

## FRAMING OF THE BABY DUMPING PHENOMENON BY THE NAMIBIAN PRINT MEDIA

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### Abstract

Baby dumping is regarded as a significant problem in Namibia and stakeholders have identified public awareness about contraceptives and options for dealing with unwanted pregnancies such as foster care, adoption and institutional care as solutions to this heart-rending phenomenon. The media are a critical player in disseminating such awareness, hence this study set out to determine how the Namibian print media framed the baby dumping phenomenon more so as scholars have determined that what receives attention in the press is regarded as very important by audience members. The present study involved a content analysis of three newspapers: the government-owned *New Era*, and the privately owned tabloid, *Namibian Sun* as well as the highest circulating daily newspaper, *The Namibian*, over a period of four years (2011-14). From the findings, it was clear that the Namibian media showed a preference for straight-news reports about the phenomenon without any attempt at proffering solutions by surfacing shared values and appeal to basic humanity or providing in all instances individual and societal/communal intervention to stem this negative tide.

### Introduction

Baby dumping is regarded as a significant problem (Kisting, 2010; *Namibian Sun*, 2011); more so, as about 40 babies are dumped or flushed down toilets in Windhoek every month (Lewis, 2013). In April 2008, staff at the Gammas Water Treatment Plant in Windhoek said that they discovered, on average, 13 bodies of dumped newborn babies every month (Shipanga, 2012).

The scenario is usually quite similar: a girl meets a boy and they start a relationship, and then pregnancy results. Due to a variety of reasons that may include stigma from friends, family and community members, the man does not want to shoulder the relationship of being a father, and the lady not wanting the baby to disturb her education and career plans etc hides the pregnancy, delivers and dumps the baby (Coomer, 2011; Haidula, 2014; *Namibian Sun*, 2012). The baby is then found, sometimes dead, sometimes alive.

To save the situation, stakeholders and rights groups have called for measures to address this menace. For instance, the immediate past executive Director of Women's Action for Development (WAD), Veronica de Klerk, called for the institution of 'baby safes' within selected buildings to allow mothers to leave unwanted babies there anonymously. The National Plan of Action on Gender Based Violence (2012-2016) as well as other stakeholders have identified public awareness on contraceptives and options for dealing with unwanted pregnancies such as foster care, adoption and institutional care (Baby Dumping in Namibia, 2014) as solutions to this heart-rending phenomenon.

The media are a critical player in disseminating such awareness, more so as scholars assert that what receives attention in the press is regarded as very important by audience members (Katz, Ali & Kim, 2014). The way the media frame issues, including in this instance baby dumping, assists greatly in the choice of one alternative over and above others as well as perception of an issue from an individual, policy or broader social

context (Mastin, Choi, Barboza & Post, 2007 and Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond & Vig, 2000).

The present study, therefore, sought to surface framing of news stories on baby dumping in the local media with a view to determining whether they were solution-oriented or straight news reports that would not assist in resolution of the phenomenon especially, since persistent framing of a phenomenon can narrow alternatives and assist audiences in adopting the proffered solutions (Aday, 2006; Akpabio, 2011; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Van Gorp, 2007).

### Framing

There are many perspectives on framing so much so that it has been referred to as “fractured” (Entman 1993, p. 51) and “passe-partout” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 60). Yet, there is broad agreement on its impact. Entman acknowledges that it still offers a way of understanding the power of a communicating text and its ability to impact human consciousness. And that the analysis of frames surfaces the precise way this impact occurs. This form of social constructionism from the purview of media effects acknowledges the active role of the audience in interpreting texts and other forms of communication which may be in direct opposition to meanings intended by media gatekeepers (Van Gorp, 2007).

A way around this is for media professionals to “apply a range of persistent frames, and hence possibly control the number of alternatives that are available to the receivers when they are constructing social reality” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 62). This, of course, means selecting aspects of reality to engender salience and thus achieve “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Thus, the way a material is framed influences human thoughts and evaluation of issues (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and can result in action such as **framing up** (emphasis added) persons which can elicit stereotypical perception and even physical attacks (Akpabio, 2011).

However, in the real media world, frames can be contestable (Chong & Druckman, 2007) and their effect may not be as straightforward as suggested here. This is because the news media in many instances do a two-sided report which requires “effortful mode of processing” (Aday, 2006, p. 770). Thus, these objectivist-framed news stories are not as effective as the advocacy-framed ones, in that the latter can elicit attitude change in line with the text, more so as these employ the heuristic of “consensus implies correctness” as well as emphasises consent on “core values” (Aday, 2006, p.770).

Still on the impact of advocacy-framed stories, Aday (2006) argues that narrative vividness which is often found in these kinds of new reports make information more accessible. Objectivist-framed stories, on the other hand, because of their less involving nature would lead audiences to rely on their priori understanding, hence the news would not have much of an effect and there is the likelihood of variability in their responses, unlike the case with advocacy-framed news stories which would be more interesting and more likely lead to judgments based on the content of the news reports.

This is similar to the categorisation of news as event- and conflict-centred by Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond and Vig (2000). They define the latter as emphasising friction between individuals, groups and organizations, thus giving the two-sides of a story, and in the process satisfying the journalistic requirement of balance. The former, by their nature, “are focused on one incident, often with only one particular story being told”, and as a result “event-centered articles are likely to bestow an advantage to the **advocacy frame** (emphasis ours) suggested by the sponsor of a media event” (p. 806).

And advocacy frame, in their view, can be thought of as “persuasive arguments meant to advance a particular point of view” (p. 806).

But can the persuasive ability of the advocacy frame be blunted by the context which may prevent action being taken? Mastin, Choi, Barboza and Post (2007) argue that it is important to go beyond frames to examine how the problems and the solutions are presented in the media. They note that social problems can be presented as an individual or society’s responsibility. It seems that in the US context, health and social issues are framed in the media as belonging in the realm of the individual, thus denying the need to view same from a broader social context/perspective (Mastin, Choi, Barboza & Post, 2007).

But many public health researchers take the opposite view: that the context determines our choices (Cho & Salmon, 2007). Hence, they argue that “the goal of most health communication campaigns is to induce individual-level change, a focus that often neglects important environmental impediments to change.” (Cho & Salmon, 2007, p. 304)

### **Infanticide**

Infanticide was once equated with concealment of pregnancy and birth. In 1690, the first Scottish law related to infanticide made it a capital offence for a woman to conceal her pregnancy and she was held liable if the baby subsequently died or went missing (Goe, 2013). Goe also reports that the English 1624 Infanticide Act condemned a woman to death if she concealed the birth of her child and held her liable even if the body was not found. This shows the level of aversion in which this act was held.

The British first came across the practice of female infanticide which was prevalent in North and West India in 1789 and, try as they did, could not stop it (Vishwanath, 1998). The practice was fuelled more by “hypergamy, status maintenance and dowry avoidance” (Vishwanath, 1998, p. 1104). In the British context, however, unmarried women who were denied financial support based on the Malthusian theory that population growth would outpace food supply resorted to infanticide (Goe, 2013).

Interestingly, child murder in India is also done by the mother; same as in the Namibian context. The point of departure is that it is girls that are murdered because they are seen as liabilities while the boys are kept alive because of the ‘value’ they would add to the family (Hedge, 1999; Mutulakshmi, 2003).

For boys, such value among others include “lighting the funeral pyre of his parents and thereby guarantee them safe passage to the afterlife according to Hindu beliefs. A son spells mobility because he is perceived as an economic asset ...and in addition he will attract a sizeable dowry in the future.” (Hedge, 1999, p. 513). So the author says the women “release” or “set free” the infant girls by killing them.

In England and Australia news reports about infanticide are about regulation of women in order to retain power relations (Goe, 2013). The author also notes that newspaper reports also portray the infanticidal woman as a threat to the prevailing perception of womanhood, the family and society. She notes that the newspapers capitalize on these reports for marketing purposes by providing lurid details “laden with pathos, inscribed with illicit sex, with love turned sour, with sexual assault and seduction, with betrayal and with murder” (Goe, 2013, p. 2)

The raises the germane question of how the Namibian print media frame incident of baby dumping. Do they report with glee while providing lurid details or use persistent advocacy frames as well as approach it from an individual and/or societal perspective? Hence, the following research questions guided the present study:

1. Do stories on baby dumping place emphasis on consensus and shared values against the phenomenon?
2. Do the news stories contain actions and strategies to curb the menace of baby dumping?
3. Do news stories on baby dumping take on objectivist or advocacy frames?
4. Are solutions to baby dumping in the news stories presented from an individual or broader social context frame?

### Methodology

The present study involved a content analysis of three newspapers: the government-owned *New Era*, and the privately owned tabloid, *Namibian Sun* as well as the highest circulating daily newspaper, *The Namibian*, over a period of four years (2011-14). A search in the online archives of the three newspapers using the term "baby dumping" yielded 77 news stories. The stories were assessed to determine if they involved news reports on baby dumping. Contents that reported on workshops, artistic and other performances, cabinet decisions, editorials, features and opinion pieces etc that did not have baby dumping incident(s) was/were removed. As a result, only 23 usable stories were analysed. The unit of analysis was objectivist, advocacy as well as individual and broader social context frames. Two coders (the author and co-author) read each news story and placed it in either of the three major categories (advocacy/objectivist, consensus/lack of consensus on shared values against baby dumping and news stories presented from an individual/broader social context) which were derived from the literature as well as preliminary examination of the data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). A neutral as well as a category catering for stories that had both individual and broader social context perspectives were created to accommodate stories that did not fit neatly into individual/broader social context columns. This is because some news stories summarised the incident as part of larger crime news stories reportage or had both perspectives. The intercoder agreement for the pilot study involving ten per cent of the stories came to 85% while the intercoder agreement for the main study was .91. Differences were resolved by consensus.

### The Findings

*Namibian Sun* had more news stories on baby dumping over and above *The Namibian* and *New Era* newspapers combined.

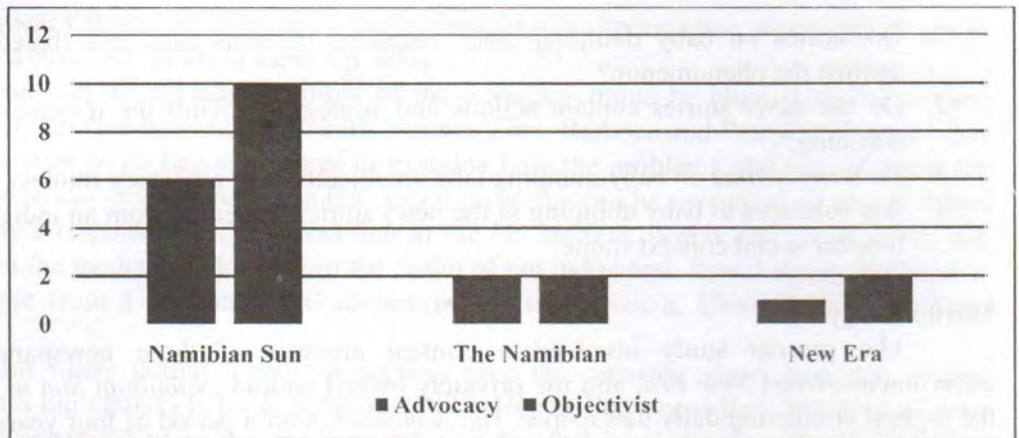
**Table 1: News Stories on Baby Dumping in Namibian Newspapers (2011-14)**

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Namibian Sun</i>	16	70
<i>The Namibian</i>	4	17
<i>New Era</i>	3	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100</b>

Most of the news stories on baby dumping across the three newspapers leaned more towards objectivist reporting (60%) as opposed to nine (40%) news stories that were advocacy-based. To disaggregate based on newspapers, there were more objectivist stories in the *Namibian Sun* and *New Era* while *The Namibian* had an equal number of stories in the two categories (see figure 1)

Figure 1

Advocacy/Objectivist News Stories by Newspapers

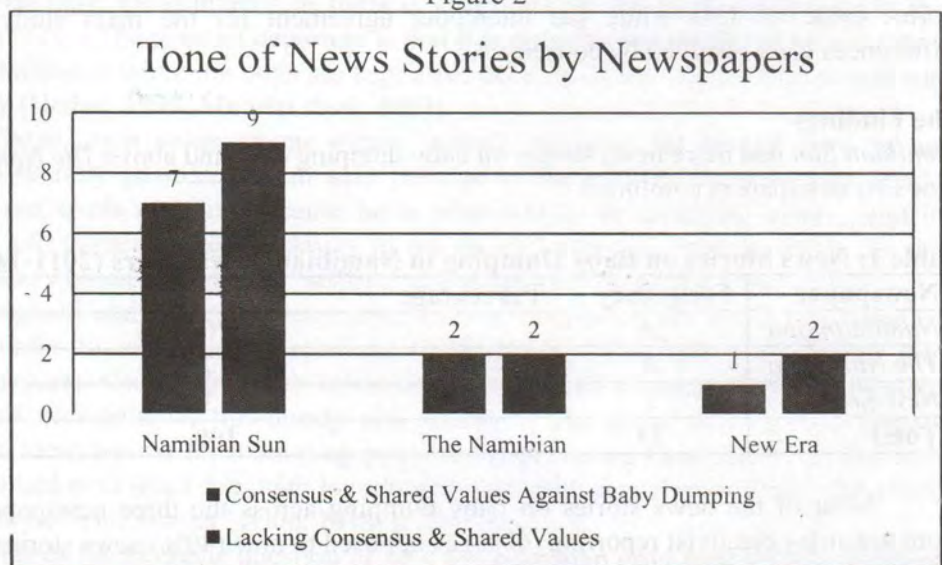


Most of the news stories did not espouse consensus and shared values against the baby dumping phenomenon (see Table 2). The newspapers that were guilty of this were the *Namibian Sun* and *New Era*, while *The Namibian* had an equal number of news stories in both categories (see Figure 2).

Table 2  
Tone of News Stories on Baby Dumping in Namibian Newspapers (2011-14)

Tone of News Stories	Frequency	Percentage
Consensus and shared value against baby dumping	10	43
Lacking in consensus and shared value against baby dumping	13	57
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 2



Most of the newspapers featured news stories that gave straight news reports of baby dumping incident, thus presenting no solution from social workers, community

members, governmental figures etc. Presentation of solutions from an individual perspective and a combination of individual and societal perspectives were tied at four news stories apiece, while the societal-solution frame had only three news stories. To disaggregate this results in terms of newspapers, most stories in the three newspapers had no solution proffered with the *Namibian Sun* leading in this regard, but *The Namibian* stories framed solutions more from an individual and societal as well as societal only perspective than the other two newspapers. *New Era* framed the solution more from an individual perspective than the other two newspapers (see Table 3)

**Table 3: Presentation of Solutions to Baby Dumping in News Stories by Newspapers**

Newspaper	Individual	Societal	Individual& Societal	No Solution	Total
Namibian Sun	3 (19%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	9 (56%)	16
New Era	1 (33%)	-	-	2 (67%)	3
The Namibian	-	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	4
Total	4	3	4	12	23

### Discussion of Findings

*Namibian Sun*, as to be expected of a newspaper with a tabloid orientation, had more news stories (70%) on baby dumping than its two mainstream counterparts. This is because tabloids favour everyday experiences which serve to titillate readers and improve the bottom line (Akpabio & Matambo, 2008; Steenveld & Strelitz, 2007). And the *Namibian Sun* did not disappoint in this regard. It featured tales of mothers who had dumped their babies and who, when caught, expressed regrets for their actions along with dramatic pictures of rescued babies and dead babies, thus privileging soft news, visual representation and personalised style of reporting which are central to tabloidization (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2007). But the other papers were not completely immune to this treatment, lending credence to the observation that mainstream and tabloid newspapers' news coverage are converging (Akpabio & Matambo, 2008).

Even though the literature favours advocacy-framed stories as capable of making a difference in an issue like this that requires action to stem this sorry state of affairs, the three newspapers had more objectivist than advocacy-framed news stories. These were news stories that simply recounted incident of baby dumping with no persuasive arguments or viewpoints against this act (Tewksbury et al., 2000). In a story entitled "Marriage offer led to baby dumping", a mother recounts how her former boyfriend offered to marry her but she was already carrying someone else's child. Since she wanted to get married, she concealed the pregnancy, delivered and dumped the baby which was later retrieved from a pit latrine (Namibian Sun, 2012).

This is unlike advocacy-framed stories that feature such incidents but go the extra mile by influencing judgment that would bring about change in attitude (Aday, 2006) as evidenced in the report entitled "Baby dumping horror...men make gruesome find at dumpsite":

Maggie Mensah-Williams, deputy chairperson of the National Council, yesterday described baby dumping as 'a heinous crime. But, she added, this is usually a cry for help by especially young mothers. 'My take on it is that I think many of these girls are abused - either by family members or someone whose name they cannot reveal'. Another

contributing factor, the MP said, is men who reject the women they impregnate. And that is very traumatic if you are not married and the father [of the baby] rejects you. Rape and the acceptance of money from the father equally play a role, she said. She added, awareness needs to be created amongst school girls so that they know what their options are if they fall pregnant. Namibia's adoption system also needs to be revamped. 'It is very, very slow and cumbersome.' Asked whether legalised abortion would help solve the problem, she said: 'It should be discussed openly and truthfully and we should put our prejudices aside. It should not be an emotional discussion but based on facts and research. But the solution is broader than that.' (Kisting, 2011, par. 9)

The tone of most of the news stories did not feature condemnation of baby dumping by invoking communal values and appealing to basic humanity. This news story from *The Namibian* entitled "Another baby dumped" (Haidula, 2014) shows the missed opportunity from the tone of reporting:

Auala said the community can help to prevent the loss of more babies' lives if they help with information about pregnant women who show signs of a reluctance to keep their children. She urged mothers to seek counselling on what they can do as the way forward. Director of Gender Equality and Research in the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare Victor Shipoh shared Auala's sentiments. Shipoh said baby dumping cannot be condoned and he sees no reason why people continue doing it. He said mothers who do not want to keep their children have the option of surrendering them to the State, because his ministry's doors are open any time. "It is the State's obligation and it is not optional. As government, we have the responsibility to take care of these children," Shipoh said, adding that women can also drop off their unwanted children at any government ministry's offices. "Don't be ashamed of doing the right thing, it's better than killing," Shipoh advised. Secretary General of the Council of Churches in Namibia Maria Kapere says there is more to look at than people realise. Kapere explained although people are worried about the increase of baby dumping and finding solutions, the necessary responses are not yet in place. "Sometimes these young people are confused. They are rejected at home with no economic support, no moral support and no one to provide them with advice on what they can do. We need to look at all those factors," she said. Kapere also pointed out that there are no appropriate facilities in place, which makes it even harder to find solutions and that government is busy with gender-based workshops to come up with solutions. "Although they should be told that it is morally wrong, they should also be told what other options they have as a solution," she concluded (pars 8-17)

If there are more of this kind of reports on this phenomenon, the persuasive argument contained therein should help to stem this negative tide (Akpabio, 2011; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Tewksbury et al., 2000).

Rather than adopt this approach, most of the news stories about baby dumping provided no solution in most instances or supplied some individual/individual and societal-based solutions. Placing the blame on mothers without looking at the larger picture like in this story in the *New Era* entitled "Mother dumps own baby" (Jason, 2013). Though featuring some solutions, the story does not go far enough:

Very disturbed by the incident is the Omusati Governor Sophia Shaningwa who described the dumping as evil and highly irresponsible. "It is shocking! It is a pity. The baby is 100 percent healthy," the shocked Shaningwa said. Shaningwa advised young mothers from Omusati Region that if they have problems they must not dump their babies in the bush but rather take them to hospital, the police, constituency offices or call her on her mobile phone at 0811 221753. "Baby dumping is damaging the economical standard of the country because babies are the future leaders. We want our population to increase," she said. She lamented the practice of baby dumping and asked the culprits how they will feel when dogs devour their dumped babies (pars 3-6).

But this appeal seems to see the issue as the responsibility of the mothers without taking into consideration the broader social context (Cho & Salmon 2007; Mastin et al., 2007). The way to go is to appeal to mothers not to dump their babies as well as provide a proper atmosphere and context that would stem this negative tide as enunciated by a number of stakeholders quoted in the news stories.

### Conclusion

The baby dumping issue in Namibia is a heart-rending phenomenon which requires concerted effort by all and sundry to put a stop to. This study explored the press angle and sought to find out if the media was reporting in a manner that would aid this effort. The findings clearly show a preference for straight news reports about the phenomenon without any attempt at proffering solutions by surfacing shared values and appeal to basic humanity or providing in all instances individual and societal/communal interventions to stem this negative tide. This, the paper considers a missed opportunity by the local media.

### Recommendations

We, therefore, call on the local press to privilege more reports that are solution-oriented given that this would aid information processing by citizens and galvanise action in this regard. This approach should also apply to reporting of other vices.

Like any study, this also has a number of limitations. The newspapers used for this study while representing the government/private-ownership, tabloid/mainstream divide as well as boasting the highest circulation (*The Namibian*) and having national coverage (*New Era*) were purposely chosen. This means that these findings do not represent the overall national press. Other studies may wish to use a more representative sample. Other scholars may also wish to explore contents other than straight news reports

such as editorials, opinion pieces, features and other types of news stories on baby dumping etc that were not within the purview of this study.

We assume, based on the extant literature, that persistent advocacy and solution-oriented frames would serve to galvanise action to stem this tide of baby dumping. Other scholars may wish to explore this angle with a view to determining if there would be any priming effects.

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