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The International News Coverage of Africa: Beyond the ‘Single Story’

Mel Bunce

In 1994, Christopher Hitchens visited sub Saharan Africa and wrote a searing indictment of the continent:

run the rule across Africa and see if you can find, anywhere in the entire foresaken continent, anything like a success story... The famines, plagues, and epidemics are, from old-style locusts to ultra-modern aids, the most sweeping and devastating...Human life is at its nastiest, most brutish, and shortest (*Vanity Fair*, Dec 1994).

Such dramatic and negative reporting on Africa was not unusual for the period. A large body of research has concluded that the international news coverage of sub Saharan Africa in the 1990s was sporadic, simplistic, racist, and overwhelmingly negative in its subject matter and tone (e.g. Hawk 1992). Academics have described this negative coverage as a form of ‘Afro-pessimism’, as it suggests that Africa has little or no prospect of positive developments (Schmidt & Garrett 2011:423; Evans 2011:400; Berger, 2010; De B’Berl and Louw, 2011). In her popular *Ted Talk*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie noted the danger of this negative, “single story” of Africa: “The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie 2009).

In the early 2010s, however, the international media started to tell new stories about sub Saharan Africa. Leading outlets like *The Economist* published cover

stories about an economically vibrant, 'Rising Africa' with burgeoning consumption, investment opportunities, and technological innovation. The new, positive narrative was quickly adopted by international fora, think tanks and diaspora groups; as Michela Wrong (2015) writes: " 'Africa Rising' has become the obligatory catch phrase applied to the continent...It is fashionable, these days, to be upbeat about Africa".

This seemingly seismic shift in the continent's meta-narrative has been widely noted and discussed in the media, online fora, and conferences – but it has not been systematically researched. We know there have been a handful of high profile stories that are distinctive and more positive in tone than historical representations of Africa (see, for example, Nothias 2015). But we do not know if these stories are now commonplace in mainstream day-to-day coverage, or they remain the exception.

This chapter contributes to our knowledge by presenting the results of a content analysis comparing two large samples of news content, one from the early 1990s and one from the 2010sⁱ. The results find that, taken as a whole, news coverage of Africa has become significantly more positive in tone. In addition, there has been a decrease in stories that focus exclusively on humanitarian disaster, and an increase in stories about business and sport. These results suggest that we may finally be moving beyond a reductive and negative 'single story' dominating the international news coverage of the continent. It is important to note, however, that these changes have not been made uniformly across the news industry. Representations of Africa in the media

are diverse and multifaceted, and it is no longer possible – if it ever was – to speak of ‘*The representation of Africa*’. Even within one publication, content can range from texts and images that are reductive and stereotypical through to those that are challenging, self-reflective and critical.

Methods

This chapter asks whether the day-to-day international news coverage of Africa has moved beyond the Afro-pessimism that dominated reports in the 1990s. Afro-pessimism is an amorphous term, but we can understand it as referring to (at least) two different aspects of news content. First: stories that focus exclusively on issues or events that are unambiguously negative, for example: famine, disease, conflict, and poverty (e.g. Moeller 1999). Secondly, we can think of Afro-pessimism as referring to the tone in which stories are reported, and the negative evaluation of events, issues of policy predictions in Africa. The methods are developed to explore both of these aspects of news content.

Topic within news agency reports: The international newswires are the most important producers of day-to-day international news coverage on Africa. The “big three” – AFP, AP, and Reuters - are “the basic organizational foundations on which the international system operates”, employing the majority of all foreign correspondents in the world (Williams 2011: 67). These agencies are particularly important in the African context because the vast majority of news outlets in the world do not have foreign correspondents on the continent; they

rely heavily on the newswires for the raw content of news they republish (Bunce 2013).

The research examined the AFP, AP and Reuters' news coverage of eight countries: Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zaire/DRC, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Mozambique. These are chosen as they are the eight most populous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South Africa and Sudanⁱⁱ. They also represent a range of 1. economy sizes, 2. geographic areas (East, West, South and Central), and 3. languages (Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone). Articles about these eight countries were collected on two days per month (the 4th and 18th) throughout a full calendar year – a total of 24 days – in the year 1994 and 2013ⁱⁱⁱ. Factiva was searched for stories with a 'major mention' of each country on these dates. Stories were excluded if they were less than 40 words long, or had more than two other countries listed in the title or first paragraph. This process resulted in a total sample of 892 articles, as seen on Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1.1 GOES HERE]

Each article was coded for its subject, from a list of 13 subjects (see appendix). If an article addressed two subjects equally, both were coded. This resulted in a total data set of 1061 subjects – 543 derived from articles published in 1994, and 518 derived from articles published in 2013. A second coder 'double coded' a randomly selected 10% of all the newswire articles and had an inter-coder reliability score of 0.9 (Cohens kappa).

Tone of newspaper articles To supplement the analysis of subjects within newswire stories, a second analysis examined the tone of articles in leading international newspapers. While news agencies provide important raw content of news, newspapers continue to play an important role framing news about Africa for audiences (Scott 2009); the headlines they select underline particular aspects of an events / story, and they place the event in a wider context and provide analysis. Four newspapers were selected from different corners of the Anglophone world: *The Guardian* (UK), *The New York Times* (US), *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia). Using the Nexis-Lexis database, these newspapers were searched for all stories containing “Africa” in the headline, in the years 1994 and 2013. Stories were excluded if they were: 1) specifically about South Africa (the goal was to explore the tone of news associated with the more general concept of ‘Africa’); 2) they listed two or more additional regions in their headline; 3) letters to the editor; 4) obituaries; or 5) fewer than 40 words. This process resulted in a sample of 426 articles. Each article in the sample was then coded for its overall tone, either: ‘negative’, ‘positive’, or ‘mixed/neutral’. A second coder ‘double coded’ a randomly selected 10% of the sample, producing an inter-coder reliability score of 0.85 (Cohens kappa).

[FIGURE 1.2 GOES HERE]

One limitation of the above methods was the need to limit the time period and outlets under scrutiny in order to render the sample manageable. Whether the

year 1994 and 2013 are representative of a wider 'era' of reporting requires further research. However, this research design has tried to mitigate the impact of anomalous events by analysing a large sample spread over a full twelve months; canvassing a range of publications; and looking at coverage of multiple countries within sub Saharan Africa. In addition, during the analysis of the data, events that received significant or unusual coverage were noted, and are reported in the results.

Results: Topics in news agency reporting

There were many substantive changes in the international news coverage of Africa represented by the two samples (Figure 1.3 and 1.4). Between the 1994 and 2013 sample, there was a decrease in reporting on many of the subjects traditionally associated with Afro-pessimism – most notably, humanitarian reporting. At the same time, there was a significant increase in economic, business, and financial stories, which have been associated with more positive 'Africa Rising' narratives. One subject bucks this trend, however: the reporting of conflict and crime, which increased between the two periods.

[FIGURE 1.3 GOES HERE]

[FIGURE 1.4 GOES HERE]

Business reporting is generally considered a positive form of news content, as it tends to focus on growth and business opportunities and, in this sense, may provide the “sprouts of hope” (2004:8) that Keane suggests have historically been missing from the international news coverage of Africa. The rise in business reporting was the single biggest change between the two samples. In 1994, one fifth of subjects in reports were business related (111 of 543), In 2013, business reporting was a much higher one-third of all subjects (189 of 518). It is important to note that this rise in business reporting was not uniform across the news agencies, however. The biggest change – by a very large margin – took place at the Reuters newswire. In fact, the changes in business reporting at this one newswire largely explain the rise in business reporting across the total sample. In 1994, 28.9% of the Reuters output was business-related; in 2013, business reporting had grown enormously, and occupied a remarkable 68.4% of all subjects reported by Reuters on these eight countries. The prominence of business reporting was also not consistent across the countries in the sample. In 2013 for example, 20 of the 32 subjects in reports about Tanzania (62.5%) focused on business. In the DRC, however, only 4 articles focused on business (9.8% of all subjects).

Sports reporting is also associated with more positive depictions of Africa, as it tends to depict African countries competing on a global stage on equal terms as other countries, and draws attention to ‘normal’ everyday pursuits, far removed from humanitarian crises (Chari & Namo 2014). Sports constituted 2.9% of the subjects (16 articles) in 1994 and this figure rose to 8.3% (43 articles) of the

total sample in 2013. As with the rise in business reporting, much of this is explained by the increase in reporting at one outlet: AFP published 9 sports articles in 1994 and 31 in 2013 (see figure 1.6).

Between the two news samples, there was also a very large drop in coverage of the topic most commonly associated with 'dark Africa' and Afro-pessimism discourses: humanitarian reporting. In 1994, humanitarian stories accounted for 17.3% of all subjects. In 2013, this figure was only 1.9%. A large number of the humanitarian articles in 1994 came from Zaire, where journalists reported on the refugee crisis that followed the Rwandan genocide. An additional four stories about Tanzania focused on refugees from the Rwandan genocide. But even putting aside the coverage related to the Rwandan genocide (which can be considered an extreme and anomalous event), there were 33 stories on humanitarian issues in 1994, compared to only 10 in 2013. The 1994 humanitarian stories included articles on drought, famine and disease – and they came from 7 of the 8 countries. The 10 humanitarian stories in 2013, by contrast, addressed a much more limited range of crises: 8 of the 10 articles were about refugees and the remaining 2 were about flooding in Mozambique. There were no news article in the 2013 sample of 439 articles that focused on famine, drought or disease.

Between the 1994 and 2013 samples, there was also a decline in reporting on domestic politics; it was the subject of 136 stories in 1994, and only 57 in 2013.

Domestic political reporting is not obviously or necessarily associated with either positive or negative issues. However, it is worth noting that the reason for this decline was primarily because of a decrease in reports on corruption, oppression, strikes and protests that would likely be considered “negative” by most readers (Figure 1.5). . General politics (policy announcements, cabinet reshuffles and so on) remained relatively stable between to two periods, as did reporting on elections

[FIGURE 1.5 GOES HERE]

One difference in the subjects covered in 1994 and 2013 does not fit the observation that the topics within African news coverage have become more positive: there was an increase in reports on both conflict and crime. In 1994, there were 63 reports on conflict, primarily in Mozambique and Nigeria. In 2013, there were 97 reports, including stories from Nigeria, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The quantities of conflict reporting varied between the newswires. While AFP and AP increased their conflict reporting between 1994 and 2013, it slightly decreased at Reuters – accounting for 10% of subjects in 1994, and 9% in 2013.

[FIGURE 1.6 GOES HERE]

Results: Tone of newspaper articles

The tone of newspaper articles was substantively and consistently more positive in the 2013 sample than it was in 1994. More than half (52.7 percent) of the newspaper articles in 1994 were coded as negative. Examples included, “Hunger persists in Africa, U.S., antipoverty group says” (*Globe and Mail*, 14/10/1994) and “Africa dissolves in dusty mirage” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27/7/1994). In the 2013 sample, the proportion of negative articles was much lower at 31.7 percent.

Between the two samples, there was also a substantive rise in positive reporting: from only 10.8 percent of stories in 1994, to 29 percent in 2013. Positive stories touched on a range of topics including business (“In Africa, blackberry finds touched on a a land of growth”, *Globe and Mail*, 27/11/2013); sports (“Africa’s sleeping giants start to stir”, *NYT*, 11/10/2013); and social and political commentary pieces, like the distinctly Australian article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “Africa’s Fair-dinkum Feminism” (13/1/2013).

[FIGURE 1.7 GOES HERE]

All the newspapers had a higher portion of positive stories in 2013 than they did in 1994 (see Figure 1.8). The most dramatic transformation, however, was at the *Guardian*, where only 8 percent of articles about Africa in 1994 were positive. In 2013, this had risen to 33 percent. In the same period, negative articles almost halved, from 61 to 32 percent. Remarkably, this meant that, in 2013, the *Guardian* published more positive news stories with Africa in the headline (46 in total) than negative stories (45 in total).

[FIGURE 1.8 GOES HERE]

The 2013 news sample was also more positive than previous studies of international news content about Africa. Schraeder and Endless, for example, researched *The New York Times* between 1955 and 1995, and found that 73 percent of stories could be categorized as presenting a negative image of African politics and society^{iv}. Interestingly, however, the rates of 'positive' reporting in these mainstream Western newspapers was not as positive as the diaspora media content analysed by Ogunyem (see chapter in this book). Studying the content of the magazine, *The Voice*, Ogunyem finds that 30% of stories were negative; 46% positive, and the remaining 24% mixed/neutral. That is – significantly more positive reporting, across a range of news genres, as compared with the newspaper content in the current study.

Conclusion

Many of the findings in this content analysis suggest that the international news coverage of Africa has become less negative. The analysis found that there was a decrease in reporting on humanitarian issues – stories on famine, refugee crises, and natural disasters – as well as stories on political oppression and corruption. At the same time, there was a significant increase in business reporting and a smaller increase in sports reporting. In addition, the framing of news stories within newspapers has, across the board, become more positive. A remarkable

example of this was the *Guardian* newspaper that in 2013 published more positive stories with Africa in the headline than negative stories. This is a sharp contrast with historical research on Africa's international news coverage.

Although the tone of coverage has become more positive, and the subjects moved away from such a focus on humanitarian issues, it is wrong to conclude that we have moved beyond Afro-pessimism to an era in which Afro-optimism and "Africa Rising" dominate the news agenda. First, the results found an increase in reporting on conflict, which now constitutes a greater proportion of reporting than it did in the sample from the 1990s. Second, the findings were not consistent across the publications. While business reporting has increased, overall, for example, this was primarily because it has gone up at the Reuters newswire. In addition, while AFP increased its reporting on sport between the two samples, the other news outlets did not. These differences reflect the varying positions of the outlets in the wider media market: Reuters has increased its emphasis on business reporting in its competition with Bloomberg; while AFP has set itself the goal of becoming the leading agency for sports (Bunce 2013). This is an important reminder of the extent to which news is a socially constructed product, mediated by the markets, rather than a simple mirror to events in the world.

On the 18th of October 2013, AFP published two stories about Ethiopia. The first was about an astronomy research project: "Ethiopia sets sights on stars with space programme". The second focused on severe political oppression: "Ethiopian political prisoners tortured". Audiences following the news that day

were exposed to two very different events in Ethiopia: a burgeoning research and science field, and a political crack down; neither a straight Afro-pessimism that scholars suggested dominated news in the 1990s, nor an Afro-optimism that many have said has replaced it in the 2010s. This variety asks audiences to engage with a more complicated world - one that is neither 'all growth' nor 'all negative'.

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Appendix: Subjects for coding

1. International Relations
2. Conflict / violent unrest
3. Domestic politics
 - a. General
 - b. Elections
 - c. Corruption / political oppression
 - d. Strikes / protests
4. Accident / crash
5. Crime
6. Business, finance, investment
7. Culture / media / arts
8. Environment / wildlife
9. Travel / tourism
10. Sports
11. Humanitarian crises
12. Development
13. Other

End Notes

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ⁱⁱ South Africa is excluded because it has long been regarded as 'exceptional' on the continent, receiving considerably more, diverse news coverage than other countries (El Zein & Cooper 1992: 136, 140); Sudan is excluded because it broke into two countries during the time period under analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ The original research design compared 1993 and 2013: a neat twenty-year gap. However, a pilot study found that the Nigerian general election occupied the vast majority of that country's

newswire coverage in 1993. Because Nigeria is the most reported on country in the sample, by a considerable margin, this skewed the results, and 1994 was selected as the base year instead. In the history books, 1994 may be considered an exceptional year, as it included both the Rwandan genocide and the end of Apartheid in South Africa. However, neither of these countries were included in the newswire sample. It is also worth noting that the Rwandan genocide received relatively little media attention (Melvern 2007).

^{iv} It is worth noting that Schraeder and Endless limited their study to the 'hard news' section of the *New York Times*, which may be more inclined towards negative reporting. In addition to the hard news, the present study included all the sections of the newspapers.