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## **INTRODUCTION: A New Africa's Media Image?**

*Mel Bunce, Suzanne Franks, Chris Paterson*

*Africa's Media Image in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. From Heart of Darkness to Africa Rising* is the first book in a generation to assess in detail and from multiple perspectives the way that sub Saharan Africa is reported in the international media. Beverly Hawk edited an *Africa's Media Image* in 1992, which focused, primarily from a US angle, upon the way that the media represented Africa (Hawk, 1992). It was seen as a groundbreaking work and was duly awarded a Sigma Delta Chi Award for journalism research from the Society of Professional Journalists. Since that time there has been a revolution in the media but also in the way Africa is reported and understood. This book seeks to examine the issue on a yet wider canvass.

It has become a well rehearsed argument that Africa has historically suffered in a multitude of ways from the prevalence of negative and stereotypical representation by a northern media system over which they have had no influence and no input (De B'éri & Louw, 2011). The emergence of increasingly participatory and indigenous information flows, in combination with a healthy cynicism and debate about traditional media and apparent decreases in dependence on northern sources, all imply a more autonomous and confident region of the world actively inventing new ways to communicate.

## **Africa's changing media image**

Who tells Africa's story has always mattered, and always been a matter for contestation. Research from the 1970s through the 1990s demonstrated that international representations of Africa were narrow, laden with stereotypes, and highly dependent on cold war frames and portrayals of an improvised, often savage, 'other'. Heather Brookes' analysis of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Guardian's* coverage of Africa in 1990, to give one example, found that Africa was represented in the UK press as a "homogenous block with violence, helplessness, human rights abuses and lack of democracy as its main characteristics" (1995:465; see also Fair and Power 2001:49; Crawford 1996: 32).

The landmark 2005 essay by Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa", satirically commented on the problematic language and imagery used by authors and reporters in the global North when they wrote about Africa. Wainaina's essay clearly struck a chord and quickly became one of the most read pieces ever published in *Granta Magazine* and helped to popularize critical reflection about Africa's representation. It has since become an important touchstone in the literature. We commend the reader to consult the original text (Wainaina, 2005), but this is a brief sample of Wainaina's pointed instructions to those writing about Africa:

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates.

Prominent journalists have been among the most vocal critics of the news industry structures that incentivize and reinforce Afro-pessimism. For example, famed news agency photographer Mohammed Amin (whose son writes in this book) told Paterson in 1995 - shortly before his death in a hijacking - that encouraging his London editors to invest in covering routine politics in Africa for their own sake was a constant struggle:

... there's a mentality. Nigeria - those elections a few years ago [1993]- and I was talking to my editor, wanting us to put in a crew in Nigeria. And the response was, 'Is there going to be trouble?' Well, my answer was, 'there's a reasonably good chance there will be trouble, but this is an important country. Should we not be covering the election? If there's trouble, of course we cover the trouble as well.' 'Well', they said, 'I think we should handle it for a couple of weeks. If there are dead bodies in the streets of Lagos we've got to go in there.' Now, you know, I'm sick of that sort of an attitude! I wonder if the same editor would think like that if there's coming elections in Britain or France or America - that you've got to wait until there are dead bodies in the streets. ... they think like that about Africa.<sup>1</sup>

### **The power of the image**

Media representations matter. The negative content and imagery that Wainaina satires has important implications for global flows of finance, trade, tourism (Schorr 2011). Moreover – and perhaps most importantly – such negative and ‘othering’

representations inform inter-cultural relations. As discourse theorists note, language plays a central role in the perpetuation of norms, values and stereotypes; and it can operate to support and perpetuate oppression by the powerful (e.g. Said 1978; Spivak & Guha 1988). Forms of “Afro-pessimism”, in particular, represent the African continent as a failed and passive site, in need of outside intervention. Audience research suggests that these representations do have an impact on how international audiences perceive Africa (Borowski 2012; International Exchange 1988)

In her powerful and widely disseminated Ted Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” the much-celebrated Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) describes going to college in the United States and meeting her roommate. The roommate, who only knew about Nigeria from popular culture, expected Adichie to be poor, unable to work appliances, and to enjoy “tribal music”. Reflecting on the encounter, Adichie points to the role that western literature and popular media play in shaping these preconceptions:

if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner....

Adichie’s powerful indictment of the single, stereotypical story becoming the only story can viewed online (Adichie, 2009).

### **A changing narrative**

Since the publication of Hawk's *Africa's Media Image*, and Wainaina's important essay, there have been many important and profound changes in the media representation of Africa. Several scholars have concluded (Nothias 2014; Ojo 2014; Bunce, in this volume) that the mainstream international print coverage of Africa shows signs of becoming more positive in tone and varied in its subject matter. The exemplar of this new, positive reporting is the now famous *Economist* cover image of a child flying a rainbow coloured, Africa-shaped kite, accompanied by the words "Africa Rising". The cover story, published in December 2011, described the continent's growing middle class, widespread technological innovation, and significant economic development. A series of similar, positive articles followed in quick succession: *Time Magazine*, *The New York Times* and other agenda setting publications heralded a shift in both events and growth statistics 'on the ground' as well as self-reflectively noting that the media image of the continent was becoming more positive. A stream of optimistic books further underlined the new narrative of growth and transformation: Hunter-Gault's (2006) *New news out of Africa: Uncovering Africa's renaissance*, Vijay Mahajan's (2014), *Africa Rising: How 900 million African Consumers Offer More Than You Think* and Dayo Olopade's (2014) *The Bright Continent*.

The concept of 'Africa Rising' was warmly welcomed by politicians, civil society advocates, diaspora groups, and business professionals; all eager to embrace a more positive image for the continent. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, declared, "Africa is the world's newest and most promising frontier of limitless opportunity...Gone are the days when the only lens to view our continent was one of

despair and indignity” (Baker and Santora 2015). However, it has also raised concern among commentators who suggest that these new narratives – although more positive - perpetuate a neo-colonial framing of the continent by presenting Africa as a site for international intervention and resource extraction. As Bach writes, ‘Africa Rising’ narratives may constitute “an invitation to call back the ghosts of explorers, soldiers, traders and settlers who each in their own way once ‘discovered’ Africa” (2013:11). The meaning and implications of these new representations requires further research and several contributions featured here are a starting point in this debate.

### **New image makers**

When Hawk and her contributors wrote in 1992, the global media landscape was dominated by “West to the rest” information flows: a relatively small number of traditional, legacy media outlets, supplied by a few international news agencies, produced international news for audiences in the Global North, and this news was then disseminated around the world. Concern with the dominance of Northern media producers, sparked the important UNESCO’s New World Information Order (NWIO) debates of the 1970s (McBride, 1980), and continues to inform the post-colonial critiques noted above which suggest Africa’s global image is constructed through the Western gaze.

In the past twenty years, however, important structural changes in the media system have seen the introduction of important, alternative, (often) non-western perspectives. Traditional news outlets have systematically cut their foreign news budgets over the last two decades, leading to a radical reduction in the number of Western foreign



correspondents posted abroad (Carroll, 2007; Utly 1997). Rather than expensive foreign correspondents, many news outlets now rely on cheaper, locally contracted journalists who were born and raised in the country they report on. This is particularly the case at the major newswires (AFP, AP, Reuters) who provide the majority of the world's raw news content (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen 2001), and are particularly important producers of international news about Africa (Bunce 2013; Paterson 2011). At these outlets, local journalists are generally the front line reporters, who discover events and relay them to regional bureaus – for example, in Nairobi or Johannesburg - where staff are a mixture of local and international journalists. As a result, the news is not always or only made by western journalists but rather, “news production today is a site of struggle where journalists form diverse background contest the way in which news events should be framed” (Bunce 2015: 43).

Another significant development, discussed in several of the contributions to this book, is the introduction and expansion of major new international media organisations, most notably Doha-based Al Jazeera, and the Chinese news agency Xinhau that have an alternative perspective on events in Africa. Al Jazeera for example, has been set up with the specific and articulated goal of giving a “voice to the voiceless” and telling stories from the perspective of the subaltern (Figenschou, 2010: 86). These media organisations are fascinating case studies, as they seek to balance the desires to tell stories in new ways with building credibility among traditional media consumers.

A final, extremely important transformation in the media system since Hawk's collection, is the introduction of technologies that allow local audiences to reclaim

their representation. The power of Twitter in particular to challenge Western coverage started to be noted in earnest in 2012 when CNN ran a report about an attempted terrorist attack that many found sensationalistic. The Kenyan Twitter-sphere responded with critique and parody under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN. Eventually the east African foreign correspondent for CNN apologized, and the story was withdrawn. The hashtag was resurrected during the 2013 Kenyan election, as Nyabola discusses in this volume Mohammed Ademo (2013), writing for *Columbia Journalism Review* discusses the impact of this technology:

*what's new is social media's role in empowering Africans to own the narrative and protest against what they saw as stereotypical coverage of their stories... as more Africans start to use social media, it is playing an increasingly important role in allowing them to partake in conversations about their future, and to protest unfair representations.*

Alongside innovations in technology changes in the humanitarian sector and geopolitical landscape have also had important implications for Africa's media image. Historically much of the international reporting of Africa has been through the focus of aid and development. Just as the tropes for framing Africa have frequently been through disaster coverage – stories of war, famine and crisis – so what has followed from that is the emphasis in reporting upon how *Western actors* are *responding* and *reacting*, usually through some kind of aid or related intervention. Allied to this is the increasing role that NGOs and large aid agencies have themselves come to play in storytelling (Franks 2010). Sometimes this manifests itself through a close involvement with journalists seeking to report, from practical assistance with transport or security to well informed local knowledge and the provision of obliging

interviewees for media outlets. Reporting with the assistance of an aid agency is sometimes vital for news organisations, but NGOs naturally expect something in return. There have been many critiques and even satires of these complicated relationships –such as the comedian Jane Bussman’s account *The Worst Date Ever, or how it took a Comedy Writer to expose Africa’s Secret War* (Bussman 2010).

On other occasions, since the emergence of digital platforms and especially social media, the NGOs, just like many other organisations, are now able to take a direct role themselves in telling the story. This has taken a range of innovative new forms as the technological possibilities have extended and NGOs have developed increasingly sophisticated communications operations, which can sometimes circumvent or at least lessen the necessity for engaging with legacy media and journalists at all.

This emergence of different voices with the flowering of citizen journalism and diverse content creation indicates how NGOs in common with others have thus found a voice through using new media. Flows of production today are in multiple directions. So on the one hand we see plenty of content produced in Africa which is then exported overseas, for example by youth culture, religious groups or a wide variety of bloggers. Similarly the wide diaspora of Africans based elsewhere are also producing their own media (e.g. Mabweazara, 2013; the chapter by Ogunyemi in this volume).

## **Africa and Geopolitics**

What economist Jim O'Neill famously termed the fast rising BRIC countries (to become BRICS in 2010) and later, MINT countries, signaled the rise of two booming African economies of South Africa and Nigeria. By 2012 Nigerian GDP was surpassing that of South Africa. A useful starting point in situating the African continent as an increasingly autonomous actor on the world stage (and thereby driving its own global image rather than being driven by an external constructed one), is the growth of a substantial middle class around the continent (McKinsey, 2010), even in some of those countries which are consistently ranked amongst the very poorest in the world. In modern shopping malls in most African cities, for example, the scores of middle class families who are shopping and dining make for a stark contrast to persistent urban and rural poverty.

But should the presence of a thriving – if still minority - middle class along with, indications even of reverse migration – middle class families returning to Africa from adopted homes in the North American and Europe (e.g. Okome, 2014), and a booming communication sector in many countries (especially Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa) justify a universal “Afro-optimism,” or do these forces perhaps offer a narrative of an Africa which works for them, while leaving an impoverished and often hungry majority out of the story?

Most financial flow into Africa is now no longer in development aid but in remittances from vast, and largely thriving, diaspora (BBC, 2013), and this financial flow is substantially facilitated by the astounding uptake of mobile telephony across the continent and across nearly all levels of wealth (Wakunuma-Zoer & Litho, 2009;

Wasserman, 2011). That dramatic facilitation of communication in Africa enabled by mobile telephony and, increasingly, internet access, has vastly increased the potential for counter-narratives to circulate in Africa, and for journalists to access a broader story (see for example, Akinfemisoye, 2013).

As we have highlighted earlier a longstanding trope of external media coverage of Africa is that of a continent beset by conflict. Indeed, in the two decades since the first *Africa's Media Image* a genocide engulfed Rwanda, with nearly 800,000 murders occurring over the course of a few months in 1994. The world paid little attention to that unfathomable tragedy, which contributed significantly to an even greater tragedy to unfold over a longer period in the civil wars of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa's fourth most populous country. There, the direct and indirect effects of war have claimed as many as several millions of lives (although such counts vary widely). Those wars also resulted in an epidemic of rape, which itself has increasingly become a controversy in assessments of Western reporting, with some suggesting that this once neglected tragedy came eventually to dominate the external image of the DRC (Buss, 2014; Seay, 2011).

But Congo's wars have also been fuelled by the demand for mineral resources in the DRC (Prunier, 2008). While many critiques of the telling of Africa's story highlight the propensity of Western editors to prefer stories of violence, fairly few journalists dug deeply into central African conflict. Several who have done so appear in this volume: Wrong, Sundaram and French. That ongoing search for wealth in Africa by those from outside problematizes the counter-narrative of an increasingly autonomous continent free of external shackles. In particular the vast extraction of wealth from

Africa by non-African corporate and state entities – with little evidence of resultant prosperity for most Africans – strikes many as a continuation of the imperial project, a neo-imperialism, as Fuchs (2010), argues, which is substantially sustained by the contemporary corporate trans-national media.

Imperial processes are certainly underway in contemporary Africa, as some of the authors in this volume address. But the interpretation of these remain highly contentious. Are these evolving foreign interventions exploitative or cooperative, and does a discourse of neo-imperialism itself support a neo-colonial media image of Africa as a continent and 1/5th of the world's population incapable of autonomy? Struggles for resources and political influence in Africa do continue to be significantly driven by external forces, whether through the shady affiliations to middle-eastern extremist groups of violent non-state organisations in Somalia and northern Nigeria, or through the investments of international corporations in African labour, resources, consumer markets, and increasingly vast tracts of land (Hall, 2013). At the time of this writing, Europe is reluctantly taking a new interest in Africa in response to the ever increasing and desperate migration of thousands of the poorest Africans to Europe as a response to poverty, political repression, and environmental change.

### ***Africa's Media Image: A New Version***

In compiling this collection the editors have organised the book around four complementary thematic sections. And like Beverly Hawk's original *Africa's Media*

*Image* collection there is a blend of recent and innovative academic research, combined with shorter commentary essays, from a range of journalists and writers who are all involved in some aspect of the reporting and production of news about Africa to international audiences. Each of the four sections features a combination of these two types of contribution.

The opening section is focused around how Africa is portrayed today in the international media. In each of the chapters the author addresses the way that contemporary media coverage seeks to frame the audience's understanding of Africa. As Scott notes, many scholarly studies of Africa-related news content have been based on small samples, and they have disproportionately focused on elite news outlets, such as the *New York Times*, as well as high profile events (most notably, violent conflict in Darfur and Rwanda). In addition, many studies do not include temporal or regional comparisons, and so struggle to place their findings in context and interpret. Problematically, researchers have often drawn on the results of this limited research to reach generalized conclusions about *The News Coverage of Africa*. In this collection we offer a wider range of research which covers more than the same handful of sources and demonstrates that in the twenty-first century there are many different versions of news out of Africa.

Alongside traditional content analyses of the coverage, this opening section includes more discursive discussion contrasting the way that news about Africa is domesticated for European audiences from Stijn Joye or a chapter from Ola Ogunyemi reflecting upon the way that the media reporting on Africa engages with

diaspora audiences based abroad. But there are also commentaries critiquing the record of mainstream media, including a contribution from Howard French who organized in 2015 an open letter to CBS signed by 200 interested writers and experts critiquing the US media framing of Africa. Over the years many commentators have raised their voice in opposition to the way reporting Africa is framed for international audiences. In some ways these are echoes of the same arguments first put forward by Edward Said in *Orientalism* and formulated in the landmark MacBride Report (1980). In more recent years we have seen well-known interventions by writers such as Binjavanga Wainaina and Chimamande Ndiiche (quoted earlier). And many others have also engaged with this debate from a range of angles: Nanjala Nyabola (Nyabola 2014) and Laura Seay (2012) for example are both highly critical of Western reporting, Patrick Gathara (2014) responds to argue that frequently indigenous African reporting about the continent does not offer a better analysis and is liable to make similar errors. We have included in this collection a piece from journalist and writer Michela Wrong who has engaged with this topic on several occasions. Here she takes a different tack and criticizes those complaining about Western journalists and emphasizes the difficulties that they might encounter in reporting stories from Africa. Anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh's essay invites us to take a further step back to explore what constitutes 'authentic' description, whether by journalist or academic researcher.

The second section of the book focuses upon the *making* of news about Africa. It includes a range of essays by journalists and media producers who are creating today's reporting from and about Africa; Salim Amin is a television entrepreneur with multimedia interests in East Africa, Zeinab Badawi is a television presenter for the



BBC's international TV service who was already writing about the problematic coverage of Africa in 1986, whilst Anjun Sundaram and Nanjala Nyabola are both digital natives with extensive networks across Africa. There are other contributions, by researchers Toussiant Nothias and Paolo Vicente which discuss their extensive investigations of the contemporary reporters and correspondents who cover Africa for the international media. As a counterpoint to this there are other chapters which reflect upon the making of news – and more broadly – a new 'image' of Africa – via emerging digital and social media platforms, from Rachel Flamenbaum who focuses upon Ghana and Danielle Becker whose research is about Instagram in South Africa.

In section three we have covered the changing way that stories of aid and development have been used as a focus in the reporting on Africa. Although many critics may have reservations about this, NGOs remain significant players both in African economies, with a big stake in the whole 'development industry' and in some cases they are specifically involved in the way news is reported. Eliza Anyangwe, formerly of the Guardian Development Network and now with CNN, criticizes the recurring emphasis upon the aid narrative and the way that distorts much reporting. Nikolas Viki is himself part of an innovative NGO based in Norway called "Radiatoraid" which has used imaginative ways to change the familiar 'white savior/helpless black victim' story of Africa by turning it around through the production of a humorous 'counter-narratives.' Heba Aly has been involved in the dissemination of 'humanitarian news' and presents some observations on how this has developed, with respect to news about Africa. Three US based writers tackle the issues raised in the diverse media representation of an ambitious development scheme – the Millennium Village Project – which was introduced in 2004 across ten sub-

Saharan countries. Kate Wright analyses in detail the complicated relationship between an NGO and the promotion of a news story in Kenya, whilst Ludek Stavinoha focuses on the reporting of the AIDs pandemic in Africa.

The final section focuses upon the media representation of both political and geopolitical forces within Africa. Several chapters examine how in a changing global environment the competing interests at a regional, national and international level, attempting to gain influence in the continent, have engaged with media interests. Three of the chapters in this section are particularly concerned with contrasting dimensions of the emerging role of China in Africa, with specific reference to the way that the Chinese media has invested in and reported news about Africa. Another chapter presents research from Nigeria about the media strategies of the Boko Haram group, one of a growing number of non-state political actors able to operate across national borders. In contrast to this there is a chapter which examines the role of the Nigerian film industry as an influential global player which is increasingly significant in shaping the global image of Africa.

It is over twenty years since the first collection of Africa's Media Image was published (Hawk, 1992) and both stories about Africa and the media have changed enormously in that period. Together these four sections, comprising thirty chapters, offer a huge range of perspectives, analysis and opinions on the media representation of Africa in the twenty first century. They present the views of well established scholars, as well as emerging researchers combined with news producers and participants directly involved in the reporting of Africa on a range of media platforms.

The collection also covers writers who are knowledgeable about a wide diversity of locations across the continent and who represent multiple viewpoints.

The aim of this collection is to contribute to an updating of our understanding of the way that news about Africa for international audiences is made and how it is framed. In a world of political and technological upheavals where newsmaking itself has undergone a revolution we hope that this book will provide a much needed reassessment and reinterpretation of how Africa's media image is produced and interpreted in the digital age. Our intention is to inspire yet further research and analysis and indeed to act as a starting point for a second wave of reflection and writing about how the African continent and people of Africa are reported and represented to the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with C. Paterson, November, 1995