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Framing Inclusive Education: The Role of Ethiopian Media Outlets-A Qualitative Study of Broadcast Media Professionals in the Somali Regional State

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Ethiopian broadcast media in promoting inclusive education, with particular attention to how media professionals perceive, produce, and disseminate content related to disability and inclusion in the Somali Regional State. Despite national and international policy commitments to inclusive education, persistent social misconceptions and stigmatizing attitudes toward persons with disabilities continue to shape public understanding, a challenge that has been widely associated with media representation and framing practices. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study draws on thirty semi-structured interviews conducted with journalists, editors, producers, and presenters from three regional media outlets-Somali Regional Television (SRTV), Jigjiga FM Radio, and SHAKAAL TV. The interview data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software to explore patterns in professional understanding, editorial practices, and institutional constraints related to inclusive education coverage. The findings indicate that while media professionals acknowledge the potential of broadcast media to influence public awareness and attitudes toward inclusive education, coverage remains sporadic and largely dependent on externally funded initiatives. Participants identified limited knowledge of inclusive education, absence of clear editorial guidelines, financial constraints, and reliance on government and non-government organizations for story generation as key challenges affecting both the frequency and framing of media content. Although the study is context-specific and limited to three regional media houses, it contributes empirical insights into an under-researched area of Ethiopian media scholarships. The findings underscore the need for sustained professional training, stronger institutional support, and rights-based editorial policies to enhance the media's role in shaping inclusive education discourse and promoting more informed and inclusive public attitudes toward disability.

Keywords: *Media, Inclusive education, disability, Ethiopia, Awareness, Policy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education: From Theory to Practice

Inclusive education is widely recognized as an educational approach that seeks to ensure equitable participation, learning, and achievements for all learners, regardless of disability, gender, socio-economic background, language, or other forms of marginalization. Rooted in international human-rights frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforced by the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), inclusive education emphasizes not only access to schooling but also meaningful participation and social recognition (Ainscow 2020; Florian and Beaton 2018). For learners with disabilities, inclusive education is increasingly

conceptualized as a rights-based obligation rather than an optional pedagogical approach (United Nations [UN] 2018; Slee 2019).

Over the past three decades, inclusive education has received growing policy attention in Ethiopia, as reflected in national frameworks such as the Education and Training Policy, successive Education Sector Development Programs, and the Special Needs/ Inclusive Education Strategy (Ministry of Education [MoE] 1994; 2006; 2012; 2015; 2016). However, empirical research indicated that implementation gaps persist, particularly in low-resource and marginalized contexts where social stigma, limited infrastructure, and insufficient public awareness continue to affect school participation and learning outcomes for children with disabilities (Mebratu et al. 2024).

Recent studies across the Global South context demonstrate that negative social perception and persistent stereotypes surrounding disability remain a major barrier to inclusive education, often reinforced by dominant cultural narratives and limited public dialogue (Adugna et al. 2024; Grech 2016). Media representation plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions, as repeated exposure to deficit-based or charity-oriented portrayals can normalize stigma and marginalization, while rights-based and empowering narratives can foster social acceptance and policy support (Johanssen and Garrisi 2020).

In this regard, broadcast media occupy a particularly influential position. Communication scholarship has consistently shown that television and radio remain powerful agenda-setting platforms, especially in contexts characterized by low literacy levels and limited access to digital media (McCombs and Valenzuela 2021). Studies focusing on disability and media further suggest that broadcast content significantly influences public understanding of inclusion by shaping both the visibility of disability-related issues and the interpretive frames through which they are understood (Shakespeare et al. 2021). Where inclusive education receives sustained and positively framed media attention, public attitudes toward disability and schooling tend to be more supportive.

Despite this growing body of international research on media representation of disability and inclusion, empirical studies examining how Ethiopian broadcast media address inclusive education remain limited, particularly at the regional level. International evidences suggest that media coverage of disability often remains sporadic and framed through narrow, stereotypical lenses rather than rights-based engagement (Kerzner et al. 2020; Christensen- Strynø 2024). This gap is especially pronounced in under-researched regions such as the Somali Regional State, where regional broadcasters serve as primary sources of information and cultural narration for large segments of the population. International evidences suggest that media coverage of disability often remains sporadic and framed through narrow stereotypical lenses rather than rights-based engagement (Atkinson et al. 2024).

Drawing on agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972) and framing theory (Goffman 1974; Entman 1993), this study examines how broadcast media professionals in the Somali Regional State understand, prioritize, and frame inclusive education. By centering on the perspective and professional practices of journalists, editors, and producers working within regional media institutions, the study seeks to generate empirical evidence on the media's role in shaping inclusive education discourse in a context characterized by socio-cultural complexity and structural constraints.

Research Questions

(1) To what extent do media professionals in broadcasting media outlets in the Somali Region understand the concept of inclusive education, and how do they interpret it?

(2) Which kinds of inclusive education coverage are first-hand produced, and what are their framing?

(3) What kind of issues do media professionals encounter when they are reporting on inclusive education?

(4) What tactics do they suggest for the media to play a better role in the advancement of inclusive education?

The study, by emphasizing these questions, intends to present evidence-based insights that have the potential to inform media practice, policy design, and advocacy strategies, thereby making a contribution to the fulfillment of Ethiopia's inclusive education commitments.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 *Inclusive Education and Ethiopian Media Houses*

Inclusive education has become the basis of a fair and excellent educational system that is universally

accepted. Its aim is to let students learn together in the same environment without any distinctions between those with disabilities, coming from poor families, speaking different languages, and of different genders and races. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] (2006) are global frameworks that recognize inclusive education as a fundamental human rights, while the Education 2030 Framework for Action [UNESCO] (2016) guides the implementation of inclusive and equitable education policies worldwide. However, a move from theory to reality implies diversified cooperation. This includes the social actors that are now required to come forward and not only support the inclusion policy but also help create the necessary positive changes in the mindset of society that would ensure equitable access.

The European continent is an area where the educational system has considerable success and strength in the adoption of an inclusive approach; however, the gap between what the policies say and what is really practiced in the classrooms is quite noticeable (Ramberg and Watkins 2020). In Asia, adoption of an inclusive system is standing back because of limited infrastructure, not-so-good teacher preparation, and social stigmatization (Parveen and Qounsar 2018). The African continent sees inclusive education as a tool for societal transformation, but its spread in the continent is not even, and it is mostly impeded by poverty, political instability, and lack of institutional capacity (Mwendwa 2014).

According to Ministry of Education [MoE] (MoE 2012; 2015; 2016), in Ethiopia, inclusive education has been the centerpiece of the country's Education Sector Development Programs three to five (ESDP III–V) and has been backed by the setting up of Inclusive Education Resource Centers (IERCs) and more importantly, the support of an itinerant teacher system. Nevertheless, while the political commitments are commendable, the actual practical execution is still encountering the same barriers, stigma against persons with disabilities, lack of resources, limited teacher training, and low public awareness have been mentioned by most of the respondents. If the media were properly utilized, they could be a great help in disseminating information to the public to remove these barriers that will result in the acceptance of inclusive education.

2.2 The Role of Broadcast Media in Promoting Inclusive Education

Broadcast media, especially television and radio, are still one of the most influential communication channels in Ethiopia. They are able to reach large and diverse audiences, including rural and pastoralist communities where literacy levels are lower. In addition, TV and radio can help to magnify the messages of inclusive education, show positive examples, and also remove stigma by making the presence and the achievements of people with disabilities a regular part of daily life.

Research has demonstrated that regular broadcast coverage of inclusion issues can change societal attitudes and lead families to send children with disabilities to school (Okaka and Nagasha 2017). In Ethiopia, local broadcasters like SRTV, SHAKAAL TV, and Jigjiga FM are the agenda-setters for the neighboring communities, just because they have the trust of the local audiences and are accessible in various languages. Nevertheless, the success of broadcast media in this position depends not only on the number of events but also on the presentation of the content, whether the reports are disclosed through the rights-based and empowering approach or through charity-oriented narratives.

The potential of broadcast media corresponds directly with the current study objective, i.e., to examine the role of the Ethiopian media, mainly these regional broadcast outlets, in the promotion of inclusive education and their challenges. Due to their coverage and influence, these outlets have the power to set the public agenda, frame perceptions of disability, and mobilize action at both household and policy levels.

2.3 Media and Public Understanding

Two communication theories provide us with the means to better understand the role of broadcast media in this process: the Agenda-Setting Theory and the Framing Theory.

Firstly, Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) asserts that the issue that the media highlights most will, to a large extent, be seen by the public as the most important one. Therefore, continuous media attention to inclusive education will be able to raise the matter out of the twilight of marginal concerns and make it a central societal priority in a country like Ethiopia.

Secondly, Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) considers the elements of the media presentation, such as structure, tone, and focus, as factors that determine the audience's perception. Thus, if broadcast programs depict learners with disabilities as empowered members of society who have rights and are capable, then they implicitly break the stigma. On the other hand, the frames that focus on dependence and pity may create an environment that leads to the

repetition of negative stereotypes.

In the case of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, where culturally-based disbeliefs about disability exist, and there is a lack of information, the roles of framing and agenda-setting of regional broadcast media are vital to a greater extent. The stations, by simply producing content that would push the issue of inclusive education up the public agenda and portray it in an empowering way, could make a big difference in changing the attitudes of both society and policymaking.

Despite the fact that Ethiopia's policy environment is a model for inclusive education, the broadcast media have a major influence on the way the public understands, appreciates, and practices this commitment. The following method describes the approach employed to study how SRTV, SHAKAAL TV, and Jigjiga FM use inclusive education in their programming and reporting.

While current studies across Africa and Ethiopia attest that media, particularly broadcast media, can have a significant influence on public understanding and policy priorities regarding inclusive education, there is an identifiable gap in empirical evidence from the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia. This lesser-known area is characterized by unique socio-cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural elements that determine media practices. Knowing how local broadcast media professionals deal with inclusive education, how they see, give importance, and put the matter forward can be a great source of policy, instruction, and promotion. This research work closes that gap.

2.4 *Data and Methods*

This study examined how media professionals in Ethiopia engage with issues related to inclusive education using a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews was employed to capture in-depth professional perspectives. Thirty (30) media professionals drawn from three broadcast media institutions in Jigjiga-Somali Regional Television (SRTV), Jigjiga FM Radio, and SHAKAAL TV were purposively selected based on their involvement in education-related programming. The sample included journalists, editors, producers, presenters, and technical staff with varying levels of professional experience. Gender balance was considered during participant selection to enhance inclusivity and the credibility of the data; however, the study did not aim to analyze gender-based differences, as the research focus was on institutional practices and professional norms rather than individual demographic characteristics.

The major role of this research was to answer the set of questions presented in the introduction. The study aimed to know:

(1) How broadcast media professionals would comprehend the concept of inclusive education.

(2) The media types and the manner in which the issue was presented.

(3) The difficulties faced by the media when reporting on inclusive education.

The interview questions were constructed around the four main themes, linking the research questions directly to the data collection and also the analysis. Interviews were held face-to-face, each with a duration of 45–60 minutes, and the audio recording was done with the participants' consent. The five themes around which the interview protocol was organized were: (1) professional cognitive towards inclusive education; (2) representation of disability in media content; (3) editorial and ethical practices; (4) institutional capacity and training needs; (5) strategies for improving inclusive education coverage.

Some of the ethical issues that were taken into account were the rights of the participants to give their informed consent, the guarantee of anonymity, and the freedom to participate voluntarily. The trustworthiness of data was supported by member checking (participants verifying the correctness of the summaries of their responses) and cross-checking between different media outlets.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, which enables the identification of recurring patterns as well as divergent perspectives across participants. The analysis prioritized institutional practices, professional norms, and media representations related to inclusive education.

Although participants included both male and female media professionals, gender was not treated as a primary analytical category. Instead, the analysis focused on thematic patterns across participants rather than comparative gender-based interpretations, in line with the study's research objectives.

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3.1 Results

The results are shown through five thematic headings, which were the main points that the thematic analysis recognized: (1) Understanding of Inclusive Education; (2) Current Media Practices and Programming; (3) Challenges in Coverage; (4) Perceived Role of Media in Shaping Attitudes; and (5) Suggestions for Improvement. To give a better idea of the opinions shared and to show the points where there is both agreement and disagreement, direct quotes from participants have been incorporated. In addition, whenever it makes sense, the findings have been connected to the concepts of agenda-setting and framing, which are the theoretical grounds of this study.

Understanding of Inclusive Education among Broadcast Media Professionals

The term "inclusive education" was described by the participants from all three media outlets, SRTV, SHAKAAL TV, and Jigjiga FM, as a comprehensive concept. Most of them perceived it as the adoption of the educational system, besides disability, but also to the other forms of marginalization, such as poverty, gender inequity, and linguistic disadvantage.

"Inclusive education is the combination of different kinds of students, such as those with special needs, economically disadvantaged, and underprivileged, with others, so that they can completely exercise their basic rights in the same way as others." (Interviewee 3, SRTV). While the majority of participants were very supportive of the concept, a few of them gave it their conditional acceptance and argued that a certain group of learners with severe needs might need a targeted intervention that can be done only side by side with mainstream integration.

"I agree with the idea, but for some children with very specific needs, separate support might be more suitable." (Interviewee 6, SHAKAAL TV). The variation in how media professionals conceptualize inclusive education reflects a pattern identified in previous studies, where inclusion is broadly endorsed but unevenly understood in practice (Ainscow 2020; Slee 2019). From an agenda-setting perspective, this fragmented understanding may be linked to the limited and inconsistent visibility of inclusive education within mainstream media discourse, which constrains the development of shared professional norms. The findings suggest that without sustained editorial attention and institutional guidance, inclusive education remains a loosely defined concept rather than a clearly operationalized media priority.

Current Media Practices and Programming

Occasionally, all three media outlets somewhat mention inclusive education or related disability issues. However, none of them runs a program dedicated to the topic. Generally, the content of these issues is included in the broadcasts, such as social affairs, edutainment, or NGO-sponsored segments.

"Our educational or teaching-learning programs are almost non-existent. Sometimes we come up with stories that are related to the common educational needs of disabled people... We also do disabled people's interviews, for instance, a disabled person who doesn't use a wheelchair and goes to school, etc. After the interview, we broadcast a message to the government and NGOs" (Interviewee 6, SRTV).

In some instances, the material is converged with general news broadcasts as a Jigjiga FM reporter indicated:

"There is no specific program for inclusive education, but we often include such stories in our news coverage." (Interviewee 9, Jigjiga FM).

The dependence on externally funded content highlights a structural limitation in editorial autonomy, a challenge commonly observed in media systems operating under financial and institutional constraints (Waisbord 2019). From a framing perspective, such dependence often results in charity-oriented narratives that emphasize vulnerability rather than rights, inadvertently reinforcing paternalistic representations of disability. The absence of internally initiated and sustained programming suggests that inclusive education has not yet achieved agenda salience within regional broadcast media.

Challenges in Media Coverage

Participants marked out three main kinds of difficulties: (a) Cultural and attitudinal barriers. Families of children with disabilities usually refuse media coverage because of stigma or fear of being laughed at. (b) Institutional and editorial constraints. The lack of policy guidance, limited funding, and low prioritization may lead to irregular coverage. (c) Professional capacity gaps; the Journalists' survey showed that they lacked training in disability journalism and had little knowledge of the principles of inclusive education.

"We did not accomplish the making of such programs due to a number of reasons: the government was not ready to listen to the voice of society, lack of editorial policy, scarcity of resources, and lack of skills among

journalists" (Interviewee 4, SRTV). "Sometimes families believe that we benefit from their stories and expect something in return. This is why it is hard to give consent" (Interviewee 2, SHAKAAL TV). The obstacles not only limit how much coverage is done but also affect the way stories are presented, which is, to a great extent, the main reason why they depict, rather than challenge, stereotypes.

These intersecting cultural, institutional, and professional barriers indicate that limitations in inclusive education coverage are not merely individual but structurally embedded within media organizations. Similar restrictions have been documented in disability journalism research, which emphasizes that lack of training, editorial policy, and institutional support often leads to avoidance or superficial treatment of sensitive social issues (Johanssen and Garrisi 2020). From a framing standpoint, these challenges restrict journalists' capacity to disrupt dominant stereotypes, thereby reproducing exclusionary narratives.

Perceived Role of Media in Shaping Attitudes

Despite the problems, the participants did see that the media can change the general opinion about the integration of the disabled in the community.

"In the event of a school opening, we always produce 'come back to school' programs, which are addressed to all families. We not only encourage the sending of the children's disabled families, but despite a very low level of consciousness, we do that as well" (Interviewee 8, SHAKAAL TV)

Some journalists have mentioned that media visibility, in some cases, has led to visible changes, that is, instances in which, after a media report on a certain situation, a wheelchair is donated to a young person, or a poor child receives the money necessary for their education. But these occurrences are still far and few between. Their individuality from the point of view of agenda-setting determines that they do not collectively influence the agenda either of policy or of the public.

The positive representation from the framing point of view would be possibly negated due to these being only a few, and the absence of continuous empowering narratives. While participants identified isolated instances of positive social response following media exposure, the limited frequency of such coverage reduces its cumulative agenda-setting effect. Agenda setting suggests that irregular reporting is insufficient to elevate issues into sustained public or policy concern (McCombs 2018). Consequently, although individual stories may generate short-term reactions, the absence of consistent and rights-based framing constrains the media's capacity to influence long-term attitudes toward inclusive education.

Suggestions for Improvement from Practitioners

The participants suggested a variety of measures that could likely improve the media engagement with inclusive education:

1. ***Dedicated programming**: Creating regular segments with a focus on the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.*
2. ***Training**: Offering specific workshops for journalists on the areas of disability reporting, the use of inclusive language, and human rights concepts.*
3. ***Partnerships**: Teaming up with education officials, the disabled community advocacy groups, and NGOs to get reliable information and interesting stories.*
4. ***Community engagement:** Implementing awareness programs.*

"We need the training, the guidelines, and more collaboration with organizations that are working on disability. Without that, our coverage will still be limited and not consistent" (Interviewee 5, Jigjiga FM).

The recommendations proposed by media professionals align closely with international research emphasizing the role of targeted training, editorial commitment, and cross-sector collaboration in improving media coverage of disability and inclusion (Blackett et al. 2021). These insights highlight the necessity of shifting from episodic reporting toward sustained, rights-based media engagement, which agenda-setting and framing theories identify as critical for long-term social change.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how Ethiopian broadcast media professionals understand and practice inclusive education, with particular attention to agenda-setting and framing processes. The findings extend existing research on media and inclusion by demonstrating that, while inclusive education is broadly supported in principle, it remains inconsistently defined and marginal within routine media practice. This pattern aligns with international studies showing that inclusion-related

issues often struggle to achieve sustained visibility in mainstream media, particularly in resource-constrained contexts (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019; Johanssen & Garrisi, 2020).

From an agenda-setting perspective, the limited and irregular coverage of inclusive education suggests that the issue has not attained sufficient salience within Ethiopian broadcast media. This theory emphasizes that sustained and prominent coverage is necessary for issues to become socially and politically prioritized (McCombs, 2018). The findings indicate that inclusive education is often addressed reactively, typically in response to external funding or advocacy, rather than proactively through editorial planning. This contributes to fragmented public awareness and limits the potential for media to influence long-term educational discourse and policy engagement.

Framing theory further illuminates how inclusive education is represented within broadcast media narratives. The findings suggest a predominance of charity-oriented and episodic frames, which emphasize vulnerability rather than rights or systematic responsibility. This framing approach mirrors patterns identified in prior studies on disability representation, where media coverage often reinforces paternalistic narratives instead of challenging structural exclusion (Blackett et al. 2021; Adugna et al., 2024). Such framing may inadvertently sustain stigma and limit public understanding of inclusive education as a right-based and institutional obligation.

In addition, this study also contributes context-specific insights into the Ethiopian and Somali Regional State media environment, where linguistic diversity, cultural norms, and resource limitations shape editorial practices. In regions where broadcast media serve as the primary source of information, particularly for marginalized populations, inconsistent framing of inclusive education has amplified implications. These findings highlight the need for institutional media policies and professional training that are sensitive to regional realities while aligned with inclusive education principles.

The findings carry important implications for media institutions, policymakers, and development partners. Strengthening the media's role in promoting inclusive education requires moving beyond ad hoc coverage toward sustained, rights-based programming supported by editorial commitment and professional capacity building. Consistent with prior research, targeted training on disability-sensitive reporting and institutionalisation of inclusive education into media agendas are critical for enhancing both coverage quality and societal impact (Waisbord, 2019).

While the study includes a gender-balanced sample, it did not aim to explore gender-specific differences in media practice, which may be a valuable focus for future research. In addition, the study provides valuable quality insights; however, it is limited by its focus on a specific regional media context and a relatively small sample of broadcast professionals. Future research could extend this analysis through comparative studies across regions or by incorporating audience perspectives to assess the reception and impact of inclusive education media coverage.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Elyas Abdi ISMAIL, Prof. Selma Koç Akgül, Seid Abdi Ismail, and Abdikadir Mohamed Abdile. The first draft of the manuscript was written by ISMAIL, and all other authors commented on the versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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