

HELP AT A HUGE COST: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HOW DONOR GROUPS MANIPULATE THE WESTERN NEWS MEDIA TO RAISE FUNDS FOR AFRICA

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Abstract

Despite criticisms, over the years, of the negative manner in which the African continent is portrayed in the Western news media, evidence abound that the situation remains largely the same. The Western media have remained consistent in presenting the African continent as a 'jungle' synonymous with poverty, disaster, conflict and everything negative. Positive developments such as improvement in social and economic conditions, innovations, etc. are deliberately ignored or downplayed to sustain the negative narrative. Playing a key role in promoting and sustaining the negative depiction of Africa by the Western news media are some Western-based non-governmental humanitarian agencies who employ 'compassion' as a strategy for attracting donations to 'assist' Africa. They exaggerate disasters and other happenings in Africa using the Western media because, in their view, donors in their countries and elsewhere would not be moved unless a grave picture was painted. This paper analyses the situation which has resulted in continued portrayal of Africa in negative light by the Western news media and the sustained tendency to deliberately ignore or downplay positive developments. It employs the media framing model to explain how the Western news media continue to portray Africa to perpetuate the situation. The paper argues that unless the humanitarian organisations in the West desist from their strategy of employing empathy to attract donations for their activities in Africa and Africans seize the initiative by propagating positive achievements on the continent, objective and unbiased reportage of the continent by the Western news media might remain a mirage.

Keywords: *Manipulation, Donor Groups, Western Media, Compassion, Negative Image*

Introduction

Although there have been advancements in various quarters in Africa, the negative portrayal of the continent in the Western news media has not abated (Bintliff, 2017). Despite evidence that many Africans have been making their mark in various fields of endeavour locally and internationally, this has not moved the Western media to change the way they 'frame' Africa and her people. As a result, the perception of many Westerners about Africa has not changed. They have been made to believe that nothing good can come out of the continent, no thanks to the persistent negative picture of Africa on the Western news media. Therefore, if a Westerner sees an African discussing intelligently, or making a mark in a particular field, he or she must have been trained in Western institutions or might have been influenced by residing in a developed country. The continuous depiction of Africa as a 'failed' continent by the Western news media despite indications of positive developments illustrates one of the tensions surrounding the role of journalists in society which is, serving as gatekeepers for all voices in society, versus advocating a particular cause or interest (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009).

Bintliff (2017, para. 1) asserts that for many centuries "Africa is widely regarded reputationally as a foreign aid dependent continent, which in reality is far from the truth". She argues that a growing body of evidence attests to the increasing number of high net worth Africans:

The 2014 Africa Wealth Report indicates that the high net worth individuals in Africa grew by over 150% between 2000 and 2013, more than double the global rate. This has resulted in the emergence of foundations and charities set up by Africans like Aliko Dangote, Mo Ibrahim, Tony Elumelu, Folorunsho Alakija, Steve and Tsitsi Masiyawa and Graca Machel to name a few (Bintliff, 2017, para. 1).

A major area where the negative portrayal of Africa is most common is in the reportage of crisis, disasters and other developments in Africa by the Western news media. In particular, the literature (e.g. Bintliff, 2017; Kareem, 2012; Mheta, 2015; Nyabila, 2014; Oscar, 2015; Rothmeyer, 2011) supports a deliberate effort by humanitarian organisations to paint an often

exaggerated pathetic picture of Africa to ensure the flow of donor funds for their activities. They justify this on the need to generate enough empathy to move people to donate towards their programmes in Africa, caring less about the damage such distortions do to the continent's image. Stories are 'framed' to sustain the image of Africa already created in the minds of the Western audience such that the picture of Africa they have is far from the reality. It thus appears that the Western news media would rather publish unverified information supplied by groups seeking donations from their audiences than uphold the journalism values of truthfulness and fairness. Kurtz (1998) in Hachten (2012) acknowledges the crisis of credibility facing the journalism profession, noting that journalists have become less concerned about the erosion of fundamental values of the profession. This paper examines this issue using the media framing lens to discuss how the Western news media continue to 'frame' Africa in negative garb while conveniently ignoring positive developments, resulting in a situation where the average Westerner harbours a distorted opinion of the continent. It argues that unless the Western humanitarian organisations change their strategy of employing sustained empathy to attract donations for their activities in Africa, and unless Africans take steps to correct the negative portrayal of the continent by projecting positive happenings, objective and unbiased reportage of the continent might take some time to come. As Chong and Druckman (2007) argue, public interest is not served if opinions can be arbitrarily manipulated by how issues are framed.

Perspectives on Framing

Although there is yet no consensus on the impact of the news media in influencing the audience, it is a widely accepted fact that they impact society in varying degrees. From the era of Mass Society Theory through the Era of the Scientific Perspective, the Era of Limited Effects up to the Era of Cultural Theory, several "paradigm shifts" continue to be witnessed in the study of media effects (Baran, 2002). Gauging the actual impact of the news media remains moot, eliciting continuous arguments and counter-arguments from scholars and media users. Ample literature (e.g. Baran, 2002; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Hachten, 2012; Rodman, 2006) exists on

media effects and many of the theories remain germane in trying to understand the news media and their impact on society. As Rodman (2006, p. 440) argues, "Media effects are not as straightforward and clear-cut as some observers have made them out to be. This has led to arguments, disagreements and debates about the impact of media." Baran (2002, p. 403) also asserts that, "the assumption behind all efforts at control of media use and content is that media have effects. But the presence, strength, and operation of those effects have been long controversial". It has also been observed that several arguments on the extent of media effects or impact hinge on different research tools with different levels of objectivity. Mass Communication researchers, according to Baran (2002, p. 406) "have produced reasonable answers to many of the most important issues of media effects, and they have done so using a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods [...]" Equally instructive is the fact the 'powerful effects' concept of the news media still holds sway among many despite the minimal effects or mixed effect models (Rodman: 2006). Hatchen (2012) for instance, notes that American journalism has influenced how people receive news and view their world globally.

Framing explains the process by which people develop a perception of an issue while framing effect describes how frames in the communication of the elite influence citizens' frame and attitudes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). This paper views it as the process through which the perception of Africa in the mind of the average Westerner is formed through a concentration on negative happenings and an almost deliberate avoidance of positive ones by the Western news media. To Entman (1993, p. 52) to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context [...]" de Vreese (2002a) views journalistic news frames as generic, involving the selection of topics that are subjects of news coverage. Chong and Druckman (2007) argue further that framing involves promoting particular definitions and interpretations while Tuchman (1978, p. 193) asserts that a frame in communication "organizes everyday reality".

From the different perspectives, it is clear that strong frames can, as Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 111) contend, be built around "exaggerations and outright lies playing on the fears and prejudices of the

public [...] and may be effective in shaping opinions through heuristics rather than direct information about the substance of policy." As argued earlier, the deliberate orchestration, and in some cases, distortion of negative news from Africa to attract donations (in aid of Africa) perpetuates a wrong view of Africa among Western news audiences. This tendency contradicts Elliotts's (2004) argument that journalists should provide their audience with global perspectives needed to understand events and the world. Clausen (2012) also contends that globalisation of news should involve an increased awareness of other cultures as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of one's own culture. Therefore, by deliberately orchestrating negative developments in Africa and ignoring or downplaying positive ones, the Western news media present a distorted 'global perspective' for their audiences which cultivates and sustains a warped perception of the continent and her people. Or could the Western news media be giving their audiences what they want? According to Heider, McCombs and Poindexter (2005, p. 953) "by gaining greater insights into the public's expectations of local news, it may be possible to identify key issues that could, in the long run, increase the public's interest in news and civic life." Going by the authors' position, it seems that the Western news audiences have been so 'primed' to expect nothing good from Africa and are uninterested in any positive news from the continent, hence their media give them 'what they want'. However, Mheta (2015) notes that the situation is changing as some Western news media have introduced programmes that focus on developments in Africa.

The Depiction of Africa in Western News Media

Journalism thrives on negative stories because conflict and controversy excite people (Spark & Harris, 2011). It is therefore usual for the news media to accord issues such as wars, conflict, disasters and similar incidents attention especially if the number of deaths, or the magnitude of the disaster is high. Africa as a developing continent has a lot of stories which fits the parameters of news. For several years, Africa presented 'big' stories for the news media in the West to a point where the picture of a continent of disasters has stuck in the minds of their audiences. Humanitarian and other donor agencies moved in to garner aid for victims of disasters in Africa and

largely succeeded and continue to get donations. The African 'bashing' in the Western news media to sustain the picture of a people in need of help is, however, sometimes tempered by compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). According to Moeller, compassion fatigue is a situation where people become fed up with and are not moved to donate toward unending negative developments in Africa. To her, the prolonged exploitation of empathy and the negative has made media audiences in the West to become compassion fatigued because of the familiarity with the 'usual' unpleasant events in Africa. She argues that "compassion fatigue tempts journalists to find ever more sensational tidbits in stories to retain the attention of their audience" and "encouraged the media to move on to other stories once the range of possibilities of coverage have been exhausted so that boredom doesn't set in" (Moeller, 1999, p. 2).

This suggests that the 'abnormal' events in Africa have become a kind of 'what to expect' such that people are no longer moved. What seems attractive to them, is anything different from the normal kind of negative stories. However, there appears to be a reluctance by those concerned to focus on positive developments in Africa.

Studies evidenced that for various reasons, there is a deliberate effort to sustain the negative picture of African in the Western news media (Chavis, 1998; Moeller, 1999; Kareem, 2012; Nyabilla, 2014; Oscar, 2015). For example, Rothmeyer (2011) argues that despite improvements in social and economic conditions in Africa, journalists in the United States continue to portray Africa as a continent of unending horrors. Citing the *Mckenesey Quarterly* which in June, 2010 described Africa as among the world's most rapidly growing economic regions of the world, she regrets that such developments do not excite the news media in the West because they prefer to sustain the negative depiction of Africa. She observed that between May and September 2010, 'the ten most-read US newspapers and magazines carried 245 stories mentioning poverty in Africa, but only five mentioned gross domestic product growth' (Para. 2).

Kareem (2012) also makes similar observations noting that the Western mainstream media narrative of Africa is of an impoverished, corrupt and helpless continent. She contends that rather than show how Africans are

making efforts to improve their situation, the Western news media perpetuate the idea that the continent is in need of help from outsiders by concentrating on what foreigners are doing to improve living conditions in Africa.

Kareem quotes Ethan Zuckerman, a co-founder of Global Voices which is an international community of citizen bloggers, as stating that there is a deliberate continuous portrayal of Africa as a place where nothing good happens. She also quoted TMS Ruge, co-founder of a Ugandan-based development organisation as saying that the negative sensational stories about Africa have skewed the public's view such that "it is difficult for people to accept that there is another side of the story" (para. 10).

Similarly, Oscar (2015) notes that the international media has played a significant role in the negative portrayal of Africa. He accused them of cultivating a distorted image of Africa in the minds of many Americans. He observes, for instance, that the coverage of Africa by the New York Times in the past 100 years has been consistently negative. He asserts that Africa is largely neglected in its coverage and the few reports on Africa are characterised by pessimism and cynicism:

By any standards, Africa is the most ignored of the major regions of the world [...] Similarly consistent is that the little African coverage that escapes the gatekeepers and makes it to the pages of this venerable paper has been characterised by pessimism and cynicism (Oscar, 2015, para 1-2).

Arguing along the same line, Mheta (2015) submits that the Western news media have convinced media audiences in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world that Africa is a hopeless, poverty-stricken continent. According to him, beautiful skyscrapers, roads and other infrastructure are kept away from their audiences who are used to pictures of malnourished, naked and terrible looking children. He, nonetheless, observes that they occasionally publish positive stories about Africa.

Chavis (1998) equally accuses the Western news media of deliberately misrepresenting Africa to their audiences. He avers that they "treat the African continent as a malignant appendage rather than as an integral systematic part of the earth and all its natural functions in accordance with

universal laws. Its indigenous populations are depicted as without value" (para. 2).

The above finding also corroborates Malaolu's (2014) observation of a general lack of interest in the coverage of third world countries by the Western news media. Citing example of the BBC which prefers to rely on non-Nigerian sources on news about Nigeria:

[...] the preference for non-Nigerian sources ensures that the voices ringing out loud in the construction of Nigeria as news are those of foreigners whose perspectives are not only culturally at variance with Nigerians', but mostly reflect the long-established precolonial and colonial construction of Nigeria. (Malaolu, 2014, p.35)

Viewing the matter from a different perspective, Gathara (2014) observes that African journalists are also guilty of perpetuating the negative portrayal of the continent. He argues that most news media in Africa take their cue on reportage on events in the continent from the same Western media they criticise by depending on international news agencies for stories of events in other African countries. He said that since most African news outlets do not have correspondents or bureaus outside their home countries, "they are part of the problem, perpetuating and disseminating as they do, western perspectives, biases and stereotypes" (para. 10). Jacobs (2015, p.73) blames his on the absence of a continental solidarity among African journalists and "lack of resources to travel between countries or to report from elsewhere in Africa."

The Role of Humanitarian Groups

As observed earlier, the literature suggests that the Western-based international aid groups involved in humanitarian and similar activities in Africa play a significant role in the negative depiction of Africa to the Western audience (Moeller, 1999; Rothmeyer, 2011). For instance, Rothmeyer (2011) in a piece entitled 'Hiding the Real Africa: Why NGOs Prefer Bad News' alleges that the organisations doctor information and encourage the portrayal of Africa as a continually needy continent to attract funding. The author found that the NGOs feed news organisations with

doctored statistics to paint a pathetic picture that would move donors. Rothmeyer cited an instance of Western news media stories on aid projects in Kibera, Kenya which were based on information provided by NGOs which described Kibera as the largest slum in Africa with a population of about one million. She said figures later released after the 2009 census in the country, showed that the area had a population of less than two hundred thousand.

Ironically, the NGOs do not see anything wrong in painting an inaccurate picture. Rothmeyer (2011) quoted an official of one NGOs as justifying the manipulation of facts on the need to prove that there is need. She quoted another as saying, "if you're not negative enough, you won't get funding" (para. 4) She concluded that the said organisations tend to focus less on what has been accomplished "but on convincing people what remains to be done" (para. 4).

What this suggests is that if the concocted or doctored facts by the NGOs on the situation in Africa suits the quest for more sensational stories, they continue to be published un-investigated over positive stories or developments which are not considered sensational enough to move the audience. It also suggests that the NGOs seek to continuously raise funds to 'assist' Africa through a continuous portrayal of a negative image of the continent in what could be described as 'killing' Africa's image in a bid to help her.

Conclusion

It is obvious from the above that there is need for a shift from the negative portrayal of Africa to presenting Africa as it really is – a developing continent with problems but which has positive aspects and prospects. As Clausen (2012) notes, the international media environment is becoming far more complex than has been suggested. As she argued, "the depiction of a hegemonic media system leading to global media may have seemed appropriate in the 1970s but has become increasingly open to challenge" (p.128). This paper therefore views as timely, Jacob's (2015, p.75) challenge to Africans to change the negative narrative about Africa in the Western media by countering "ahistorical and decontextualized images of the continent and its people". He suggested ways in which the news media in

doctored statistics to paint a pathetic picture that would move donors. Rothmeyer cited an instance of Western news media stories on aid projects in Kibera, Kenya which were based on information provided by NGOs which described Kibera as the largest slum in Africa with a population of about one million. She said figures later released after the 2009 census in the country, showed that the area had a population of less than two hundred thousand.

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Africa can change the negative narrative: "Report stories. Investigate malfeasance. Get out of the newsroom. Produce compelling media. Give readers proper historical context. No PR stories. Use local idioms which can be helpful for meaningful reporting" (Jacobs, 2015, p.75).

His call supports a similar one by Ogunyemi (2014) who notes that African diasporic press has a lot to do towards redefining the African narrative and correcting the dominant negative framing of Africa.

In light of this, the paper calls for greater publicity for the activities of African philanthropists, some of whom have established foundations which are demonstrating that Africans have the capacity to help themselves. In this regard, the paper commends Bintliff's (2017) proposition that African philanthropy needs its own name and the adoption of the coinage – *Afrilanthropy* -to describe it. According to her, "Western philanthropy has been about helping people 'over there'. Afrilanthropy is about helping the people 'right here'" (para. 8). It is also cheering that a prominent personality such as the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres is leading in the projection of Africa in positive light. According to him, "far too often, the world views Africa through the prism of problems. When I look at Africa, I see a continent of hope, promise and vast potential" (Guterres, n.d., para. 1). With the interest being shown by countries like China in assisting Africa's development, it is only a matter of time for the negative portrayal of Africa as completely hopeless, to become questionable among Western news audience. However, unless the Western humanitarian organisations change their strategy of employing empathy or compassion to attract donations for their activities in Africa, and until Africans seize the initiative and begin to correct the negative depiction of Africa, objective and unbiased reportage of the continent by the Western news media might take some time to come.

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