local African news-media reports compare with national and international news-agency reports and foreign news-media reports as triggers of *CNN* Africa's coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018 - June 2019?

This study is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it introduces and legitimizes the concept- news trigger as distinct from news values, positioning it as a foundational *pre-gate mechanism* within the broader media attention flow model. This contributes a novel conceptual layer to journalism studies, enhancing the understanding of how news originates. Practically, the study informs public relations and media advocacy strategies by identifying which triggers are most effective in gaining international media attention, particularly for African voices seeking global representation.

This study covers a period of eighteen months, precisely January 2018 to June 2019- the period preceding the date commencement of the study. The content analysed is limited to news stories in the hard news, feature, editorial and opinion to the exclusion of others about the sub-regions of Africa by *CNN* Africa mobile App. The focus is on identifying news triggers behind international news with regard to five African sub-regions - West, East, Central, North, and Southern Africa.

Conceptual Clarification

News Trigger: A stimulus or action - such as a government statement, civic protest, or journalistic initiative - that brings an event to the attention of the media, activating the preconditions for its potential news coverage.

Theoretical Framework

The investigation was guided by gate keeping, agenda-setting and framing.

Gate keeping Theory

Gatekeeping was first associated with communication flows through Kurt Lewin's (1947) work on channels of group life, as later adapted into journalism and mass communication research. Fundamentally it presupposes that the media has capacity

to: (a) deny or allow issues, events and persons flow-access into public consciousness through its selectivity mechanism and processes. (b) Confer salience upon certain issues, events or personalities by repeatedly focusing attention on them, thereby keeping them constantly before the public's eyes. Shoemaker (2009, p.1) describes it as "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, and it is the centre of media's role in modern public life."

In this study, gatekeeping is conceptualized as the second phase in the news attention cycle - news triggers precede and influence gatekeeping outcomes. It is therefore the premise for this study's attempt to ascertain impact of local news media reports triggers and compare it against foreign news reports.

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda Setting is a mass media theory that seeks to explain the relationship between media issues output through formats like news, editorial and commentary, and the publics' perception of those issues. It was first empirically tested by McCombs and Shaw (1972). Wanta and Alkazemi (2017) cited in Obi, Okon and Mbazie (2023, p. 18) note that seven spheres of agenda setting have been identified since then.

Agenda setting presupposes that the media has the capacity to initiate public discussion of issues by prioritising certain issues. Once a story passes through the gatekeeping filter, its frequency and prominence shape public discourse. The principle is that specific issue prioritization by the media leads to their prioritization by the public. This study links dominant news triggers to the eventual prominence of issues in *CNN* Africa's coverage of the continent.

Literature Review

Conceptualising News triggers and Distinguishing the Construct from Related Journalistic Concepts: The *pre-gate phase* in news production process

This study advances journalism theory by conceptualising "news triggers" not merely as incidental precursors to news selection, but as a distinct *pre-gate attention activation system* that operates upstream of gatekeeping. While classical frameworks such as gatekeeping (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker, 2009), agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and framing (Entman, 1993) provide robust explanations of how news is selected, prioritised, and interpreted, they largely assume the prior availability of information within the media field. This study

challenges that assumption by foregrounding the mechanisms through which information becomes visible to journalists in the first instance.
By the law of cause and effect, we understand that for an event to become news, it is triggered- that is brought to the attention of the media. This gives credence to the postulation that an event is not news until it has been reported. But for an event to be reported, it must gain the attention of news producers. The concept, *news trigger*, properly defined, is the activator of media's attention to a potential news worthy object. Put differently, it refers to *'pre-gate stimuli that activate journalistic attention.'* The argument is simple. Until an issue comes to the attention of the media gatekeepers, the utility of news values is zero. As without the foundation, the house cannot rise, without news trigger, news value would not come to play. Therefore, the concept of news trigger becomes an important area of inquiry for several reasons. First, because it precedes gatekeeping where news value is weighed. Secondly, the concepts - media agenda and public agenda- are already well established in literature. Media agenda brings reported issues, events and personalities to the attention of the public while public agenda is the response of the public to specific issues that come to their attention via the media (Nisbet, 2008). So, while media reports are capable of getting the attention of the public, what are they that draw the attention of the media and by what means? Also, if gatekeeping presupposes that there is a 'gate', two important questions ensue. First, 'what knocks at the gate?' These pre-gate factors need to be conceptualised and differentiated.

From the foregoing, there is need to distinguish news triggers as construct from related journalistic concepts. A news trigger is the identifiable event, action, statement, information release, media report, journalistic initiative, or other observable signal that activates journalistic attention to a potential news subject and provides the immediate occasion for its consideration as news (GeiB & Kepplinger, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2003). They constitute observable signals - originating from institutional actors, civic groups, or media systems - that elevate an occurrence from background reality into the field of journalistic awareness. And are therefore initial signals that spark journalistic attention leading to the process of news value consideration - a fundamental gatekeeping function. Without them, the news cycle cannot proceed to gatekeeping, agenda-setting, framing and unto public agenda. They can be described as internal and external event-based activation points that (may operate independently of established media relationships and routines) explain how such information enters the decision-making space.

The central analytical question is: *What activated journalistic attention to this potential story at this particular point?* This differs from asking whether an event was newsworthy, who supplied information, how journalists routinely gathered it, who strategically promoted it, whether editors selected it, how salient it became, or how it circulated across national media systems.

News triggering is therefore neither a substitute for news values nor another name for gatekeeping, sourcing or agenda-building. News values explain the perceived newsworthiness of an event; news factors operationalise attributes associated with selection; sources identify information providers; sourcing routines explain recurrent information-gathering practices; media relations and news subsidies concern strategic attempts to secure journalistic attention; gatekeeping explains selection and rejection; agenda-building explains the broader construction of the media agenda; and transnational news-flow research examines the movement and distribution of news across media systems (Gutiérrez-Atala, 2026; Geiß & Kepplinger, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2007). By contrast, news triggering, identifies the observable occurrence or signal that activates journalistic attention and creates the immediate occasion for a potential story to enter the selection environment. This distinction resolves a longstanding conceptual overlap in journalism studies by separating four analytically distinct processes: (a) activation (news triggers), (b) selection (gatekeeping), (c) prioritisation (agenda-setting), and (d) interpretation (framing). In doing so, the study provides a clearer sequencing of media processes, particularly in digital-first environments characterised by speed, decentralisation, and multiple points of information entry.

This study builds upon earlier operational uses of the story-trigger idea (GeiB & Kepplinger, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2003) by developing and theoretically specifying news triggering as an explicit *pre-gate* analytical construct, clarifying its conceptual boundaries in relation to established journalism concepts, operationalising it for the analysis of international African mobile-news flow, and locating it within a proposed sequence linking attention activation, gatekeeping, media-agenda formation and framing.

Accordingly, the study introduces a four-stage Media Attention Cycle comprising: (1) Triggering (activation), (2) Gatekeeping (selection), (3) Agenda-setting (salience), and (4) Framing (interpretation). This model analytically separates visibility, selection, salience, and meaning construction - dimensions that are often conflated in journalism scholarship. It therefore contributes a new layer to the

theoretical framework governing news production in general and in particular, international news production as shown below:

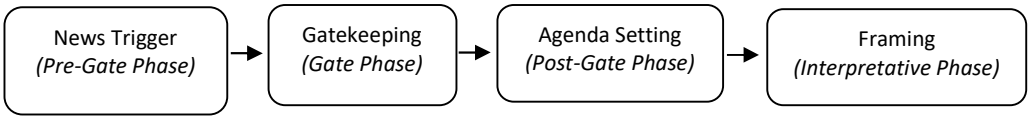


Fig. 1 The Media Attention Cycle Model

The Media Attention Cycle proposed in this study conceptualises news production as a sequential but interrelated process. At the Pre-gate or activation stage, news triggers determine which events become visible to journalists. At the gatekeeping stage, editorial routines determine which of these events are selected. At the agenda-setting stage, frequency and prominence determine issue salience. Finally, at the framing stage, interpretive structures shape how these issues are understood by audiences. This four-stage model extends existing scholarship by explicitly incorporating the pre-gate phase, thereby addressing the previously under-theorised question of what initiates media attention in the first place.

Pew Research Center (1998) identified 19 factors that that have the potential of arresting media attention, namely spontaneous/unplanned news/action, investigation, journalistic enterprise, release of poll results, release of research/report, provision of incremental fact(s)/story update, anniversary major event or issue, trial balloon, analysis/interpretation, preview/forward look/curtain raiser about an issue, executive (government) action, govt. agency action(includes police/prosecutor), judicial action, legislative/legislator action, news maker action or event(non-government), news maker statement(non-government), news maker statement (govt. legislature and executive), political candidate action, emerging figure action.

The study, however did not distinguish between positive and negative spontaneous/unplanned news/action. For instance, both the 2019 catastrophic crash of 737 MAX 8 aircraft, Flight ET302, and the 2018 heroic rescue of a child hanging from the fourth-floor balcony in France by an illegal migrant-Mamoudou Gassama-were spontaneous/unplanned/news actions. Broad categorization of the two events as spontaneous/unplanned/news action hides their fundamental characteristic thereby undermining the principle of exclusivity and 'exhaustivity' in categorization (Wimmer & Dominick 2011, p. 166). This is important because, by

distinguishing between the negative and the positive we can determine which type triggers news more than the other. Therefore, that distinction is made in this study.

News flow and news trigger are directly related for there is no news without a news trigger. It therefore can be argued that the news flow of sub-regions of Africa is traceable to news triggers. But question arises as to whether news triggers are sufficient in themselves to cause news flow? Journalism studies inform us that journalists exercise judgment in news selection. Pew Research Centre, defined news trigger as "what triggered" each story to become news in the first place." That creates a conceptual confusion between news trigger and news values. The argument here is that a news trigger is rather "what brought the event to the attention of the media in the first place' and not what made it to become news, this falls within the domain of news values.

This study clears that conflation by observing that countless number of potential news stories get 'triggered' daily, but only a select few meet individual journalist and organisation level gatekeeping news selection criteria and news values thresholds. We therefore contend that news flow occurs at the intersection of news trigger and news values as can be demonstrated with a sample set of news triggers and news values in Fig. 2 below

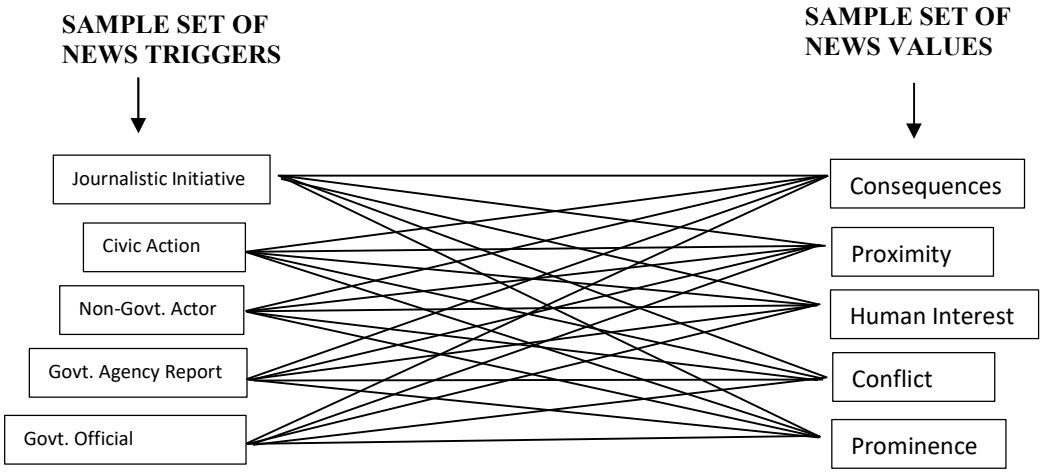


Fig. 2: Conceptual Model: Intersection of news triggers and news values model**.** It supports the theorization that news selection is influenced by not only news values but also by the origin and nature of the news-triggers.

Review of Empirical Studies

In "Framing the News: The Triggers, Frames, and Messages in Newspaper Coverage," Pew Research Center (1998) analysed 2269 news stories published on the front page of three national and 4 regional newspapers within two months. The study identified 19 triggers that project events to the attention of the news media. The study did not situate news trigger within the broader media attention model wherein this study has located it as Pre-gate phase. The study also did not distinguish between positive and negative spontaneous/unplanned News/Action as is done in this current study. This study therefore contributes a novel model of the intersection of news triggers with news values as news selection decision-making points. Using quantitative content analysis to identify factors that bring event(s) to the attention of the media, the current study examined news posts on a digital-first platform over a period of 18 months unlike the study under review which studied two months of front-page newspapers stories.

Methodology

This study employed quantitative content analysis to examine the news triggers associated with *CNN* Africa's mobile coverage of African sub-regions during the historical period from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2019. The population comprised 836 eligible *CNN* Africa mobile posts published during the study period. The individual *CNN* Africa mobile news post constituted the unit of analysis. Eligible content comprised hard news, news features, editorials and opinion articles relating to African sub-regions.

To distribute observations across the 18-month study period and reduce potential temporal bias associated with selecting a single continuous period, a three-week constructed-calendar sampling procedure was employed. The procedure incorporated a systematic one-day interval in selecting publication dates and yielded 216 sampled dates, equivalent to 12 sampled days per month. All eligible *CNN* Africa posts occurring on the selected dates were included in the analytical sample, producing 329 posts. It has been argued that a minimum of "two weeks constructed calendar, and as many as five weeks constructed calendar are needed to accurately represent online news" (Hester & Dougall, 2007, p. 811).

The data were manually retrieved from *CNN*'s Africa View mobile application. The 836 eligible posts identified within the study period were serially numbered, after which the constructed-calendar procedure was applied to identify posts corresponding to the selected publication dates. The resulting 329 posts constituted the final dataset analysed in the study.

A coding sheet and accompanying coding guide were developed to operationalise the study variables. The principal variables relevant to the present analysis were African sub-region and news trigger. African countries were classified into five sub-regions -West, East, Central, Southern and North Africa - and assigned numerical country and sub-regional codes in the coding guide.

Conceptually, a news trigger refers to a pre-gate stimulus that activates journalistic attention by bringing an event, issue or actor into the field of potential news selection.

Operationally, a news trigger was defined as the identifiable event, action, statement, report, journalistic initiative or other communicative occurrence presented in the manifest content of a *CNN* Africa post as the primary stimulus bringing the subject of the story into journalistic attention. Each post was assigned to only one news-trigger category. Where a post contained evidence of more than one potential trigger, the coder identified and recorded the primary or dominant trigger responsible for activating attention to the story. The coding guide classified news triggers into 28 categories:1.Positive spontaneous/unplanned news; 2.Negative spontaneous/unplanned news; 3.Investigation; 4. Journalistic enterprise; 5. Public opinion poll result/released; 6. Research result or report released; 7. Incremental facts/update; 8. Anniversary news; 9. Trial balloon; 10. Analysis/interpretation; 11. Preview/forward look (forecast/curtain raiser); 12. Executive government action; 13. Government agency action/statement; 14. Judiciary action; 15. Legislative or legislator action; 16. Non-government news-maker action/event; 17. Non-government news-maker statement; 18. An arm of government news-maker statement; 19. Political candidate statement/action; 20. Emerging figure action; 21. Foreign government statement/action; 22. International organisation statement/action; 23. National news agency report; 24. International news agency report; 25. Local news media report; 26. Foreign news media report; 27. Viral social media/internet report; 28. Other.

Each post was assigned one primary/dominant news trigger. Where more than one potential trigger was identifiable in a story, the coder selected the trigger judged to be primarily responsible for bringing the event or issue into journalistic attention. This decision rule made the news-trigger categories mutually exclusive at the level of coding, while the residual "Other" category accommodated identifiable triggers that did not fit the predetermined categories, thereby supporting exhaustiveness.

A second coder was trained by the researcher in the application of the coding guide before reliability testing. The coding instrument was also subjected to expert review

to assess its suitability for measuring the variables examined in the study. Intercoder reliability was assessed using a subsample of 45 news posts independently coded by the researcher and a trained second coder. Reliability was evaluated separately for the two principal coding variables - African sub-region and news trigger - using Holsti's intercoder reliability coefficient. The 45 double-coded stories represent 13.68% of the 329-story analytical sample. Holsti is retained because the reliability exercise concerned nominal agreement between two coders and because it was the coefficient specified and used in the original study.

For each variable, the two coders reached agreement on 37 of the 45 coding decisions. That gave rise to 74 coding agreements from a total of 90 decisions. Applying Holsti's formula:

$$\text{Re}\,liability = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$ Where 2 = two coders, M = number of coding decision agreements, N_1 = sum of first coders coding decisions and N_2 is sum of second coder's coding decisions.

$$Reliability = \frac{2 \text{ x } (2 \text{ x } 37)}{(45 \text{ x } 2) + (45 \text{ x } 2) =} \qquad Reliability = \frac{2(74)}{180} = 0.82$$

The coded data were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, tables, charts and measures of central tendency. Comparisons between trigger categories and African sub-regions therefore represent observed distributions within the sample and the defined historical period. No causal effects or statistical significance are inferred from frequency differences unless supported by an appropriate inferential statistical test.

Finally, the study treats January 2018 - June 2019 as a bounded historical period. Accordingly, the findings describe *CNN* Africa's mobile news content during that period and are not presented as evidence of the organisation's contemporary editorial or platform practices.

Method of Data Analysis

The analysis covers posts published from 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2019. The period constitutes a bounded historical dataset and is analysed as such rather than as evidence of *CNN* Africa's contemporary editorial practice. Consequently, all interpretations and generalisations concerning *CNN* Africa are restricted to the study period. The dataset nevertheless provides a systematic empirical record from which patterns of sub-regional news flow and news triggering during the period can

be reconstructed and against which subsequent research may examine continuity and change.

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics- using tables and charts

Ethical Approval
Approval for the research was obtained from Ethical Approval Committee of the graduate school of University of Port Harcourt.

Results of **Data Analysis**
The result of data analysis is presented on Table 1: News Genres in the news flow of Africa's sub region and Table 2: Dominant News Triggers in News Flow of all Sub-Regions of Africa on *CNN* Mobile Posts.

Results
The results are presented in relation to the two research questions. The analysis is descriptive and is therefore reported principally in terms of frequencies, percentages and observed differences among news-trigger categories and African sub-regions.

Table 1: Distribution of News Genres found in news flow of Africa's sub region

	Section 1		Section 2		Section 3		Section 4		Section 5		Section 6		Section 7	
Units of analysis NEWS GENRE	West Africa		East Africa		Central Africa		South Africa		North Africa		Other		Total for all sub-regions	
	F	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	F	%
Hard News	85	83.33	82	68.6	18	85.7	25	78.1	30	66.7	6	75	246	75.08
Features	17	15.69	37	31.4	3	14.3	7	18.8	15	33.3	2	25	80	24.32
Editorial	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Opinion	1	0.98	0	0	0	0	1	3.1	0	0	0	0	2	0.6
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	103	100	119	100	21	100	33	100	45	100	8	100	329	100

Key: f = Frequency

A total of 329 *CNN* Africa mobile posts constituted the analytical sample. Hard news accounted for 246 posts (75.08%), making it the predominant news genre.

Feature stories accounted for 80 posts (24.32%), while opinion articles accounted for two posts (0.60%). No editorial was recorded in the sample. Geographically, the posts comprised 103 from West Africa, 119 from East Africa, 21 from Central Africa, 33 from Southern Africa, 45 from North Africa and eight classified as "Other."

Table 2: Distribution of News Triggers in News Flow of all Sub-Regions of Africa on *CNN* Mobile Posts (January 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019)

	West Africa		East Africa		Central Africa		South Africa		North Africa		Other		GRAND TOTALS		
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	AVE
P-s/u news	1	0.97	1	0.84	0	0	0	0	1	2.22	0	0	3	0.91	0.5
N-s/u news	3	2.91	6	5.04	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	2.73	1.5
Invsg	3	2.91	3	2.52	1	4.76	0	0	1	2.22	0	0	8	2.43	1.3
Jou./Ent.	8	7.77	8	6.72	0	0	4	12.12	2	4.44	2	25	24	7.29	4
Pop Result/rel	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Res. reslt or rept rel.	1	0.97	5	4.2	0	0	2	6.06	0	0	0	0	8	2.43	1.3
In.F/update	4	3.88	11	9.24	0	0	2	6.06	2	4.44	0	0	19	5.78	3.16
Ann.news	2	1.94	0	0	0	0	1	3.03	0	0	0	0	3	0.91	0.5
Tri. B	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ana/intpre	3	2.91	5	4.2	1	4.76	4	12.12	3	6.67	1	12.5	17	5.17	2.8
Prev./fwd Lk.	0	0	2	1.68	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.61	0.33
Exe.govt action	1	0.97	7	5.88	1	4.76	0	0	1	2.22	0	0	10	3.04	1.66
Govt. Ag.	18	17.48	14	11.76	1	4.76	3	9.09	2	4.44	2	25	40	12.16	6.66
Jud.Action	2	1.94	2	1.68	0	0	1	3.03	1	2.22	0	0	6	1.82	1
Leg. Action	1	0.97	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.3	0.16

NGnma/e	**8**	**7.77**	**4**	**3.36**	**2**	**9.52**	**0**	**0**	**8**	**17.8**	**0**	**0**	**22**	**6.69**	**3.66**
NGnms	**8**	**7.77**	**5**	**4.2**	**3**	**14.29**	**6**	**18.18**	**3**	**6.67**	**1**	**12.5**	**26**	**7.9**	**4.33**
Govtnms	**23**	**22.33**	**16**	**13.45**	**3**	**14.29**	**3**	**9.09**	**5**	**11.1**	**1**	**12.5**	**51**	**15.5**	**8.5**
pol. Cand.s	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**3.03**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**0.3**	**0.16**
Emfia	**2**	**1.94**	**1**	**0.84**	**3**	**14.29**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**12.5**	**7**	**2.13**	**1.16**
Fgovts/a	**2**	**1.94**	**1**	**0.84**	**1**	**4.76**	**1**	**3.03**	**1**	**2.22**	**0**	**0**	**6**	**1.82**	**1**
IOs/a	**6**	**5.82**	**7**	**5.88**	**3**	**14.29**	**0**	**0**	**2**	**4.44**	**0**	**0**	**18**	**5.47**	**3**
NnAR	**0**	**0**	**1**	**0.84**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**3**	**6.67**	**0**	**0**	**4**	**1.22**	**0.66**
InAR	**1**	**0.97**	**4**	**3.36**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**3.03**	**1**	**2.22**	**0**	**0**	**7**	**2.13**	**1.16**
LnMR	**4**	**3.88**	**6**	**5.04**	**2**	**9.52**	**4**	**12.12**	**5**	**11.1**	**0**	**0**	**21**	**6.38**	**3.5**
FNMR	**0**	**0**	**3**	**2.52**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**3**	**0.91**	**0.5**
VSM/IR	**1**	**0.97**	**1**	**0.84**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**3**	**6.67**	**0**	**0**	**5**	**1.51**	**0.83**
OTHER	**1**	**0.97**	**6**	**5.04**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**1**	**2.22**	**0**	**0**	**8**	**2.43**	**1.33**
TOTAL PER SUB REGION	**103**	**99.98**	**119**	**99.97**	**21**	**100**	**33**	**99.99**	**45**	**100**	**8**	**100**	**329**	**99.97**	
AVERAGE	**3.67857**	**3.571**	**4.25**	**3.57**	**0.75**	**3.571**	**1.17857**	**3.571**	**1.6071**	**3.57**	**0.2857**	**3.5714**	**11.75**	**3.5704**	

Keys to news triggers: P-s/u news= (positive) spontaneous/unplanned news; N-s/u news=(negative) spontaneous /unplanned news; Invsg.=Investigation; Jou./Ent. =Journalistic enterprise; Pop Result/rel.=Public opinion poll result/released; Res. reslt or rept rel. = research result or report released; In.F/update=Incremental facts/update; Ann.news= Anniversary news; Tri. B=Trial ballon; Ana/intpre= Analysis/interpretation Prev./fwd Lk.= Preview/forward

look(forecast/curtain raiser); Exe.govt action= Executive government action; Govt. Ag. = Government agency action/statement; Jud.Action= Judiciary action; Leg. Action =Legislative or legislator action; NGnma/e= Non-government news maker action/event; NGnms =Non-government news maker statement; govtnms=An arm of government news maker statement; pol. Cand.s/a= Political candidate statement or action; Emfia=An emerging figures action; Fgovts/a=Foreign government statement or action; IOs/a=International organisation statement/action; NnAR=National news agency report; InAR=International news agency report; LnMR=Local news media report; FNMR=Foreign news media report; VSM/IR=Viral social media/internet post.

RQ1: What news triggers characterised *CNN* Africa's mobile app coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018–June 2019?

Across the 329 posts, the most frequently identified primary trigger was an arm of government news-maker statement, which accounted for 51 posts (15.50%). This was followed by government agency action/statement, with 40 posts (12.16%). Together, these two official-government categories accounted for 91 posts, representing 27.66% of the sample.

Other comparatively frequent triggers included non-government news-maker statements, 26 (7.90%); journalistic enterprise, 24 (7.29%); non-government news-maker actions/events, 22 (6.69%); local news-media reports, 21 (6.38%); incremental facts or story updates, 19 (5.78%); international-organisation statements/actions, 18 (5.47%); and analysis/interpretation, 17 (5.17%).

Several categories occurred comparatively infrequently. Executive government action accounted for 10 posts (3.04%); negative spontaneous/unplanned news for nine (2.73%); investigation and research/report release for eight each (2.43%); and the residual "Other" category for eight (2.43%). International news-agency reports and emerging-figure actions each accounted for seven posts (2.13%), while judiciary actions and foreign-government statements/actions each accounted for six posts (1.82%). Viral social-media/internet reports accounted for five posts (1.51%), while national news-agency reports accounted for four (1.22%). Positive spontaneous/unplanned news, anniversary news and foreign news-media reports each occurred three times (0.91%). Preview/forward-look stories accounted for two cases (0.61%), while legislative actions and political-candidate statements/actions each appeared once (0.30%). No case was attributed primarily to a public-opinion poll release or trial balloon.

The distribution, however, varied across African sub-regions. For instance, in West Africa, 103 posts were analysed. An arm of government news-maker statement was the most frequent trigger, accounting for 23 posts (22.33%), followed by government-agency action/statement with 18 (17.48%). Journalistic enterprise, non-government news-maker action/event and non-government news-maker statement each accounted for eight posts (7.77%). International-organisation statements/actions accounted for six (5.82%), while incremental facts/updates and local news-media reports each accounted for four (3.88%). While in East Africa, which recorded 119 posts, an arm of government news-maker statement was again the most frequent trigger, with 16 cases (13.45%), followed by government-agency action/statement with 14 (11.76%). Incremental facts/updates accounted for 11

cases (9.24%), while journalistic enterprise accounted for eight (6.72%). Executive-government action and international-organisation statements/actions each accounted for seven cases (5.88%). Negative spontaneous/unplanned news and local news-media reports each accounted for six cases (5.04%).

A different distribution was evident in Central Africa, where 21 posts were analysed. Four categories recorded the joint-highest frequency of three cases each (14.29%): non-government news-maker statements, an arm of government news-maker statements, emerging-figure actions, and international-organisation statements/actions. Non-government news-maker actions/events and local news-media reports each accounted for two cases (9.52%). The remaining represented categories each occurred once or not at all. For Southern Africa, 33 posts were analysed showed that Non-government news-maker statements constituted the most frequent primary trigger, accounting for six posts (18.18%). Journalistic enterprise, analysis/interpretation and local news-media reports each accounted for four posts (12.12%). Government-agency actions/statements and statements by news makers representing an arm of government each accounted for three posts (9.09%), while research/report releases and incremental facts/updates each accounted for two posts (6.06%).

For North Africa, the sample comprised 45 posts. Non-government news-maker action/event was the most frequently identified primary trigger, accounting for eight posts (17.8%). Statements by news makers representing an arm of government and local news-media reports each accounted for five posts (11.1%). Analysis/interpretation, non-government news-maker statements, national news-agency reports and viral social-media/internet reports each accounted for three posts (6.67%).

The eight posts classified under "Other" geographical coverage displayed a more dispersed pattern. Journalistic enterprise and government-agency action/statement each accounted for two cases (25%), while analysis/interpretation, non-government news-maker statement, an arm of government news-maker statement and emerging-figure action each accounted for one case (12.5%).

Therefore, the findings for RQ1 show that official-government triggers were the two most frequently observed categories in the overall sample, but this overall pattern was not uniform across the five African sub-regions. Government-related statements/actions occupied the highest positions in West and East Africa, whereas the distributions in Central, Southern and North Africa contained comparatively

stronger representation of non-government actors and other trigger categories. This statement describes the observed distribution and does not attribute the differences to particular political or social conditions.

RQ2: How did local African news-media reports compare with national and international news-agency reports and foreign news-media reports as triggers of *CNN* Africa's coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018 - June 2019?

Local African news-media reports were identified as the primary trigger in 21 of the 329 posts (6.38%). By comparison, international news-agency reports accounted for seven posts (2.13%), national news-agency reports for four (1.22%), and foreign news-media reports for three (0.91%).

In frequency terms, therefore, local African news-media reports occurred three times as frequently as international news-agency reports (21 versus 7), 5.25 times as frequently as national news-agency reports (21 versus 4), and seven times as frequently as foreign news-media reports (21 versus 3). These ratios describe differences in the observed frequencies within the sample; they are not tests of statistical significance or measures of causal influence.

Sub-regional distributions further show that local news-media reports occurred in West Africa four times (3.88%), East Africa six times (5.04%), Central Africa twice (9.52%), Southern Africa four times (12.12%), and North Africa five times (11.1%). No local news-media report was recorded as the primary trigger among the eight posts classified under “Other.”

International news-agency reports were less frequent, comprising one case (0.97%) in West Africa, four (3.36%) in East Africa, none in Central Africa, one (3.03%) in Southern Africa and one (2.22%) in North Africa. National news-agency reports comprised no cases in West, Central or Southern Africa; one (0.84%) in East Africa; and three (6.67%) in North Africa. Foreign news-media reports occurred only three times in the entire sample, all in East Africa, where they represented 2.52% of the sub-regional total.

Thus, within the bounded 2018 - 2019 dataset, local African news-media reports were more frequently identified as primary news triggers than each of the three comparison categories -international news agencies, national news agencies and foreign news media. The finding establishes an observed frequency pattern in *CNN* Africa's sampled mobile posts.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the types of signals associated with the entry of African events and issues into *CNN* Africa's mobile news coverage during January 2018-June 2019. Because the study used descriptive content analysis, the frequencies establish patterns of occurrence rather than causal influence, newsroom motives, source dependence or audience effects. Within these limits, the results are relevant to Gatekeeping and Agenda-setting theories and to the proposed concept of news triggering as a pre-gate stage of media attention.

We shall discuss the results of the posed questions under the following headings: official and sub-regional trigger patterns; Local African media as upstream triggers; Gatekeeping, Agenda-setting and the pre-gate proposition

What news triggers characterised *CNN* Africa's mobile app coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018–June 2019?

Official and sub - regional trigger patterns

Statements by news makers representing an arm of government were the most frequent primary trigger, accounting for 51 posts (15.50%), followed by government-agency actions/statements with 40 (12.16%). Together, these categories represented 27.66% of the 329 posts. From a gatekeeping perspective, this concentration is consistent with the proposition that information must first become available within the journalistic field before editorial selection can occur. The finding therefore identifies official communication as a recurrent pathway through which potential news entered the sampled *CNN* Africa news stream. It does not demonstrate that *CNN* deliberately privileged government actors or that official sources exercised greater causal influence over editorial decisions; such claims would require evidence about newsroom routines and journalists' source relationships.

Across sub-regions the aggregate pattern was not uniform as government news-maker statements and government-agency actions/statements occupied the two highest positions in West Africa (22.33% and 17.48%) and East Africa (13.45% and 11.76%) while in Central Africa the pattern was more dispersed: non-government news-maker statements, government news-maker statements, emerging-figure actions and international-organisation statements/actions were jointly highest at 14.29% each. In Southern Africa, non-government news-maker statements were most frequent (18.18%), while in North Africa non-government news-maker actions/events ranked first (17.8%). These variations show that the composition of primary triggers differed by sub-region. Though the scope of this

study does not include a causal and effect investigation, our guess is that political instability, crisis intensity or civic mobilisation occurring within that period could be contributors to the observed differences. This contextual explanation therefore is seen as hypotheses for future comparative research.

How did local African news-media reports compare with national and international news agency reports and foreign news-media reports as triggers of *CNN* Africa's coverage of African sub-regions during January 2018 - June 2019?

Local African media as upstream triggers

Local African news-media reports were identified as the primary trigger in 21 posts (6.38%), compared with seven international news-agency reports (2.13%), four national news-agency reports (1.22%) and three foreign news-media reports (0.91%). Thus, local media reports occurred three times as frequently as international news-agency reports, 5.25 times as frequently as national news-agency reports and seven times as frequently as foreign news-media reports. Local African media therefore constituted a comparatively more frequent upstream pathway through which information in the sampled *CNN* Africa posts had already entered mediated circulation. This suggests a potentially important local-to-international pathway of news visibility: a local news organisation may first make an event visible, after which its report becomes available for further selection by an international news organisation.

Gatekeeping, Agenda-setting and the pre-gate proposition

The findings sharpen the conceptual distinction between triggering and gatekeeping. News triggers are conceived as observable signals that bring occurrences into the journalistic decision environment, whereas gatekeeping concerns selection once information becomes available. A government statement, civic action, research report, local-media report or other signal may activate journalistic attention, but *availability does not guarantee publication*. The dataset contains only published stories and therefore identifies realised triggers associated with selected content, not all signals that reached *CNN* journalists and were rejected. Accordingly, news triggers are described as potential attention-activation mechanisms that precede and supply information to gatekeeping, rather than as factors that determine publication.

The findings also have implications for Agenda-setting even though the study did not measure audience perceptions or compare a media agenda with a public agenda to determine what audiences considered important. Its contribution lies further upstream in the sense that, before an issue can acquire media salience, it must first

become available for selection. Triggering can therefore be conceptualised as an antecedent condition of media-agenda formation. The relatively frequent official-government signals indicate that governmental actors' actions were recurrently manifest at this antecedent stage, while the presence of non-government actors, international organisations, journalistic enterprise and local-media reports demonstrates that the pre-gate environment was heterogeneous.

Media Attention Cycle and theoretical contribution

The findings provide empirical grounding for considering the proposed Media Attention Cycle -Triggering (activation), Gatekeeping (selection), Agenda-setting (salience) and Framing (interpretation) but they do not validate the complete model. The study directly examines primary triggers associated with published stories; it does not independently observe editorial decisions, measure public-agenda transfer or systematically test framing. The cycle is therefore presented as a conceptual model informed by the findings, with its relationships requiring further empirical testing. In this formulation, triggering addresses *how* potential news becomes visible, gatekeeping addresses selection, agenda-setting concerns subsequent salience, and framing concerns interpretation.

Overall, the study shows that African events on *CNN* Africa's sampled mobile coverage were associated with an uneven distribution of attention-activating signals. Official-government statements and government-agency actions/statements were the two most frequent categories overall, although their prominence varied across sub-regions, while local African news-media reports appeared more frequently as primary triggers than the three-comparison media-report categories. These patterns are consistent with a gatekeeping framework in which information must become available before selection and extend the analysis upstream from conventional Agenda-setting by asking how potential agenda items first become visible. The principal theoretical contribution is therefore the proposition of news triggering as a distinct pre-gate analytical construct linking attention activation to subsequent processes of selection, salience and interpretation.

Conclusion

This study examined the primary news triggers associated with *CNN* Africa's mobile-app coverage of African sub-regions during the bounded historical period of January 2018–June 2019. Statements by news makers representing arms of government (15.50%) and government-agency actions/statements (12.16%) were the two most frequently identified trigger categories, jointly accounting for 27.66% of the 329 sampled posts. The distribution was not uniform across the continent:

official-government triggers were particularly prominent in West and East Africa, while Central, Southern and North Africa displayed more heterogeneous combinations of governmental, non-governmental, international-organisational, journalistic and media-generated triggers.

Local African news-media reports also constituted a more frequent primary trigger than the other media-report categories examined. They accounted for 21 posts (6.38%), compared with seven international news-agency reports (2.13%), four national news-agency reports (1.22%) and three foreign news-media reports (0.91%). This indicates that local African media formed an identifiable upstream pathway through which some events had already entered mediated circulation before appearing in *CNN* Africa's sampled mobile coverage. It does not, however, establish *CNN*'s organisational dependence on local media or causal influence over its editorial decisions.

Theoretically, the findings demonstrate the analytical usefulness of distinguishing news triggering from gatekeeping. News triggers are conceptualised as attention-activation signals that precede editorial selection, while gatekeeping concerns subsequent decisions about available information. In relation to Agenda-setting, triggering is therefore better understood as an antecedent to media-agenda formation rather than evidence of effects on the public agenda. The proposed Media Attention Cycle model, -*Triggering, Gatekeeping, Agenda-setting and Framing* - is consequently advanced as a conceptual framework informed by the findings.

Overall, the study provides a historical empirical baseline for examining how African events became visible within an international mobile-news environment and a foundation for further testing of news triggering as a distinct pre-gate construct. Because the evidence is specific to *CNN* Africa's mobile coverage between January 2018 and June 2019, the conclusions are not presented as *CNN* Africa's current editorial practices or international news coverage of Africa generally.

Recommendations

1. International news organisations covering Africa should maintain diversity in their information pathways. Because official-government communication constituted the two most frequent trigger categories in the sample, international newsrooms should complement institutional information with credible community, civil-society, professional, research and other non-governmental signals while applying consistent verification standards.

2. African news organisations should strengthen the credibility and discoverability of their reporting. The comparatively frequent occurrence of local African news-media reports as primary triggers suggests that local journalism can constitute an important upstream pathway into international news circulation. Investment in verification, original reporting, data journalism, transparent sourcing and digital distribution can strengthen the reliability of such reporting for wider journalistic use.
3. Further research should test the news-trigger construct across platforms and periods. Comparative studies involving *CNN*, BBC, Al Jazeera and other international news platforms could determine whether the trigger patterns identified here recur across different editorial systems. Longitudinal research should also examine whether the 2018–2019 patterns have persisted or changed.
4. Future studies should combine content analysis with production- and audience-level evidence. Newsroom interviews, journalist surveys, sourcing records and ethnographic observation could establish how potential triggers enter editorial decision-making and why some pass through the gate while others do not. Audience and engagement data could separately test Agenda-setting implications that the present content analysis cannot establish.

Contributions to Knowledge

First, the study extends and operationalises "news triggers" as a distinct analytical construct for examining the observable signals associated with the activation of journalistic attention before editorial selection. This extends inquiry beyond conventional emphasis on news values, gatekeeping and salience by foregrounding the analytically prior question of how potential news subjects become visible within the journalistic decision environment. Second, the study proposes the Media Attention Cycle Model as a conceptual framework comprising Triggering (activation), Gatekeeping (selection), Agenda-setting (salience) and Framing (interpretation). Its contribution lies in analytically separating these processes thereby laying foundation empirical studies to investigate whether or not the relationships in the four-stage sequence is deterministic. The framework therefore provides propositions that can be tested and refined in subsequent production-, content- and audience-level research. Third, the study provides a systematic historical account of the distribution of primary news triggers across African sub-regions in *CNN* Africa's mobile coverage during January 2018–June 2019. It establishes that official-government triggers were most frequent overall but that trigger composition varied across sub-regions. It also identifies local African news-media reports as a more frequent primary media-report trigger than international news agencies, national news agencies or foreign news media within the sample.

These findings provide an empirical baseline for comparative and longitudinal research on the pathways through which African events enter international digital news flows.

Limitations

This study has limitations that define the boundaries within which its findings have been interpreted. First, it is platform-specific, examining only *CNN* Africa mobile-app posts. The observed trigger patterns therefore are not assumed to represent other international news organisations or digital platforms. Second, the dataset is historically bounded to January 2018-June 2019. The findings provide evidence about *CNN* Africa's mobile coverage during that period and is not interpreted as describing its current editorial or platform practices. Changes in digital journalism, platform distribution, newsroom routines and African political contexts since 2019 may have altered the patterns identified. Third, the study relies on quantitative manifest-content coding of the primary news trigger associated with each published post. Although this permits systematic comparison of observable trigger categories, it does not reveal journalists' motives, source relationships, editorial deliberations or the universe of potential stories that reached *CNN* but were not published. Consequently, the study identifies patterns among realised triggers in published content rather than directly observing the gatekeeping process itself. Fourth, the study does not measure audience responses or public-agenda effects. Its Agenda-setting implications are therefore confined to the formation and composition of the media agenda and are not interpreted as evidence that the identified trigger patterns affected public perceptions of issue importance. Similarly, the proposed Media Attention Cycle model is a conceptual framework informed by the findings rather than a causal sequence empirically tested in all four stages.

Finally, some sub-regional categories contain substantially fewer observations than others. Sub-regional comparisons should therefore be interpreted descriptively and cautiously rather than as evidence of statistically established differences. Future studies can address these limitations through multi-platform and longitudinal designs and by combining content analysis with newsroom interviews, journalist surveys, production records and audience-level measures.

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the accuracy, interpretation, arguments, citations and final content of the manuscript. ChatGPT was not listed as an author and did not determine the study's data, its arrangement, analysis, findings or conclusions.

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