# Representation of Students with Disability in Media: The Case of *Abled Differently* Television Programme

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## Abstract

Higher education in Kenya is seen as the privilege of a few, with Persons with Disability (PWD) hardly standing a chance to access it. While disability can be explained in a straightforward way using medical discourses, critical disability theorists argue that disability is both socially and culturally constructed. Media representation of Students with Disability (SWD), therefore, can determine perceptions, attitudes and behaviour towards access to higher education for PWD. Although a number of social and cultural changes occasioned by activists have taken place to improve the social position of PWD, the image of disability in media may not have changed much. This study therefore sought to determine the extent to which government owned media in Kenya are mainstreaming disability in Kenya. The study focused on the national broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation Television (KBC TV) and specifically investigated how its premier programme *Abled Differently*, is representing SWD. The study was guided by the framing theory and adopted a qualitative research design was adopted and content analysed from a sample of 13 episodes of the *Abled Differently* programme which aired in 2015. A purposeful sample of 20 key informants involved in the production of the *Abled Differently* programme was drawn. Findings show that the representation of SWD in the programme moves beyond stereotypical representation SWD in the educational context. The study recommends that the media can provide the kind of information and imagery which acknowledges and explores the complexity of the experience of disability and a disabled identity for SWD in higher education. To this end, there is need to train journalists so that they can craft programmes that emphasize the dignity, inherent value, and equal rights of SWD. Hopefully, increasing emphasis of positive portrayal of SWD in higher education will offset the image of PWD as incapable of adjusting to the rigors of higher education.

***Keywords: Television, framing, higher education, Students with Disability***

## Introduction

Despite a variety of factors shaping perception of students with disability in higher education in Kenya having been investigated, it appears that the media has hardly been considered, as the dearth of literature on the subject indicates. Although the effect of the media on disability discourse in higher education has been neglected, the impact of media may be of substantial interest as many researchers focusing on media effects in other disciplines have ascertained (Samsel & Perepa, 2013). However, the extent to which government owned media in Kenya are highlighting Students With Disability (SWD) remains unknown. Therefore, the paper explored how mainstream media in Kenya frames disability. The study focused on the national broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation Television (KBC TV) and specifically investigated how its premier programme *Abled Differently*, represented SWD.

Mainstreaming disability is one of the rights guaranteed not only by the Constitution of Kenya, but by several treaties and international conventions that have emphasized the dignity, inherent value, and equal and inalienable rights of persons with disability. According to Stibbe (2004), provisions of the law that stand out include the UN Declaration for the International Year of Disabled persons (1981), UN Decade of Disabled Persons (1983), ILO Convention no. 159 (1983) and UN Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1994). The recent UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), which Kenya is party to, elaborates on the duties of the state in ensuring rights of persons of disability in order to overcome the marginalization they face.

Locally, similar rights for PWDs are guaranteed in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights which Kenya subscribes to. Article 54 of the Constitution of Kenya is a stand-alone article on disability which expressly states that a person with any disability is fully integrated into society. Additionally, the National Disability Policy of 2006 takes cognisance of the importance of awareness raising on disability and to this end states that the government shall seek to increase the levels of public awareness on the needs, aspirations and capacities of persons with disability so as to enhance their acceptance, participation and integration in society.

While, for many, disability can be explained in a straightforward way using medical discourses, critical disability theorists recognise that disability is both socially and culturally constructed. Social and cultural models of disability have emerged in response to the dominating medicalisation of disability as a personal problem to overcome. On one hand, the social model of disability sees disability as the restriction of social activity imposed on top of people that have impairments (Ellis, 2015). On the other hand, the cultural model focuses on how society represent disability through stereotypes. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) state that representation can be divided into negative imagery which not only identifies but also categorises damaging reoccurring stereotypes of disability. They argue for the potential for cultural subversion in images of disability which may be considered negative. They recommend critical theorists undertake a consideration of how disability works as a narrative prosthesis in popular media and culture. From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the experience of disability is, therefore, shaped by social and cultural factors.

The political, social and economic structures in Kenya may not favour access to higher education for SWD. While in primary and secondary education, there is additional resource support in terms of personnel, and equipment, there are no support systems in higher education. While there is affirmative action for admission of students with disabilities in some colleges, the universities do not have any. Although this is the case, inclusive education is part of a human rights approach to social relations and conditions. Therefore, the role of education in the development of an inclusive society is a fundamental one. This points to the role of media in framing inclusive education for SWD in a way that urges the society to be more proactive. Media representation of inclusive education can determine perceptions, attitudes and behaviour towards SWD. How SWD are portrayed and the frequency with which they appear in the media has an enormous impact on how they are regarded in society. International Labour Organization (2015) argues that portraying PWD with dignity and respect in the media can help promote more inclusive and tolerant societies.

Burns (2016) argues that disability has been framed by the media in ways that promote negative stereotypes. Black (2004) posits that media representation of students with disability affects expectations of students in education institutions.

Although broadcast television in Kenya emerged in the 1960s, with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation Television as the only channel, and peaked from 1991 when the airwaves were freed and later with digital migration, there was a general invisibility of PWD on television which paralleled their invisibility within the Kenyan society. PWD appeared only occasionally in documentaries or education programmes, but never during prime time.

When they did they were likely to appear in low budget specialist programmes or dramas squeezed into unpopular time slots. One such programme was the television drama *Vituko* which featured a popular person with short stature, Likobe, which aired on the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation Television at 3 pm on Sundays. Even then, most TV programmes tended to sensationalise or stereotype disability. Others were more concerned with entertaining the audience rather than informing the audience. Most of the programmes lacked representation of higher educational needs of PWD (Samsel & Perepa, 2013).

Gray (2008) notes that television provides a massive cultural database and vocabulary that can be used to understand our society, yet, historically, disability stories hardly get featured in the media and when they do, they often misrepresent disability. Barnes (1997) argues that the media teaches society about disability, and the repetition of stereotypical portrayals perpetuates values that infringe on the rights of PWD.

Yet, television has the power to play a part in the formation of social opinion and ultimately the removal of discrimination and barriers to SWD. Because of the segregation that SWD face, the only significant chance for their positive portrayal is through television (Stibbe, 2004). In essence then, television has the potential to play a particularly important role in constructing the concept of disability in the Kenyan society. Burns (2016) argues that the media is crucial in establishing or quashing stereotypes about PWD by their selection of the content and frames regarding disability. By determining these frames, they construct reality for those who read, watch, or listen to their stories.

Television, as a form of popular culture, holds much potential for an examination of disability. It is therefore important to see how Television frames disability in Kenya and whether it is in Tandem with the numerous provisions of law, chief among them the Constitution of Kenya and the requirements of the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA).

The CA, in response to having media that is responsive to societal needs, crafted the Programming Code for Free-to-Air Radio and Television Broadcasting Services (2015) that demands broadcasting of sixty percent of local content with provisions for airing contact specific to PWD. Although this law came into effect in 2015, it is not clear what kind of representation exists for SWD in television programming.

Given the central position that television plays in social construction of disability in Kenya, it is important to question the extent to which television supports the agenda of disability activism in higher education. The objective of the paper, therefore, was to determine the extent to which *Abled Differently* programme which aired on government owned television in Kenya represented SWD.

**Media Framing**

According to the framing theory advanced by Goffman (1986), media elaborate and reinforce certain representations which in turn creates frames through which opinions about issues are shaped. In this way then, the media play an important role in distributing ideology primarily through framing.

Framing involves selecting pieces of information and organizing them to produce stories for an audience. The essence of framing, therefore, is selection to prioritize some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events (Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993).

Reese (2007) explains that frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. Indeed, over time some frames become conventional in the media and they provide contextual cues. They give meaning and order to complex problems, actions, and events, by slotting the new into familiar categories or storylines. Ironically, once conventional frames become pervasive, the media believe that they are portraying factual information in the tradition of objective and balanced reporting, as they are unaware of the way that the broader frame shapes their story narratives.

It follows that conventional frames for reporting disability reinforce stereotypical perceptions of SWD. According to Hunt (1991) there are 10 stereotypes that the media use to portray disability. These include: i) the disabled person as pitiable or pathetic, ii) an object of curiosity or violence, iii) sinister or evil, iv) the super cripple, v) as atmosphere, vi) laughable, vii) his/her own worst enemy, viii) as a burden, ix) as non-sexual, x) being unable to participate in daily life. Where these conventional frames are adopted, media stories are often not a true representation of disability. This paper therefore investigated the framing of SWD in television in Kenya and its effect on conversations around the access to higher education for them.

## Methodology

The study used a qualitative research design for data collection and analysis to establish the framing of SWD in the *Abled Differently* programme. The programme was selected because it is the first TV magazine to voice issues of SWD in Kenya. The study analysed coverage of a 12-month period in order to capture the representations. The 12-month period was from 1st January 2015 to 31st December 2015. The researchers obtained the programmes from the programme's controller at Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. Each episode had a run-time of 27 minutes bringing the total number of minutes to 351. A purposeful sample of 20 key informants involved in the production of the *Abled Differently* programme was drawn and interviews conducted to obtain in-depth information. This included producers, directors, presenters, script writers and reporters who participate in the production of the programme. Qualitative data obtained was transcribed and divided into meaningful analytical units. The units were grouped into different categories that were coded for content analysis.

## Results and Discussion

*Abled Differently*, which is a 27 minutes show, airs every Saturday at 6.30pm on KBC Channel One and gives prominence to issues surrounding PWD. The programme starts with 45 seconds montage which show persons with disability engaged in various activities such as presenting shows, presenting radio shows, driving personal cars, singing, playing sports, learning in educational institutions, playing with their children in a living room.

The signature tune contains the lyrics; "keep on moving, keep marching on" which encourages persons with disability not to lose hope in life. The programme is divided into two parts which comprises of three different features, and inserts on the rights of PWD drawn from the United Nations Convention on Person with Disability. Finally, the presenters announce the show's end. The show concludes with song sung by PWD or about PWD and credits roll. In general, the programme attempts to portray a disability culture that is no different to many other cultures because it is premised on the idea that persons with disability share a common bond of experiences and resilience. According to Darrow (2013), PWD share a common history of oppression and resilience and they claim their disabilities with pride as part of their identity. It follows that media portrait of a given group can determine the image of the group and consequently how the public reacts to that group, hence the need to be more aware of the media and its role in influencing human behaviour.

Although the *Abled Differently* programme features PWD in general, it was observed that SWD are also featured in various institutions of higher learning. Findings SWD from public universities were featured more (60%) than those from private universities (40%). The representation of SWD in institutions of higher learning helps to build positive images about SWD in the society. Research shows that young people who are educated in a more inclusive classroom environment are much more accepting of other SWD (Trepanier-Street., et al, 2011). Successful inclusion requires acceptance of the disability of the individual with a disability by all students either with or without disability. In addition, featuring SWD in higher education contributes to a more inclusive representation of disability in the society.

Findings indicate that the language used in the Abled differently programme to frame issues on SWD focuses on the person and not the impairment. For example, in Episode 3 we are presented with the story of Veronica Naserian from Mt Kenya University, who is a student of short stature. The terminology used in naming the student focuses on her person and not her disability. She is referred to as a person of short stature and not the stereotypical term 'dwarf'.

Further, value laden terms such as "disabled person, blind person, Albino" were avoided and instead terms like "person with disability, person with visual impairment, person with Albinism" used respectively. In cases where phrases could not adequately describe PWD, the name of the person was given prominence. For example, instead of saying "deaf girl" or "blind person" the interviewee's particular names were used. In an interview, the director of the *Abled Differently* programme states: "I made a conscious decision to use terms that put the person first and not her particular functional or physical limitations. Although I'm aware of the editorial policy to use terms that save on time, I choose to put the child first and not the disability". In another episode Michael Mwangi, a student from St. Paul's University, is described as "using a wheelchair" instead of instead of being referred to as "wheelchair-bound" hence emphasizing his ability, rather than disability. Although the programme uses less stereotypical, cliché, oppressive and offensive language, most scholars content that this is the exception and not the norm (Burns, 2011; Haller, 1993; Tanner, Green, & Burns, 2012).

The *Abled Differently* programme gives voice to SWD by allowing them to speak for themselves. Findings indicate that SWD narrate their own stories through vox pops. One *Abled Differently* reporter interviewed states: "We give time to the Students With Disability to make their remarks. We do not allow a lecturer or interpreter to purport to talk on behalf of the students." Indeed, Groce (2005) argues that seeing disability on TV programmes is said to improve self-esteem to SWD.

The *Abled Differently* programme features experts who comment on misconceptions about SWD. In one of the programmes, a lecturer from Kenyatta University is featured explaining that Students with Albinism are in danger because they are targeted by individuals who believe that their body parts contain some healing power. The Lecturer emphasizes that Students with Albinism do not contain magical powers and that there is need to create more awareness to dispel this myth as a way forward.

Another myth is that SWD always want to be "cured" or have their disability magically go away. Maurice Kinyua, a student from Kenyatta University who is featured, recounts how his parents took him to Catholic sisters who took care of him because blindness is a taboo subject in his community.

Hunt (1991) observes that a common misconception about PWD is that they need "cure". This thinking subscribes to the medical model where disability or impairments are seen as problems which should be 'fixed' with treatment (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). The *Abled Differently* programme provides counter narratives to this view of SWD.

Findings regarding the image of SWD indicate that the *Abled Differently* programme features SWD in active roles. Episode 4 features Ashura Micheals who is a deaf Student studying Law at Kenyatta University. She is portrayed as active in college. In one clip, she is seen in the library searching for reading material and in another clip she in class engaging her lecturer using sign language. This representation is useful to a society where students with Deafness have been side-lined, or even hidden from the public. This representation helps to break down barriers and open up opportunities for SWD. Dyson (2005) argues that altered attitudes towards PWD is necessary for social integration between able bodied and individuals with disability. In essence then television could alter society's attitudes by representing SWD in active roles.

Findings demonstrate that the *Abled Differently* programme succeeds, to a larger extent, in providing counter narratives on SWD. Interviews conducted with the programme production personnel showed that the team made a conscious decision to move away from stereotypical representations of SWD. One script writer cited lack of training on reporting on disability as a major contributor to stereotypical representations of SWD. Indeed, the World Health Organization (2011) posits that many aspiring journalists and established journalists alike, have had little engagement with PWD. This fact influences the way the journalists frame disability in their programmes. Burns (2011) contends that if disability is to be better represented in the media, student journalists need to be educated and exposed to PWD, and language and images that accurately represent PWD.

*Abled differently* demonstrates media activism in a society where PWD are likely to be portrayed in the media as dependent and requiring special services and support from the community. More often than not we encounter stereotypes of PWD as persons who are not capable of effectively managing their affairs especially in the educational context. These stereotypes may hinder the adjustment of SWD in institutions of higher learning.

Media activism essentially offsets the image of dependency and increases awareness of SWD as persons who are capable of adjusting and participating fully in higher education.

**Conclusion**

Disabling stereotypes, which medicalise, patronise, and dehumanise SWD abound in the media. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of SWD are based. The study recommends that the media can provide the kind of information and imagery which; firstly, acknowledges and explores the complexity of the experience of disability and a disabled identity and; secondly, facilitates the meaningful integration SWD in higher education. There is a strong belief among journalism academics that there is a need to include diversity studies, including disability representation, in journalism education (Burns, 2016). Indeed, it is only with appropriate training that journalists would move from stereotypical representation of SWD and envision programme treatment that emphasizes their ability in the context of higher education. Hopefully, increasing emphasis of positive portrayal of SWD in higher education will offset the image of PWD as incapable of adjusting to the rigors of higher education. In addition, more programmes that centre on disability and higher education are required.

Apart from having magazines or documentary-style programmes that focus on SWD like *Abled Differently*, there is need to have dramas where characters are cast without disability defining them. Overall, more research is needed in order to understand the complex nature of what shapes current portrayal of SWD on television in Kenya.

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