MICHAEL SERWORNOO

The Image of Africa in Ghana's Press

The Influence of Global News Organisations

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover design by Anna Gatti based on a photo by Duangphorn Wiriya on Unsplash at https://unsplash.com/photos/KiMpFTtuuAk

Introduction

Media coverage of Africa has historically been analysed using different approaches and from the vantage point of different geographical locations. Academic literature of the late 1970s and 80s highlights the negativity and bias on the part of developed nations not only in the way they write about Africa but also regarding their control of international news flow due to the growing influence of a hegemonic private press (Nordenstreng, 2012; Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997; Hawk, 1992; Sreberny, 1985; Stevenson and Shaw, 1984; Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1979; Galtung, 1971; Galtung and Ruge, 1965). This literature seems to suggest that a socially constructed discourse about Africa, which has come to be known as *Afro-pessimism*, has either improved in the wake of *Africa rising* discourse (Bunce, Franks and Paterson, 2017, Nothias, 2015; Ojo, 2014) or is in fact a non-existent myth (Scott, 2015). Indeed, recent publications argue that the claim of negative representation has no validity beyond certain few Western countries (Scott, 2017; Obijiofor and MacKinnon, 2016). New studies continue to adduce empirical evidence of Africa's negative portrayal in US elite press and of how this coverage spreads around the world (Gruley and Duvall, 2012). In this book, I trace these debates by examining the nature of the continent's coverage in the Ghanaian press with a focus on the dominant themes of representation, subject matter and tone of the coverage. I will also offer explanations for Africa's depiction in the press by journalists and editors, their newsroom exigencies and the world beyond these two contexts.

Background

Due to the historical implications of the use of communication technology by the Persian, Greek, Roman and British empires, communication across borders continues to occupy the minds of many researchers today (Thussu, 2000). However, an early attempt to explain the coverage of one country by another became prominent through the work of Johan Galtung, who introduced the Centre–Periphery model in which he attempted to explain the inequality within and between nations, and why that phenomenon was resistant to change. These inequalities and imbalances in international news flow, highlighted by Galtung, account for the persistent complaints of developing nations regarding their coverage in the Northern press (Galtung, 1971; Galtung and Ruge, 1965).

The attempts in scholarly literature to explain how nations cover each other were inadequate in establishing the necessary credibility of these imbalances. In fact, prior to the publication of UNESCO's MacBride Commission report (1980), the claims made by developing nations regarding their negative portrayal by Western media, which subsequently reinforced prejudices in the West, remained largely allegations. In addition to the UNESCO publication, several other studies, in particular those examining the portrayal of Africa in other countries, have been published (Bunce et al. 2017; Mody, 2010; Chang and Lee, 1992; El Zein and Cooper, 1992). The Western media has consistently refuted the claim that it represents Africa and other parts of the world through a negative lens. They argue that the term "Western press" is a generalisation referring to the press in the US and the UK. According to Jonathan Graubart (1989), the refutations by the Northern Hemisphere, led by the US, require a review. In the California Law Review, Graubart suggests that when the US evaluates proposals for change to the negative coverage of developing countries, it should move away from "the pious sanctity of its private press and rather attempt to pragmatically consider what steps it can take to further the economic and socio-cultural conditions in the Third world by reversing the consequences of centuries of negative coverage" (p. 631).

A detailed look at how African journalists portray countries on the continent could provide us with useful insights with which to assess the gravity of Western dominance over foreign news businesses, and help

us to understand how this has promoted dependency and hegemony. Thus far, existing research efforts have described how the media in the dominant Northern Hemisphere (Western nations) continue to negatively represent Africa, with little improvement (Bunce, 2017; Nothias, 2015). Recent publications have analysed other developed nations beyond those already implicated and have found this entire claim to be a non-existent myth (Obijiofor and MacKinnon, 2016; Scott, 2015). These studies, however, do not deal with the way in which Africa is covered by the continent itself, while the few studies that do acknowledge this point, ignore (Obijiofor and Hanusch, 2003; Pate, 1992) the agency of sources that were employed in the coverage.

The Problem, Purpose and Significance

The relationship between the ideology of a country and its portrayal in the media has been investigated and expounded (Ofori-Birikorang, 2009; Van Djik, 2009; Snow and Benford, 2000). The media frames that appear in news have their roots in the several influences that shape their production and reproduction (Gruley and Duvall, 2012). However, most scholars have only analysed media content and have overlooked more deeply-rooted questions pertaining to their sources. To disregard the origins of news selection and their value is comparable to a thesis which argues that no relationship exists between media portrayal and its source. The argument that sources play a significant role in news construction is justified because the ideology of news rarely permits receiving journalists to make major changes to what their fellow journalists have communicated.

Journalists are committed to the questions of who, what, when, where, why and how. The important question that remains unanswered, however, is whether African journalists writing for their local newspapers are capable of any resistance towards the influences of the international press? We can only understand this issue when we begin to analyse their works. The investigation of African media output, focusing specifically on sources, provides a new angle to the debate of both quantitative and qualitative imbalance of news flow to Africa. In any case, Wrong (2017) highlighted the need for African media to show their resistance by assuming a more responsible role than their Western counterpart.

Motilola Akinfemisoye (2013), supported this observation by arguing that significant improvements in mobile telephony and Internet access on the continent present a glorious opportunity for circulation and access to counter-narratives and broader stories about Africa.

Instances where the values of a particular international news agency become the guiding principle of an African newspaper could be the result of several factors such as media ownership, training, access, professional affiliations and history (Hachten, 2004; Golding, 1977). Unfortunately, these explanatory components are often disregarded by researchers. My intention is to investigate the coverage of Africa within the continent itself, without the assurance, as Francis Nyamnjoh (2017) argues, that the African journalists will fare better or worse than their Northern media counterparts. Rather, I consider this book a commitment to plurality, in a way that gauges how the issues have evolved over the years and across borders. This book fills a scholarly vacuum by providing the first description of the continent's current portrayal in the Ghanaian press. This description focuses on dominant themes employed by the press, the sources utilised, subjects discussed and the reasoning behind the country's portrayal. This book also tackles decision-making regarding news selection, which extends beyond the events and the journalists in question to the social milieus of the newsroom and Ghanaian society in general.

The overarching purpose of this book is to describe how Ghanaian newspapers have portrayed the African continent in their foreign news pages and the subsequent issues that the portrayal raises. It will be important to examine the weight of influence each international news agency carries as a source in the Ghanaian press as well as the collective influence exerted by international media on Ghanaian media's coverage of the continent. The book evaluates the subsequent reasoning behind the kind of representation Africa receives from the Ghanaian press in terms of actors, conditions and practices. These specific objectives guide my enquiry, as the study aims:

1. To deconstruct the dominant themes, tone and subjects employed in the representation of Africa in the Ghanaian press and to discuss the deconstructed themes in relation to those employed by the media in the Northern Hemisphere

regarding the portrayal of Africa (Bunce et al., 2017; Hawk, 1992).

2. To determine the weight of influence of international news agencies (actors) as sources in the Ghanaian press (Obijiofor and Hanusch, 2003).

3. To evaluate the conditions and practices which shape the foreign news selection beyond news values, by uncovering both conscious and unconscious elements, from the perspective of the journalists, their work environment and the immediate world beyond the newsroom.

4. To investigate the nature of intermedia agenda-setting relationships between Ghanaian newspapers and transnational news agencies (Segev, 2016; Golan, 2008; Groshek and Clough Groshek, 2013; Roberts and Bantimaroudis, 1997).

Media representation and news selection about foreign *Others* have been debated extensively over the years. Indira Gandhi outlined the need for real change when she stressed the importance of self-reliance in these words:

> We want to hear African on events in Africa. You should similarly be able to get an Indian explanation of events in India. It is astonishing that we know so little about leading poets, novelists, historians and editors of various Asian, African and Latin American countries while we are familiar with minor authors and columnists of Europe and America (Gandhi, 1984, p. 16).

The approach in this book contributes to literature on media representation in three unique ways. Firstly, it contests media representation through the approach of postcolonial theory — which offers a more democratic re-reading of media text — questioning, reframing and rethinking representations about the West and Others (Shome and Hegde, 2002). It is essential to note that the use of postcolonial theory in analysing foreign news selection is not to emphasise the West and East divide, but to understand and explain how identity is represented in the politics of power. Secondly, international news flow is often considered as a product of gatekeeping factors (Chang and Lee, 1992) or event-oriented

determinants (Eilders, 2006, 2006; Maier and Ruhrmann, 2007). Only a few studies have investigated intermedia agenda-setting as a possible factor (Groshek and Clough Groshek, 2013; Golan, 2008). Furthermore, most studies on news selection have been limited to content and frame analysis at the expense of a broad, explicit and multidisciplinary framework (Van Djik, 2009). In an attempt to capture the inherently ideological structures embedded in the news selection process, this study contributes to the literature on journalism research with a unique blend of ethnographic content analysis (ECA) and ethnographic interview. Although ECA is aimed at seeking a deeper insight into media text, it fails to provide the perspective of journalists and editors. This weakness is addressed by the application of detailed ethnographic interviews employing rigorous methodical techniques, which have enriched the findings in this book.

Guiding Questions

The study is driven by a compelling investigation into the portrayal of Africa in the Ghanaian press. Closely related to this issue are the further sub-questions that provide the context for a better understanding of this aspect of the study. The first research question (RQ1) — what is the overview of the coverage of Africa in the Ghanaian press — is divided into four sub-questions:

1. What subjects/topics/story types were mostly covered on the continent?

2. What were the dominant themes through which the African story was narrated?

3. What was the quality/tone of coverage (negative or positive or neutral)?

4. How comparable are RQ1 sub-questions a. b. and c. between the Ghanaian press and their Western counterparts?

The second research question (RQ2) asks: what is the weight of influence, both quantitative and qualitative, which individual international news agencies carry as sources in the Ghanaian press? The third question (RQ3) investigates the reasons behind the kind of representation Africa

receives in the Ghanaian press in terms of conditions, practices and perspectives of the journalists. Finally, RQ4 asks how has the issue of intermedia agenda-setting preferences between the Ghanaian press and their foreign counterparts been reviewed, considering the phenomenon's evolution so far?

Outline of the Book

The details here reveal the arrangement of the various chapters of the book. Chapter 1 presents the historical and contextual backgrounds of the study. Beginning with a discussion of the UNESCO-commissioned MacBride and Sreberny-Mohammadi reports, the chapter opens up the debate of that era. The findings of Beverly Hawk's edited book on *Africa's Media Image* are outlined, in addition to the work of Mel Bunce et al. (2017). Ghana's evolving positionality as a strong Pan-African state is discussed, from the pre-independence through the post-independence era to the current Internet and digital age. Chapter 2 situates this study in the current literature as a way of benefiting from previous research. It discusses the meaning and usefulness of foreign news in general, while also discussing the conceptualisation of terms and expanding upon a discussion relating to the opportunities afforded by the digital and Internet era for a fuller understanding of the world. It continues to evaluate the various determinants of international news coverage. This chapter subsequently describes how Africa has been portrayed in the Western media alongside a discussion of the determinants of international news flow. This chapter zeroes in on the framework within which the African press operates and the influences of international news agencies, and Western education and training on this entire process. Chapter 3 examines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study. The theories of newsworthiness, intermedia agenda-setting and postcolonial critique are discussed. The inter-relationships among the three theories are outlined, highlighting how they help in addressing the objectives of the study. The theoretical framework and hierarchical influence model of Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (2014) are recounted. Chapter 4 discusses the overarching methodology with a detailed outline of the various methods and procedures that inform the study. Ethnographic content analysis (ECA), a method that

integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to content analysis, is explained. This chapter also provides a rationale for the use of multiple methods (triangulation) for data collection as it pertains to this study. It encompasses the sampling methods and procedures employed, the units of analysis that were subject to examination, the period of study, as well as the steps and procedures carried out in the actual data collection in the field. The chapter ends with a discussion of validity, reliability and ethical issues, as well as coding instruments and protocol adopted for the study. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the ethnographic content analysis that emerged from the examination of articles on the foreign news pages in the newspapers studied. It discusses how the findings of the ECA complement purposes outlined for the research. The chapter ends with a comparison of Africa's image as portrayed in the Ghanaian press vis à vis the current literature. Chapter 6 focuses on the description of the findings relating to the ethnographic interview aspect of the data as a follow-up on chapter five. The ethnographic interview reveals the reasoning behind the foreign news selection process in Ghana from the perspective of the journalists and editors. The chapter outlines the qualitative weight of influence and the conditions shaping the foreign news selection. The workings of intermedia agenda-setting relationships are traced through the ethnographic interviews. All the findings are reduced to descriptions involving little or no discussions at that stage of the analysis. Chapter 7 discusses the findings outlined in Chapters 5 and 6 in line with the objectives of the entire study, in particular through an evaluation of each of the research questions posed in the Introduction. The chapter argues that the coverage of foreign news in the Ghanaian press reinforces existing postcolonial trajectories and relationships that contribute to the existing imbalance in international news flow around the world. The chapter further argues that the *soft-power* success of China's Xinhua News Agency not only represents South–South cooperation, but presents a new form of supremacy as a result of the relationship and engagement defined by imbalance of power relations and interactions between the Chinese and their Ghanaian counterpart. The chapter also focuses on the juxtaposition between the dependency of the Ghanaian press on international news agencies and its claim of an *African perspective*, thus suggesting that the entire scenario represents a resistance and subaltern ambivalence. However, to reach such a

conclusion we must first consider to what extent resistance is truly effective. In reality, Ghanaian journalists have done less in practice to establish any potent resistance to their negative proxy coverage of the continent, which begs the question, does the efficacy of resistance exist only in its conception or can it be achieved in practice?