CHILDREN AND TELEVISION: THE LOOMING MEDIA EFFECT IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The debate on children's behavior as competent television viewers and also cultural viewers today continues unabated in research. In the developed world, much of research has focused on the effects of television exposure on children's behavior and attitude formation. Other researches however, focused on effects on cognition. Yet the African child has been left out in such researches that continue to be conducted in developed world. Indeed, media research in Africa may not be meaningful without giving regard to 'Africanity' among the children. This gives an open window through which one sees the peculiarities of the local culture in which African children grow as they get exposed to the media. While a number of Kenyan narratives celebrate the virtues of television including the discourses on coverage of the infamous terrorist attack in West Gate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, 21st September, 2013, it appears that the role of television in Kenyan society is catapulting into political discourses with attempts in enhancing approaches to quality governance. On the contrary, a country with a population of over 40 million people with nascent capitalist economy, there is need for enhancement of local communities and increased opportunities for education which will not lead to the hegemony of one social group and subordination of others. Of the 40 million people, 43% are children aged between five and sixteen. This paper concentrates its focus on the social milieu of the people living around the Lake Victoria region, majority of whom are mostly fishermen.

KeyWords: Television viewing; Globalization; Children; Looming effect; Africanity; Narrative construction; Dialectics of life.

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INTRODUCTION

Media's information – consumption initiatives in families, schools and other institutions in Kenya are increasingly changing children's expectations, values and identities. In the face of all these changes, there is need to beware of lack of television's content analyses since television's introduction into Kenya in 1960's. Indeed, much of television viewing grows out of a need for relaxation (Rubin, 1981). Thus its content is not generally challenging. This makes producers of television programmes to use stereotypes to present easily understood media content and identified character types, even in the production of news where producers of the news illustrate news stories with the representative examples (Linn, 1996). The stereotypes are often adults who may articulate the media tastes for children, those who whatever make ups they may use will articulate these tastes for children in television serials.

Yet, we are aware that television has changed over the years since its establishment as a mass medium globally. The major question that arises is: does the change in television (preferably its menu of programme options) have effect on childhood? Livingstone (2002) would agree with this, as she has proposed 'if the media have changed in the past fifty years, so too have the contexts of childhood, whether this is charted in terms of the social structures of the family or community, of the consumer and the labour market expectations, or of the values and identities' (Livingstone, 2002:21)

Livingstone (2002) then argues that such parallel changes need to be considered in tandem. Thus, changes in television programmes need to be consonant with changes in social experiences the children are likely to consume. This leads us to look at how we conceptualize television in this paper. Looking at Robert's (2004) work in defining television, it becomes clear that the various definitions in use often complicate attempts to have a clearly concise one.

In his attempt, Roberts (2004:1) gives five definitions of which three are very relevant for this paper:

- Television is aggregate of all the images and sounds 'carried' by television and produced, organized and experienced as television programming.

- Television is a changing set of technologies for electronically capturing images and sounds; recording, manipulating and arranging images and sounds; (sometimes) transmitting images and sounds through space (via radio waves, through coaxial cable, bounced off satellites, over the internet); and displaying images and sounds thus captured, recorded, manipulated, arranged, and (sometimes but not always) transmitted from one place to another.

- Television is the social experience associated with producing, viewing, listening, talking about, reading about, being captured by, appearing on, and being influenced and affected by television.

A look at the three definitions given above gives the idea that conceptualization of 'television' needs to vary from country to country and home to home. This nodal specification of locality helps in describing the way of living among Kenyans, where we find a large number of them living in the rural countryside in a communal culture of the village dominated by oral tradition. These are people whose culture is rooted in an experience preserved in a common collective attitude of the world which is basically African, that of a communal culture of the village. These are Kenyans whose roles as men, women and children are all located and dictated by the locales they find themselves in. Many of these locales are without the 'medium without message' (electricity). (McLuhan, 2007:134)

Of course in the urban Kenyan setting, we find a different social milieu, where the 'affluent urban dwellers,' the 'high ups,' those 'at the top' who have houses having electricity, hot and cold water, bathrooms and lavatories ,cars, washing machines, fridges, books, cookers, televisions and internet. They can afford local holiday in Mombasa's five star hotels, can shop in New York and London. Scannel (2007) considered them as "the agents of official culture that looms over and above working class life…..they are the 'vast apparatus of authority' as it intrudes on working class life" (Scannel,2007:108). We find them in large cities of Kenya that is Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu; in their homes far flung from the city slums. The children from these homes are indeed e-children, far up-rooted from the stoic culture of the slums and that of the economically deprived rural villages. They have access to all sorts of new media for their entertainment and other uses. These are issues of development often seen as a political, economic and cultural process in the changing time in developing countries where culture and consumption of media symbolic forms dominate discourses of development. These are trends in a geographical sweep occasioned by media in the name of globalization in the world, trends that must be discussed by scholars to reveal real differences among regions of the world. Such an attempt will also shade light on the globalization effects appearing in different nodal regions of the world

The dialectic in understanding Kenyan children

In discussing differences within the regions, we thus begin to present a backcloth description of the socio-economic scenario the Kenyan children find themselves. This is a way of not making us lose sight of the differentiated locales in which the children live.

In contemporary Kenyan society and the scenario presented above, one may misconstrue that, the majority of Kenyan children and the youth live in towns and cities spread in Kenya. On the contrary; majority live in the countryside rural settings where the child belongs to the world of his community that provides him /her with security and traditional skills of survival in a world around him/her (Agalo, 2012:25).Surprisingly of course, the integrity of this Kenyan communal village life appears threatened. It is engulfed in shocking waves of change. The adults in these rural settings have become defeated to reshape their skills and stock of knowledge to be in line with the new mediating waves of emerging knowledge. Their poor position in the changing life has emerged as a result of lack of social reform to alleviate the problems they face

and are inclined to accept the position. Hence they remain legitimated, as was advocated in Malthu's thesis: 'there is one right which man has generally been thought to possess which I am confident he neither does nor can possess – a right to subsistence when his labour will not fairly purchase it' (Malthus, 1872,p.91)

Indeed the old people in rural areas of Kenya who remain as custodians of African culture therefore feel the dialectic of life in increasingly changing circumstances in late modern Kenya where traditional practices are increasingly getting detraditionalised. For them it is a shock. Thus the countryside is in the lull of village tranquility while the urban locales whine with noises of vehicles, planes and modern factories. For those in the cities, as Webster (2006), in quoting Bauman (2005), has succinctly stated:

> "this is the time characterized by a search for order, a society seeking stability and control under the aegis of the nation - states which looked after their citizens, a period in which there is confidence in planning, and where it was imagined, that reason brings about greater surety as to how we might best arrange things" (Bauman,2005).

But this is not true in a developing country. Thus, the old in rural areas of Kenya remain befallen with a feeling of dialectic of life in an increasingly changing modern Kenya.

Bauman's point here is a rhetoric response that the state has the task to guarantee social justice where education , health and other economic activities lead to safeguard individuals' well being. But this has not been the case in African countries where a person struggles in misery and fails to change his or her fate. Most of children and youth today form majority of those living in rural Kenya. They often experience spells of hard time making them turn into crimes reminiscent of violence in American films watched on Television and videos. Such crimes spill into towns and cities causing moral panic.

Surprisingly, the children in the large expanse of rural Kenya have become fascinated by the symbolic form of the media. To them media's symbolic forms have become vehicles for their self reflection; thus 'a basis for thinking about themselves, about others, about the world to which they belong' (Thompsons, 2011:42). To them, they begin to see a new world outside their rural locales through the media. They begin to fashion themselves using the messages gleaned from media message content. Seemingly they cherish the messages gleaned from the media and incorporate in their own lives contrary to the expectations of the adults. It is an experience that provides them with the basis for constructing a sense of self, a sense of new collective belonging. Thus the consumption of global media content begins to provide them with a shift from local experience to a virtual one. Beninger (1986) has given a description of this experience which Peirce (1931) described as a 'tri-relative influence' in which the 'shared symbols (Pierce's signs) enable individuals to take the perspective or role of the other and therefore develop a 'generalized other' (Pierece's Object) or internalized social conscience as well as self and mind (Pierece's interpretant). (Beniger, 1986:91). This distinction relates to structuralist idea which contrasts the innate 'I' to the objective social self or 'me'. The contrast engenders the socio cognitive play in which the media engage the children in the rural countryside in Kenya. The media symbolic form here bombards the child as an objective self and transpires into his ego (the self and mind). The Innate 'I' which then extends to dictate his personality (observable behavior) typifies the internalized symbolic forms consumed which then socially appears as a new virtual experience. In this sense, the child begins slowly to alienate himself from common values and norms of his community as exemplified in his use of language and narrative construction. Thus television images influence his socialization process.

TELEVISION VIEWING

For our interest in department of Media and Communication, we particularly chose to make visits for one month, every weekend to a tiny room, Homabay town to watch the Mexican soap opera and combat films which were liked by the children. Every time the Nigerian Soaps were shown, a number of children snubbed them and attendance dwindled during such shows. The Kenyan ones were no better. We asked one boy why they did not like the Nigerian soap opera and he gave the following response:

The Narrative

$$\begin{bmatrix} ---- \\ ---- \\ ---- \end{bmatrix}$$

we do not like the sorcery they practice and also hunting with arrows, rungus (clubs) and machetes.

We also hunt like that

…The women quarrel with husbands in open where children see

Mhh…I don't like their food

(Asked why they like Mexican soap opera)

$$\begin{bmatrix} ---- \\ ---- \\ ---- \end{bmatrix}$$

They dress well, drive beautiful cars in clean streets…their houses are good.

Their films are good

From this short part of the narrative, we begin to establish how television can be part of cultural transmission. Gillespie (2005) has relevant arguments on this when she writes that:

Qualitative research can, however, offer an interpretation of this scene that takes account of contextual factors at work…media consumption is embedded in the routines and institutions, both public and domestic of everyday life. Whether in form of print, broadcast, or recorded, or computer forms, _ _ _are inseparable from and negotiated within these contexts. (Gillespie, 2005:28)

The impact of this argument suggests that African Children begin to experience media effects immediately they come into contact with media and immediately show signs of gradual behavioral change. Many parents in Homabay therefore are left in a shock and wonder what they see happening to their own children. Amutabi (2011) describes the state of wonder thus:

Although the general tendency of educated Kenyans is to treat their children equally regardless to sex, they are not immune to the subtle influence that radio and television play in the socialization of their children……(Amutabi, 2011: 1192)

LOOMING EFFECTS

Indeed researchers on media effects have always known that context matters. Thus, different groups, for various reasons, will interpret television content differently in their everyday life. Therefore understanding the looming pervasive media effects among children in Kenya will be through coming into terms with contemporary issues in the relationship between media, education and social change in Kenya. As we have stated before, The Kenya School Parents Association (KSPA) has argued for 'the mutual interaction between the Kenyan past state of social values and norms and the emerging social values being kept in check by education, such that none loses its strand as both are needed to weave a conducive milieux for social change'. (Agalo, 2012:31).

The impact of the Kenya school parents exemplifies the wonder that has befallen the Kenya adults as concerns the consumption of media (film, video, television and internet), as global issues open up in Kenya, including terrorism. Therefore a country should not be seen from the perspective of just a political, economic and territorial entity (Gillespie, R 2005: 140). From this sense of relevance, then television viewing in Kenya should be considered as one of the sources opening up the contemporary dramas of the world for the children.

The worry among Kenyans and indeed Homabay County, is the irresistible heights of influence among children viewing television in 'closures' in rural shopping centers in the 'tinny darkrooms' where they pay to watch television and videos with the doors closed or in their homes where they close the doors of their rooms and put off the lights then the serenity of silence pervades. Thus they consume the media content without parental guidance.

In Homabay county, it is emerging that the ubiquity of media has raised concern about the sensory stimulation of children and more so, as Gillespie (2005) suggested, in Media's intensity and shock effect that incites the children:

What matters here is the relationship between the media and distinctive mental or physical kinds of perception or attention and the ways in which the body is socially and historically organized and regulated. It is not just the senses that emerge as being socially and historically malleable and subject to training, rather it is the articulation of the relations between the senses and other capacities….the whole perceptual, sensory, neurological and physiological organization of the individual (Gillespie,2005:89).

What is noticeable about this elaboration of the relationship between media and senses is the sum total of television viewing hours that provide space for social construction among children.

Indeed the drama serials children like to watch in the Kenyan media scene, are mostly American that tend to, as Gillespie suggests, showcase for US consumer goods that most people in developing countries can only dream of. Such serials, it is argued, 'promote global homogeneity and cultural uniformity and threaten to erode the diversity and destroy the authenticity of local and traditional cultures' (Gillespie, 2005:144.)

We see today the power of the media casting its imperialistic net upon Kenyan children across the country especially from those in large cities and those in rural areas. More striking observation is that:

the power of media is blind to barriers between affluence and poverty, it knows no cultural diversity. Moreover, its acquired behavioral patterns among children establishes the difference between those from affluent homes and those from poor homes. Those from affluent homes, though they watch the same television drama serials, will tend to mellow well showing some cultural sophistication (epitomizing the class materialistic value of the US -style of consumer culture (Gillespie, 2005:144)

In Homabay County countryside, the children's experience look unsophisticated; lacking in glamour of the lifestyle watched on the television. Their adoption of lifestyle watched on television is indeed constrained by socio economic conditions they find themselves.

Nonetheless, the experiences they gain from viewing television drama serials, as we witness around the lake, are not consonant with norms of cultural practice in their communities. Schools and the churches in the county where most of the worshippers are Seventh Day Adventists, have failed to keep in check such emerging experiences. Worse still, those

parents with televisions in their homes do not regulate the time the children should watch them. This has given space for children to be over exposed onto other drama serials not necessarily meant for children consumption.

Are Kenyan children falling into the trap of media imperialism or call it 'a seductive diversion?' This a question worth asking. It smacks of the fear African media researchers have held concerning how deep the media imperialism will eat into Africanity and agricultural lifestyle based on biological economic survival with a culture based on an African language. As the late Kofi Awoonor, a Ghanaian poet, once suggested, 'All of us Africans at heart are still villagers and the fabric has held out despite our education', (Daily nation September 2013:14 (lifestyle)

The attitude emerging is that of a wary stance. We see children and the youth which form 52% of the Kenyan population turning to violent cultures on the streets, in line with violent drama serials on television. In the popular music, they love African American beats and shun with disdain the African beats. The dressing they like is the type commonly seen in American movies. Many people often ask what next since American fashion industry is dynamic and fast changing.

Statistics around the world (mostly developed world) about how much time home children take in watching television are astounding. The work of Jordan et al (2010) on the 'The role of television access in the viewing time of US adolescents' has posed questions: what compels some children to be heavy viewers? Is the domestic context an important determinant?

Conceptual model

Jordan et al (2010) designed the parameters to compromise the four main question parameters related to television viewing. They answer questions on the 'mediating variables of home TV access' and time spent watching television (Jordan et al 2010)

The model (Fig. 1) includes age as a parameter in literature, since some adolescent traits seemingly appear to have influence in television viewing. In the work of Rideout et al (2005), it was found that 15-18 year olds watch significantly less television than 11-14 years old. Indeed such differences tell us more about television viewing. Thus the teens begin to venture out for live media entertainments like live music and the tweens remain glued at Television and videos at home.
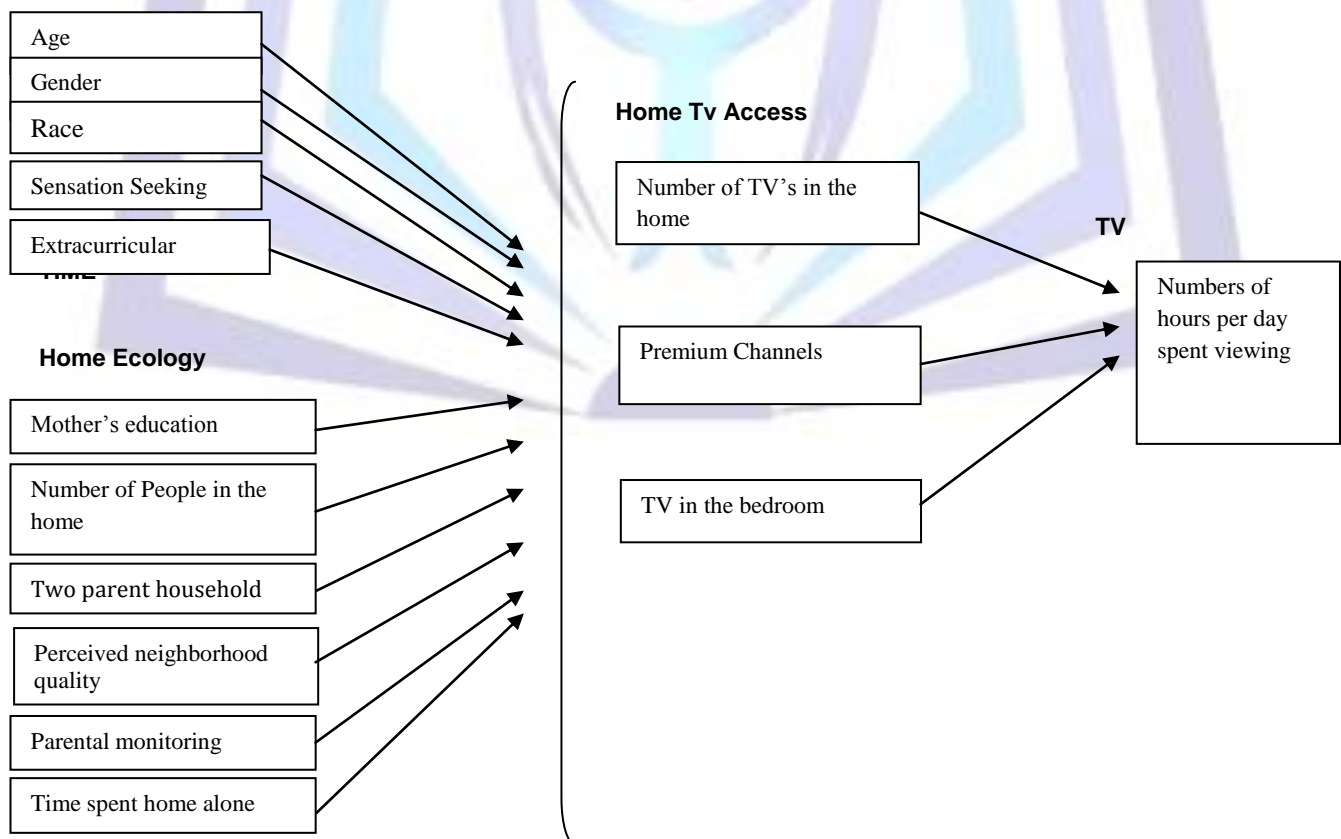

Figure 1 Predictors of adolescent viewing time. (Adopted from Amy Jordan et al, 2005)

Predictors given in Figure1 also have connection with the emerging trend in childhood weight gain among African children as witnessed among the tweens in Homabay. Weight gain is emerging as one of the most serious public health challenges in 21st century in Africa. It is a precursor to child obesity and is emerging as one of the Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs). Medical literature specifies the causes of childhood obesity to include sedentary lifestyle, physical inactivity and also consumption of high-calorie diets which contain low nutrients value (Gilmore and Jordon, 2012)

We took interest on weight gain because of high frequency of food advertisement on Kenyan television. Such advertisements have profound influence among children in Kenyan cities but the effect is also beginning to be seen in smaller towns as illustrated in table 1. According to social cognitive theorist (Bandiera, 1977) children can copy behaviors from models, including actors and actresses they watch on television. But the children will also be moved by messages about food and beverages.

Table 1. Children's television viewing

S/N	NAME	CLASS	SEX	AGE	WEIGHT	HEIGHT	BMI	TV	FRIDGE	M-PHONE	M-WAVE	ACTIVITY	DIET
1	CHILD 1	5	f	13	49	1.45	23.30558859	yes	N	y	n	Reading	rice/meat
2	CHILD 2	4	f	12	61	1.47	28.22897867	yes	Y	y	y	watching TV, washing	
3	CHILD 3	4	f	10	41	1.4	20.91836735	yes	Y	y	y		
4	CHILD 4	4	m	10	41	1.4	20.91836735	yes	Y	y	n	football/ TV	beans /chapo
5	CHILD 5	2	f	8	36	1.39	18.63257595	yes	Y	y	y	Football	
6	CHILD 6	4	f	12	48	1.47	22.21296682	yes	Y	y	n	washing, reading	
7	CHILD 7	4	f	9	47	1.49	21.17021756	yes	Y	y	y	watching, washing	
8	CHILD 8	5	m	11	44	1.48	20.08765522	yes	Y	y	n	Football	
9	CHILD 9	8	m	13	50	1.52	21.64127424	yes	Y	y	n	Reading	
10	CHILD 10	8	m	13	57	1.82	17.20806666	yes	Y	y	y	Football	
11	CHILD 11	3	m	10	47	1.49	21.17021756	yes	Y	y	n	Football	
12	CHILD 12	4	m	12	49	1.49	22.07107788	yes	N	y	n	washing dishes, football	
13	CHILD 13	2	f	8	25	1.27	15.500031	yes	Y	y	n	washing dishes, watching TV	
14	CHILD 14	8	f	13	37	1.52	16.01454294	yes	Y	y	n	jumping ropes	
15	CHILD 15	4	f	10	55	1.49	24.77365884	yes	Y	y	y	watching TV, washing	
16	CHILD 16	8	m	12	28	1.39	14.49200352	n	N	y	n	Football	
17	CHILD 17	3	m		56	1.7	19.37716263	yes	Y	y	n	Football	ugali/ veges
18	CHILD 18	4	m	9	24	1.2	16.66666667	yes	Y	y	y	Bten	fish choma/ugali
19	CHILD 19	4	m	9	49	1.3	28.99408284	yes	N	y	n	watching cartoon	ugali/veges
20	CHILD20	5	m	11	38	1.49	17.11634611	yes	N	n	n	Football	
21	CHILD21	3	f	8	23	1.1	19.00826446	n	Y	y	n	Katie	
22	CHILD 22	5	m	12	69	1.42	34.21940091	yes	N	y	n	watching Afro cinema, running	
23	CHILD 23	5	m	11	49	1.47	22.67573696	yes	Y	y	n	Football	

The Parameters given in **Table 1,** include age, education, parents, siblings, time taken to watch television, height and weight. Accordingly in **Table 1,** those children who take too long watching television rated higher in weight.

CONCLUSION

The debate on media affectivity on Kenyan children will always take many topical issues including culture, media tastes, context of childhood and the impact of harmful materials; the list will always be long.

We continue to witness in Kenya, a life in rural community increasingly being transformed by the dynamics of media pervasiveness. Very few Kenyan children today can be said not to have watched television even though those who may not, may associate with those who have. The few may be children in remote semi-arid areas in Northern Kenya among the warring communities of Turkana and Pokot. However, these children meet in schools, churches, cultural festivities. Where they meet, those who have access to television at home and those who meet in tiny rooms in small shopping centers where they pay to watch videos and watch English football and Mexican television drama serials. Such meeting places have become places where a lot is learnt. As I stated before, 'Children are very good at making sense of visual images and are quick to express their experiences. They will talk their hearts out on what they see in books, TV or video.' (Agalo, 2012:30).

 Media pervasiveness is a problem that forms for it concerns not only the relation between the media and the senses, but also goes beyond to transform some aspects of African culture. It is crucial to be concerned about this thesis as it is emerging to be the basis upon which children and media researchers take stand in media research

Kenyan media researchers must not remain ignorant of the rolling news and digital television channels which are steadily growing in the country. Such ignorance, as has been argued, has a consequence on Kenyan children, who most Eurocentric media researchers have overlooked as 'children from the poor, the disadvantaged, of the nations outside Europe and north America'(Webster,1995:125)

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Author' biography

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After college, from 1976 to 1989 I worked in Kenyatta University in the department of Linguistics during which I went through my post graduate studies in Media studies at the University of Wales. I joined Moi University in 1990 and immediately proceeded to Singapore (RELC) for studies in Linguistics.

Soon after coming back to Moi University I continued with my services as a lecturer in the department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages when I won a fellowship for PhD Studies in Linguistics (split programme) at the University of Pittsburg, US. Then after completion of my doctoral programme and having published enough papers, I was promoted to the position of a Senior lecturer in the same department. Soon after, I was appointed Head of department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages. My research during this time was on Tonal System of African languages.

After 3 years as head of Department. I moved to Rongo University College, a constituent College of Moi University, where I was appointed as the new Dean of the School of Information, Communication and Media Studies. This is the post I continue to occupy for the last two years. My present research is on Media and Children and Media Community Empowerment in rural Kenya, focusing on Agroinformatics. I have published in International journals. Presently, I am working with colleagues at the University of Dubrovnik, Croatia, on research a book on Media and Tourism.

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