

Discursive Construction of Pandemic-Induced Teleworking Implementation: Analysis of Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The way media portrays an issue through its use of language influences people's interpretations of the issue. Despite pandemic-induced teleworking having received considerable media coverage, scholarly work on the media discourses surrounding this phenomenon is rare. This study used thematic discourse analysis method to identify recurrent themes of teleworking in media stories and explore how these themes were discursively constructed. From a corpus of 54 stories from selected East African newspapers, three key narratives were distilled: redefined productivity, work-life imbalance and digital readiness. Results showed that these narratives created a contested discourse on the merits and demerits of teleworking. While the dominant discourses mobilized the gain-frame to depict teleworking as the cost-effective lifeline and future of work, counter-narratives underscored teleworking's consequences in alienating workers from themselves and the workplace, entrenching work-life imbalance and perpetuating employer-employee tensions on performance expectations. The study enriches scholarly debates on teleworking as the future of work by demonstrating how this phenomenon was discursively constructed by media through different players in the East Africa region and how such discourses inform effective implementation of teleworking into the future of work.

Keywords: Teleworking; COVID-19; East Africa; Newspapers; Discourse

INTRODUCTION

Compared to previous global health crises, COVID-19 had the greatest mortality and infectious rates, exacting a death toll of 6.5 million people in its aftermath (WHO, 2022). To mitigate the pandemic's negative consequences, the world leveraged information communication technologies to enable remote working (also called teleworking or telecommuting), forcing millions into a 'global experiment' of teleworking as the 'new normal' (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

As the pandemic ravaged the world, news media covered how people reacted to this new mode of work and its broad ramifications. The Nielsen Global Media (2020) dubbed the widespread consumption of media technology during this time as 'collective trauma' as people tried to contain the depressing effects of the pandemic. Such increased media exposure was also associated with heightened psychological distress and impaired functioning over time. With media being the main conduit of the COVID-19 messages, journalists occupied a vantage point in framing issues related to the pandemic in ways that helped audiences to understand them.

Prior to COVID-19, teleworking research received transient scholarly and media attention (Beaunoyer, Dupere & Guitton, 2020), with most teleworking studies suffering from

selection bias arising from the voluntariness of the practice. The pandemic pushed teleworking to center-stage, providing fertile ground for media to ignite debates on this phenomenon. Since media discourses shape people's social realities by guiding how they think and perceive issues, it becomes relevant to understand how teleworking adoption was discursively constructed to identify the dominant narratives that informed its adoption as the future of work (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015). While some studies have focused on how media construct technology-induced work, scant attention has dwelt on the tensions wrought by such a phenomenon, largely legitimizing technology as tools of work or 'innovations with no agenda behind them' (Hajal, 2022). Rarely are such innovations investigated as sources of ideological conflict in media discourse. As discourse genres, news stories are considered sites of ideological struggle on how sources make sense of certain phenomena [e.g. teleworking].

While teleworking received broad scholarly attention from western perspectives, it remained under-researched especially in countries facing ICT infrastructure challenges, digital illiteracy and deep socio-economic inequalities (Mutua & Oloo, 2020). With many East Africa countries caught unprepared for teleworking, exploring the global phenomenon from their context sheds lights into issues that were prioritized and what this portends for their teleworking readiness as the future of work.

EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

While the concept of teleworking lacks a universal definition, scholars broadly define it as the use of information communication technologies to perform work away from one's physical workstation (Vasic, 2020). Such technologies facilitate interaction between employers and employees (and work-related data) from any place and at any time. With smart hand-held devices, it is now easier to address spatio-temporal challenges since work is no longer restricted to given work locations and times.

The idea behind teleworking arose in the USA in the 1970s to address the persistent oil crisis that hampered employees' commuting to work – thus teleworking was positioned as the solution to persistent traffic gridlocks and air pollution. Until the advent of asynchronous ICTs and broadband communications, only a few sectors adopted teleworking due to technology limits. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic was the ultimate spark that ignited widespread multi-sectoral adoption of teleworking as the new normal.

Futurologists like Alvin Toffler brought the concept of telework into popular imagination by fitting it within libertarian politics where technologies facilitated decentralized work units to communicate together. While debates generally present technology-enabled teleworking as revolutionary, some scholars position teleworking legitimacy as a contested and negotiated practice, with legitimacy discourses underscoring the desirability or appropriateness of the practice within established norms and values. In addition, such debates present contradictory visions of teleworking as the future exposing the 'past futures' of the technology era, presenting certain discursive narratives of the phenomenon (Reisenwitz, 2020).

Several studies have been carried out on teleworking in different organizational contexts (e.g. de Vries, Tummers & Bekkers, 2019; Tavares, 2017). In the context of COVID-19, studies mainly focused on teleworking as a mitigatory stop-gap for the pandemic consequences (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020); teleworking challenges during the pandemic (e.g. Vasic, 2020); considerations for teleworking during and post-pandemic (e.g. Pareschi 2021) and the characteristics of teleworking and its future challenges (Hajal, 2022). From a historical and comparative perspective, Homberg, Lukemann, and Abendroth (2023) studied the gendered discourses and patterns of teleworking usage among German and UK

workers from the 1970s, with results showing common perceptions of teleworking as a source of gender role conflicts.

Ramos and García-de-Diego (2022) explored how teleworking influenced people's lives in the EU, with results equating teleworking to a safety valve and lifeline. Baert et al. (2020) explored Flemish employees' perceived pandemic-induced teleworking experiences. Most employees (85%) had positive attributions of telework e.g. increased efficiency and reduced risk of burnout. But some feared that teleworking would diminish their opportunities for promotion and disconnect them from their employer. These findings align with an earlier study by Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson (2015) explored teleworking experiences of 240 workers in Christchurch, New Zealand, following an earthquake. Teleworking ensured continued employer-employee connectivity and gave organizational resilience in the wake of the disaster.

Although research on media discourses of health crisis contexts is rare, studies involving general media coverage of past health epidemics abound (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015). Other studies explored how different aspects of the pandemic were framed in the media stories (Mutua & Oloo, 2020). Regarding teleworking, research mostly paid attention to how COVID-19 was covered globally, with scant attention on the media discourses that were used in explaining the teleworking experiences.

Treem et al. (2015) investigated how 58 employees perceived the use of social media tools during teleworking. Although, such tools increased knowledge sharing among the peers, employees generally resented the 'social disconnection' with their seniors. Mahajan, Singh and Azad's study (2020) portrayed telemedicine as a disruptive healthcare practice whose effectiveness depended on training, clear guidelines and reliable internet connectivity. It as convenient, affordable and easily-accessible health information. Although Hincapié et al. (2020) regarded telemedicine as the service providers' first line of defence to stem pandemics, telehealth services limited the possibility of virtual physical examinations and other lab tests, compounded by poor communication networks between the providers and patients.

Reisenwitz (2020) explored how people's work schedules were shaped by teleworking during the pandemic. Most people spent more time in online meetings as they tried to meet work demands remotely. Stahl (1995) analyzed the ten-year news content of *Time* magazine regarding technologies as tools of work. Thirty-six percent of these stories used magical or religious discourse to depict technology as the solutions to spatio-temporal limitations. Mutua and Oloo (2020) studied how the BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, and People's Daily covered the pandemic. These news outlets were considered critical influencers of public opinion about teleworking as a pandemic mitigating factor.

In his research on teleworking experiences using groupware package among staff in an Australian university, Olesen (2014) observed that telework implementation was largely caused by organizational politics, demonstrating the role of work culture in the adoption of information systems. Rincón et al. (2023) used text mining and opinion analysis techniques to analyze sentiments of teleworking tweets in post-pandemic context. Most tweets were positive regarding telework. While telework was considered critical in improving worker well-being, the employee working conditions needed attention.

Using topic modelling technique, Pareschi (2021) analyzed the content of 7 Italian newspapers to explore how teleworking was framed. Employee productivity and work-life balance dominated the concerns of most employees. In their thematic analysis of interviews on teleworking among selected Chinese employees, Long, Kuang and Buzzanell (2013) found that most millennials legitimized teleworking from a pragmatic and moral perspective

– as the most efficient and right way to work. However, they raised teleworking concerns over Chinese values pitted against western business interests.

Cañibano and Avgoustaki (2022) drew on organizational signalling theory to investigate employees telework perceptions during pandemic disruptions. While telework is generally considered employee-centric, results portrayed it as employee threat, demonstrating that its meaning may not be predefined but socially constructed depending on circumstances external to the organization. A 2013 decision by CEO of Yahoo, Marissa Mayer to end telework at the company was largely criticized as irregular and out of tune with the prevailing discourse that promoted telework as the wave of the future. Media discourse about Mayer's announcement demonstrated that gender, and domestic labor narratives shaped how the story was told.

While technology may have boosted people's lives during the pandemic, scholars caution that the benefits should be balanced with the risk of too much reliance on technology. Particularly, scholars like Torous et al. (2020) argued that the technological implications of people's physical and mental health when they work away from colleagues needed to be borne in mind. The foregoing demonstrates that debate on teleworking post-pandemic continues to attract scholarly attention.

As a form of public discourse, news (through language use) helps to explore the ideological structure and the meaning ascribed to an issue. By using different rhetoric devices, news discourses can help analyze how a text is expressed and constructed and its wider contextual interpretations. Scholars argue that discourses of technologies for work mainly focus on how people socially construct them, informing their perceptions on how the technologies influence what they do and how they do it (Treem et al., 2015). Discourses are considered key in constructing social reality by producing concepts and positions that guide people's interpretation processes. From a neo-institutional theoretical perspective, teleworking is positioned as a contested issue around competing interests of different actors (Stahl, 1995). Being ideological sites for articulation and negotiation of issues, media content on teleworking was expected to help audiences to make sense of it and its effect on the implications of future work. Furthermore, this struggle for the meaning of the implications of such a phenomenon is justified in debates that push for socio-technical considerations in appropriating technology for work. Examining these discourses may reveal the power distribution in teleworking implementation as well as discursive silences that may hinder proper appropriation of teleworking and what this portends for the future of work.

Departing from the foregoing argument and with no systematic scholarly study on media discourse on teleworking yet, the main objective of current study was to identify the dominant media narratives relating to teleworking and further explore how language was employed to construct and articulate these narratives (and attendant ideologies) in the selected stories on teleworking.

METHOD

This study used thematic discourse analysis method to explore the discourses underpinning COVID-19-induced teleworking in four mainstream East African newspapers: The *Daily Nation* (Kenya), The *Daily Monitor* (Uganda), The *New Times* (Rwanda) and The *Daily News* (Tanzania). These newspapers enjoy wide readership and agenda-setting role in their respective countries. The analysis period was March 2020 to June 2020, when teleworking had become a global reality. Although the corpus was small (n=54), it was considered fit for a

thick description of the data and broadly represent the discourses in issues [like teleworking] where media players have no ideological differences (see Pareschi, 2021).

Eligible articles were culled from the online archives of the newspapers using key phrases like ‘work from home’, ‘remote working’, and ‘teleworking’. Two trained coders (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.92) read the stories and coded recurring themes through lexical or rhetorical choices like catchphrases, anecdotes, quotes, etc. and explored how these were constructed through language (including dominant and counter-dominant discourses on teleworking). Attention was paid to meanings that seemed taken for granted or absent from the texts. These discourses were then discussed within the East Africa socio-cultural and political contexts. Since the dataset was in the public domain, the study suffered no ethical risks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed that COVID-19-induced teleworking was discursively constructed under three main themes - redefined productivity, work-family balance and digital readiness. Each of the was underpinned by different discourses or narratives by the news sources. These themes are discussed next.

REDEFINED ‘PRODUCTIVITY’

A key narrative that undergirded this theme positioned teleworking from a labour output perspective, presenting contesting ideologies in employees’ performance in the virtual space. Generally, most articles employed a positivity discourse that extolled the merits of teleworking - reduced travel expenses, more task focus and strengthened family bonds. To exemplify this positivity, sources in the *Daily Nation* of 27 May 2020 and *Daily Monitor* of 28 April 2020 contrasted the teleworking gains with pre-pandemic episodes of traffic gridlocks and office bureaucracy that negatively affected productivity. An article in the *New Times* of 8 May 2020 positioned teleworking as paradigm shift that challenged the traditional meaning of the 8-5 work routine poorly reflected quality productivity. To underscore this shift, several articles depicted teleworking as a disruptor that had removed spatial-temporal barriers of work, giving new meaning to productivity. According to a writer in the *Daily Nation* of 17 March 2020, one’s performance should henceforth be measured by what ‘one does, not the number of hours they spend in the office’. This resonated with another quote from an article in the *Daily Nation* of 26 March 2020 which portrayed ‘work [as] something you do, not a place you go to’. In the same article, a columnist drew on the bandwagon appeal of ‘millions of workers who have [successfully] tried teleworking [...] for a long time’, to reinforce the discourse of remote productivity. The source advises employers to focus on ‘outputs, not inputs and deliverables. not hours logged’. Storylines underpinned by such sentiments constructed teleworking as having ‘disrupted work’ for the better productivity.

In the corpus, some counter-narratives on teleworking productivity also emerged. Given the speed at which teleworking was introduced (or forced upon organizations, as some commentators in the *Daily Nation* of 27 April 2020 and *Daily Monitor* of 28 April 2020 framed it), the discourse of lost productivity was evident in news stories that alluded to teleworking as ‘not fit for all jobs’, ‘hybrid work as better’, ‘huge teleworking costs’ and potential ‘role conflict’. One contributor in the *Daily Nation* used examples of those in the informal (not-technology) sector like casual labourers as potential losers in the teleworking

bandwagon since their productivity was judged on their in-person presence. (*Daily Nation*, 27 March 2020).

To underscore productivity as a contested discourse, news stories also mobilized the conflict language to demonstrate employer-employee tensions occasioned by constrained feedback. This was evident in the discourse of performance uncertainty - what employees were doing at home and how they were using digital resources assigned to them [and the employers' rationale for paying 'underworked' staff]. Some sources positioned teleworking as a 'hide-and-seek game' where unsupervised employees could devise clever ways of shirking official responsibilities to engage in other personal remote work assignments (*Daily Nation*, 13 May 2020; *Daily Nation*, 16 May 2020; *Daily News*, 8 May 2020). This observation was supported by the Consumer Insight Africa report in the *Daily Monitor* story of 10 April 2020 which showed that 41% of those who attributed low performance to teleworking spent their time watching TVs. The use of this statistical appeal potentially articulates the employer-employee tensions in teleworking contexts. These arguments run parallel with studies that have shown employers as apprehensive of teleworkers 'slacking off' without direct supervision. These studies have also shown that teleworking productivity suffers when employees feel no sense of belonging and cannot participate in the enactment of organizational identities, beyond the virtual presence (Hajal, 2022).

Performance uncertainty narratives also existed in news stories that painted images of anxious, mistrustful and overbearing supervisors, who sought to micromanage their employees to re-exert their controlling power (*Daily Nation*, 27 May 2020, *Daily Monitor*, 24 March 2020 and *The Daily News*, 8 May 2020). The uncertainty discourses also problematized measures of downsizing staff or suspending salaries as opportunistic, in the guise of stemming teleworking-induced productivity losses. For example, one source considered teleworking as having been weaponized and positioned as the 'convenient trigger' [...] to dismiss 'unproductive staff', reinforcing the notion that out of sight 'undesirable' employees deserved dismissal (*Daily Monitor*, 24 March 2020). While some newsmakers supported such austerity measures, others employed the human rights and justice discourse to appeal to employers to follow the law and avoid interfering with an employee's rights if the terms and conditions of their contracts have not changed (*Daily Nation*, 27 May 2020; *The New Times*, 15 April 2020). One *Daily Nation* positioned reciprocity as the solution to such performance conflict: 'employers need to provide the right work environment [...] and clear lines of feedback if they expect to work [and perform] harmoniously with employees in the teleworking context' (*Daily Nation*, 18 May 2020).

Several articles employed the justice discourse to temper the dismissal-for-unproductivity recourse by employers. Such a move portrayed employers as inhumane, unaccommodating, insensitive and unemphatic to employees. For example, one source in the *The New Times* of 15 April 2020 depicted teleworking as the 'lifeline that sustained employee productivity', suggesting the futility of dismissing staff instead of using them to keep the business afloat. Such sentiments are captured in different articles, depicting teleworking as the litmus test on the post-pandemic continued productivity and survival of the organization.

The proponents of teleworking productivity problematize in-person presence at work as the standard indicator of performance and perpetuates the ensuing debate that positions 'home as the new office' (*Daily Monitor*, 28 April 2020). Furthermore, teleworking is considered to potentially legitimize a neoliberal interpretation of employee outputs as an alternative index of measuring productivity (de Vries, Tummers, & Bekkers, 2019). These discourses are consistent with studies that position quality remote management of employees as best achieved through mutually agreed results, avoiding the burdensome reporting and monitoring (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015). Scholars argue that since technology

should be as effective as its users, positive teleworking outcomes can only be realized when the expectations of remote working are agreed apriori, otherwise the technology ‘will not bridge the distance’ (OECD, 2020; Brussevich, Dabla-Norris & Khalid, 2020). With teleworking, studies have advocated for the redefinition of productivity to recognize employees’ ability to juggle multi-faceted work-life demands and how they are able to deliver results in such circumstances. They argue that the ability to collaborate and innovate should be considered (Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022). A study by OECD (2020) indicated that teleworking productivity would only be effective when the right environment was assured (see results in Figure 1).

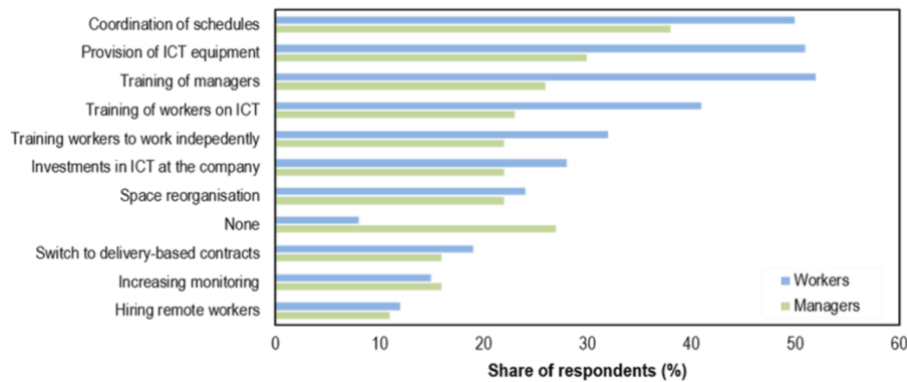


Figure 1. Telework survey of OECD Global Forum on Productivity

Source: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/12/the-role-of-telework-for-productivity-during-and-post-covid-19_dbbfb20e/7fe47de2-en.pdf

In line with teleworking counter-narratives of the present study, scholars consider productivity in teleworking as hampered by lack of employee trust, task interdependence and some situations which necessitate face-to-face interactions (Pareschi, 2021; Reisenwitz, 2020). Furthermore, empirical counter-narratives underscore teleworking’s susceptibility to abuse in the personal interest of remote workers (OECD, 2020; Hajal, 2022).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

This theme was prevalent among 73% of the stories analyzed. It was identified through storylines of teleworker experiences of juggling between professional and personal/domestic roles. The dominant discourses positioned teleworking as ‘disruptive’ and source of work-life disequilibrium. Stories characterized this disequilibrium as potentially overwhelming and conflicting with the culturally-ascribed (or personal) and official roles of employees. In one instance, a source underscored the delicate balance between ‘working when my 2-year-old son is asleep and taking care of him when he wakes up’ (*Daily Monitor*, 28 April, 2020). This view was shared by another who presented remote working as a struggle to be up by 5am to finish office assignments, otherwise children would not let her work or enjoy her ‘me time’. (*Daily Nation*, 18 May, 2020) A source from the Daily monitor lamented that even if the home environment was quiet, she could not keep up with the rhythm of work and dropping to and picking her children from school (*Daily Monitor*, 24 March 2020). Another decried the volumes of office emails and WhatsApp messages to respond to sometimes ‘following you into bed’ (*Daily Nation*, 18 May 2020).

Underlying these narratives is the reality that some remote workers may resent teleworking for its tendency to cause role conflict, for example, when mothers are forced to work based on the ‘sleep-wake’ patterns of their children. These discourses are evident in a few articles. In one story of the *Daily Monitor*, 10 April 2020, a working mother mobilized

the language of ‘technology power’ where the home-office barrier was removed rendering her to ‘live at work’. Another source from the *Daily Nation* was reduced to being ‘on call 24/7’ to continuously attend to clients (*Daily Nation*, 17 March 2020). The obliteration of time and space in teleworking portrayed a disruptive phenomenon which elicited contestations on its merits and demerits. The discourse of ‘living at work’ represented teleworking as a potential tool of enslavement and entrapment, much like Friedan’s (1963) (cited in Cañibano & Avgoustaki, 2022) ‘trapped housewife syndrome’ where housewives feel disconnected from marital expectations and yearn to opt out. McLuhan’s (1962) technological determinism theory presupposes that people’s lives are determined and shaped by changes in technology – much like being enslaved by it! Much as teleworking is considered a middle-ground approach to fulfilling multiple roles, results in this study showed its risk of mitigating one conflict while creating a different one altogether.

Some articles invoked the gender conflict lens to demonstrate how teleworking perpetuated and reinforced gender role imbalance. These narratives mainly position teleworking as biased against women. For example, a source demonstrated a discourse of male hegemony where ‘men do not feel the weight of teleworking as they don’t participate in household duties’ (*Daily Nation*, 18 May 2020), a sentiment shared in a *Daily Monitor* remark that ‘men have adequate time to catch up with entertainment while women juggle work with household chores’. (*Daily Monitor*, 28 April 2020). In one *Daily Nation* story, one woman was more cryptic: ‘I run like a ‘machine powered by grit to work, school, and discipline children as my husband watches news’ (*Daily Nation*, 18 May 2020).

These sentiments perpetuated a privileged socio-cultural discourse that represents teleworking as negatively legitimizing a woman’s place as the kitchen or at home’ (Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022) irrespective of other official tasks she had to execute. By reproducing a hegemonic discourse of men’s dominance in the teleworking context, the narratives potentially represented women as the ‘beasts of burden’ at the domestic front. The quote that compares women working like machines constructs women as the ‘tireless and all-functioning’ robots in a factory, conveying their ability to juggle between roles as opposed to men. A survey by Euroreporter (2020) explored gender perceptions of work-life balance in the European Union. As shown in Figure 2, teleworking with children was considered by more women than men as having complicated the concentration on the job and general family time.

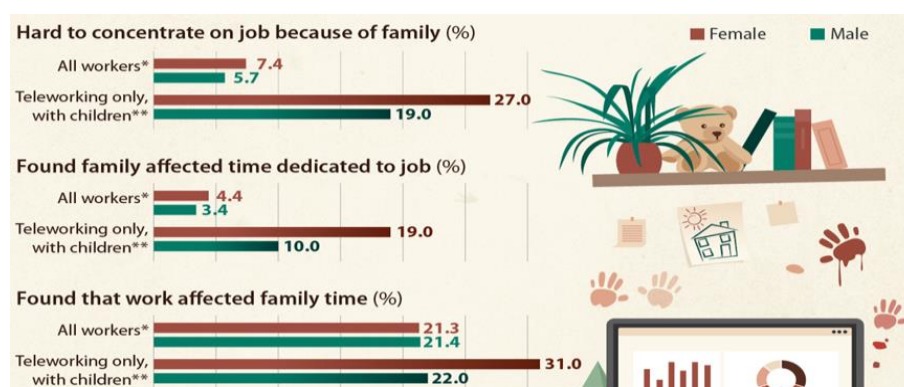


Figure 2: Perceptions of work-life balance during the pandemic

Source: <https://www.eureporter.co/politics/european-parliament-2/2022/03/09/teleworking-unpaid-care-and-mental-health-during-covid-19/>

These narratives foreground the reality that teleworking may not be an equalizer. Studies explain gender and parenthood discourses that reproduce or reinforce gender biases at

work, for example, where women endeavour to align work with family requirements as men ‘realize higher work demands’ (Ramos & García-de-Diego, 2022). When the work-life boundary becomes permeable, the employees suffer from emotional burnout and physical exhaustion and eventually disconnect from their social and family lives (Donnelly & Proctor-Thomson, 2015). The results are also consistent with scholars who caution against haphazard implementation of teleworking, which may be detrimental to how employees relate to their jobs, their families and general well-being (ILO, 2020). With growing research underpinned by feminist undercurrents that demonstrate women’s peripheral location in the workplace, the potential for teleworking to exacerbate this trajectory is alive, as evident from the current study. But scholars like Homberg, Lukemann and Abendroth (2023) see an emerging ‘public attention economy for work-family balance issues’ where the discourse on computerized flexibilization as a gender issue will be reframed.

DIGITAL READINESS FOR TELEWORK

Positioned as prerequisite for effective teleworking, the digital readiness theme was predominant in several articles. Teleworking readiness was underpinned by discourses of capacity (in 34 stories), innovation (technological optimization) (in 11 stories), learning from best practices (in 13 stories) and shift in mind-set (in 32 stories). These stories essentialize technology as critical in effective post-pandemic teleworking. Positioning teleworking readiness from a capacity perspective was enacted through references that underscored improved internet connectivity, enactment of digital policies, adopting a digital culture, learning digital skills, appropriating requisite digital tools, strengthening technical support and ensuring cybersecurity. These phrases construct effective teleworking as hinged on a mix of right digital infrastructure, skills, policies and mindset. The capacity discourse employed two competing repertoires, with one foregrounding lack of ‘formal skills’ to use technology and another highlighting lack of innovation or creativity to use the already available technology for teleworking. Despite several stories foregrounding the need for digital skills training, counter-narratives used the ‘optimization’ frame to suggest that effective teleworking required innovative approaches to fully exploit its affordances. To illustrate this, one story invoked the Eureka moment where teleworking ‘forced’ people to discover hitherto underutilized computer applications like Skype to get office work done (*Daily Nation*, 27 May 2020). A *New Times* article used resurrection metaphor to described how teleworking helped to ‘breathe life into’ technologies initially regarded casually and previously untapped’ (*The New Times*, 20 April 2020). This framed teleworking as life-giving to once ‘dead’ or dormant applications that had long been either ignored or slow to adopt.

Teleworking was also positioned as a moment of learning, with news narratives presented it as a great lesson to digitally mitigate future work disruptions. For example, a story in the *Daily News* underscored the need to learn digital lessons from the pandemic and ‘think of a new way of working, one that blends the best of in-person with the best of digital. Stories extolled the teachable moment presented by the pandemic. For example, learners who must put their smart phones into better use to study and learn from a distance [from their teachers] (*Daily News*, 8 May 2020), companies to leverage new digital skills to innovate cost-effective virtual solutions to deliver services like on(off)boarding employees, monitoring productivity, telemedicine (*Daily Nation*, 27 May 2020) and remote digital maintenance through cloud computing (*The New Times*, 30 April 2020). To underscore the urgency of digital learning, one story employed an emotional frame of ‘the shame ‘that would befall those who failed to leverage this virtual working to make permanent changes to the way they work’ (*The New Times*, 20 April, 2020). In a *Daily News* story of 8 May 2020, one expert in

Huawei products was more proverbial: ‘a good honing gives a sharp edge to a sword. When the new dawn arrives (as it surely will), let it find us well prepared to seize the day’.

These media stories exemplified pandemic-induced teleworking as a wake-up call and eye-opener to inform readiness for the digital work future, as scholars like Reisenwitz (2020) have demonstrated. Moreover, this learning has been associated with the development of a mind-set shift in people’s use of technology for teleworking, with proponents of this shift positioning technology-enabled teleworking as a ‘contest’ between adopters of the new ‘digital work culture’ and laggards who resent it (Vasic, 2020).

Scholars argue that people’s perceptions of technology as enablers of teleworking reproduces a mind-shift frame exploring how technology can be leveraged for success (Long, Kuang & Buzzanell, 2013). In the current study, the language of mind-set shift is distilled from statements that suggested a re-engineering of business to align with new work dispensation, being agile and rejigging the ways of work, and avoiding the rush to the same old and concentrated work environment. Such phrases depict teleworking in futuristic perspective with its experiences shaping the reality of work in the future. By enacting the mind-set shift discourse through references like ‘teleworking as the new normal’ and as an irreversible shift towards work that people must learn to embrace, articles suggest a break from the ‘old’ to a ‘new’ culture of work. One article reflects this shift by mobilizing the age card to remind the old generation [of workers] to adapt or be bypassed by the new millennials who are poised to drive the technology-driven teleworking agenda (*Daily News*, 8 May 2020). The digital culture mind-set relates will portrayals of COVID-19 as the harbinger of new innovations. Within the context of crises, scholars consider teleworking not just a novel approach to doing work but also an opportunity to test the limits of working with technology and the work cultures it creates (Cañibano & Avgoustaki, 2022).

Positioning digital connectivity as essential in people’s teleworking survival, some stories mobilized the language of human rights to portray Internet as an inalienable, basic right for all – much like the right to life. One story was succinct: ‘Internet should now be considered a basic need [like water, food and medicine], essential service and ‘human right to broadband access’ (*New Times*, 15 April 2020). In the same story, an official from Alliance for Affordable Internet Access portrayed the taken-for-granted internet tools as ‘a lifeline, not a luxury any more’ which over 3.5 billion people globally could not access. To reinforce this digital essentiality, the article provided an example of police officers who allowed ‘delivery agent[s] to take broken laptops for repair [during the pandemic lockdowns] because they understood the devices’ essential roles in teleworking’ (*The New Times*, 15 April 2020).

This discourse of access to digital resource dominated media narratives that employed phrases like ‘unequal access’, ‘poor connectivity’ and ‘high costs of internet’ to apportion blame for ineffective teleworking. To exemplify the digital inequality, one Ugandan daily drew on the statistics appeal to demonstrate that the proportion of employees ‘who routinely use internet is only 1.7 per cent, and their performance would be worse if they are forced to work remotely’ (*Daily Monitor*, 24 March 2020). The article also suggested a bias against the informal sector where businesses ‘cannot be run from home yet about 90% of our GDP is generated by the informal sector who do not have access to internet and [...] mobile money transactions are too high’ This view was echoed in a *New Times* article of 26 March 2020 which showed that the country had ‘90% national broadband coverage, yet only about 10% of the population are actively connected to internet’.

A *New Times* article of 15 April 2020 invoked the digital ‘haves’ vs ‘have-nots’ dichotomization to underscore the lopsidedness of technology access, in favour of the global North. This was also echoed in stories from the *Daily News* of 3 April 2020 and *Daily Nation* of 24 March 2020 which metaphorized Africa as a ‘technological underdog’, suggesting its

delayed joining of the teleworking bandwagon). The story considered teleworking as ‘call to action’ to redress this North-South technological imbalance. These narratives seemed to showcase teleworking-induced digital inequalities drawn from the geo-political and historical debates of the imbalanced news and technological flows between the North to the South, debates that have abated with the rise of new media like artificial intelligence.

The narratives seemed to privilege the discourses that perpetuate the notion of a minority few enjoying the affordances of technology at the exclusion of the vast majority. The theme of digital readiness draws parallels with studies that consider COVID-19 as having awakened the tensions between people and technology where glaring digital inequalities exist (Pareschi, 2021; OECD, 2020). Teleworking was considered to have exacerbated such inequalities especially for many young, uneducated workers where jobs required in-person presence (Brussevich, Dabla-Norris & Khalid, 2020).

To emphasize caution in the discourse of readiness, digital teleworking was also constructed as ‘unsafe territory’, with several news narratives foregrounding its susceptibility to risks, characterized with references like ‘cyberattacks’, ‘data breaches’, ‘hacking’, and ‘online trolls’. This characterization conjured images of danger lurking in the telework environment and legitimizes such an environment as ‘vulnerable, porous and subject to abuse’, as scholars have cautioned (Turner, Turner & Shen, 2020). Excerpts depicting this vulnerability included ‘there has been unprecedented volume of cyberattacks to trick people into giving up credentials to attackers’ and ‘attackers are taking advantage of people's fears about COVID-19 with scare tactics to get people to click on malicious links or attachments [...]’ (*Daily Nation*, 18 March 2020).

The possibility of cyberattacks that took advantage of working from home suggested the existence of stealthy scammers who would exploit digital unpreparedness to exact havoc, as one *Daily Nation* article exemplified: ‘they created an email attachment titled ‘work-from-home policy’ but cleverly [set it] to hack into our network’ (*Daily Nation*, 18 March 2020). Another article in the same newspaper described hackers who created parody accounts in a company pretending to be managers and instructed the finance manager to urgently wire cash with explanations to follow later.

Such scammers have been presented using metaphors like predators who preyed on the fear and digital illiteracy of remote users of technology (Turner, Turner and Shen, 2020). To stem the negative consequences cyberthreats, stories (see *Daily Nation* of 19 March 2020) considered the urgency of securing corporate data as a race against ‘opportunistic cybercriminals working overtime with click baits to make a kill’. This suggested that teleworkers needed to move with speed to deny hackers a head start by being digitally prepared to neutralize their sinister moves. Several stories across the corpus positioned prudence in network usage as the antidote to cyberthreats. This prudence was expressed in suggestions like installing cybersecurity software, observing all digital protocols and keeping all digital data secured. Some media narratives like in the *Daily Monitor* of 24 March 2020 attributed the online vulnerability to lack of policies and skills in adopting cybersecurity measures like VPN, cloud backups, firewalls [...] as well as anti-phishing technologies like file/attachment and link inspection’.

These suggestions presented a broad-based discourse on the vulnerable nature of teleworking especially where digital protocols are not clear or are breached (OECD, 2020; Beaunoyer, Dupere & Guitton, 2020). Thus, readiness for the positive exploits of teleworking was positioned with a counter-discourse of the potential harm that must be warded off in such working environments. In their study on employee perceptions of the pandemic cybersecurity protocols and their performance effectiveness in the US, Turner, Turner and Shen (2020) found that although the employees trusted the protocols, they still

felt vulnerable and considered in-person protocols reliable. According to Intaratat (2022), the pandemic has accelerated digitization to cushion people in future uncertainties. Figure 3 shows the digital skills that will be required to spur the creation of about 149 million jobs by 2025.

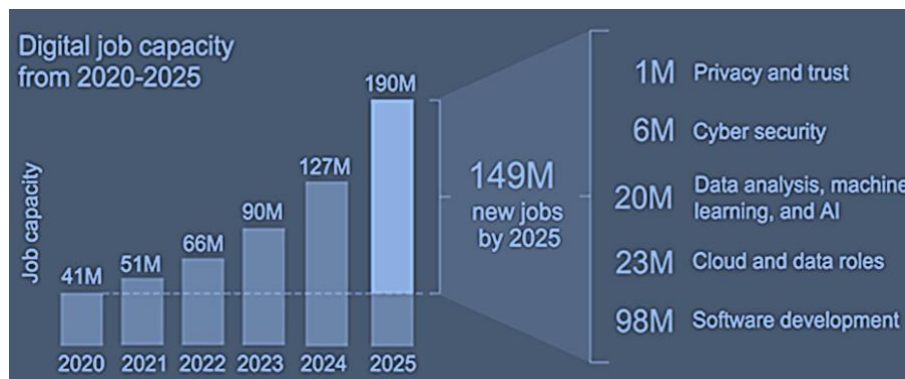


Figure 3: New digital skills needed in and after a COVID-19 economy.

Source: <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=114356>

With the advent of remote working, a new discourse of the ‘geography of work’ has merged. This will be underpinned by how well technology will be deployed to maximize and equitably distribute the benefits of working from any location (Euroreporter, 2022). In line with the debate, the pandemic provided a wake-up call for proper policy frameworks to be developed to ensure efficient implementation of telework as the future of work (Hajal, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study explored pandemic-induced teleworking discourses in East Africa newspapers and identified redefining productivity, work-life imbalance and digital readiness as the key themes. The tensions of teleworking employed a gain-loss frame dichotomy demonstrating its positive and negative consequences. The results had near-convergence of opinion about teleworking as the future of work, with affirmative voices from different discourse coalitions like employees, students and experts. While the gain-framed narratives portrayed telework as the quintessential tool for achieving cost-effective work outcomes, focused working, ensuring employee safety and building stronger family ties, counter-narratives constructed teleworking as a source of ‘disequilibrium’ by foregrounding idiosyncratic differences in digital preparedness, socio-cultural barriers like gender inequalities and disrupted work-life balance.

This counter-narrative aligns with assertions that teleworking was a forced [involuntary] global experiment where everyone had to join the bandwagon (see Vasic, 2020). Descriptions of tension between the needs of the employees and the goals of the employers were a recurring feature of accounts, especially about metrics of productivity when working remotely. The sentiments shared showed that people who worked remotely without the requisite support experienced tensions between conforming to their work requirements (e.g. in order to keep their jobs) and juggling other external pressures of family, need to rest, infrastructure, etc. This also portrayed remote working as ‘robotizing people’ by taking away the essence of their humanness, and prioritizing productivity over the workers’ well-being. Scholars consider the ideal teleworking as one where productivity aligns with employee work-life balance without disrupting their livelihoods. Taken together, discourses in this study underpin leveraging teleworking in ways that do not overrate remote working while overlooking counter-discourses of disrupted work-life balance and infrastructural

hiccups. The study results also indicate that teleworking as the future of work should undergird a mind-set change and an innovative culture that harnesses the potential of available tools for better productivity and organizational resilience in case of future crises.

As the world faces an uncertain future, scholarship on teleworking as the future of work should continue. Broader interrogation should go beyond media accounts to incorporate policy reports, social media debates and lived teleworking experiences of different stakeholders.

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