

Research focus: European Media Discourses of Africa

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Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi is a Visiting Fellow at LSE doing research into European (international) broadcasting and its coverage of African affairs. Looking at four international broadcasters: BBC World Service, France 24, German Deutsche Welle, and pan-European Euronews, her research combines media and international relations. It looks at the broadcasters' policies towards Africa, their narratives on African issues in the news on the one hand, as well as African perceptions of European discourses on the other. The project will examine how the media policies and discourses all sit within the broader Europe-Africa relations and where they can take us in the future.

On the whole, the majority of news from Africa as reported by European international broadcasters from Europe is not positive. Despite the proliferation of special interest programs, such as 'African Voices' (CNN), 'Focus on Africa' (BBC), or 'Africa on the Move' (DW), the old journalistic maxim 'if it bleeds, it leads' remains strong in the news sections. A quick survey of African topics trending in European broadcasters' news quickly reveals a never-ending spectacle of blood, deadly blasts, victims, state of emergency and 'catastrophic' levels of things. Politicians traveling to the continent also see some of its countries such as Kenya as 'hotbed of terror'. Africa is hardly seen as a hotbed of creativity or innovation. The old-age stereotypes of Africa as a problem prevail.

If we go deeper into the stories, we will discover that it is mostly non-African voices that speak about Africa. They provide opinions, views and solutions to African problems. Europeans are portrayed as doers, movers and shakers. They provide equipment, intelligence and knowledge. Africa on the other hand is seen as passive, lacking sophistication and political will, therefore inadequate to cope with the magnitude of its own problems. Local voices, knowledge and expertise are silent. This way, whether it is ebola crisis, violent extremism, issues of gender, conflict, or economic development, discourses carried by European broadcasters generally perpetuate relations based on domination of African affairs by external (mostly Western) ideas and solutions.

Africa On European Screens

For example, pictures of African doctors treating ebola patients were very rare on European screens. It would take a British, non-African, aid worker to remain in West Africa even after the eradication of the virus 'to make sure they wash their hands...' Nigerian military are simply 'massive rights abusers', engaged in a primitive 'hunt' for Boko Haram, the country's information policy is 'equally shambolic' while westerners 'deploy surveillance', 'share satellite imagery', and even 'comb through every detail of the video for clues that might help ongoing efforts to secure the release of the girls'. For example, when Boko Haram kidnapped 280 girls in 2014, the Nigerian president was 'on hand' while decisions on extremism were taken in Paris, in itself a foreign capital. Not sending girls to school in East Africa is simply an 'old African tradition' that needs to be abandoned.

Does, what our media say about Africa matter? After all, these are just news stories which audiences in the West may already be tired of and start displaying 'compassion fatigue'. In Africa on the other hand, viewers may be busy listening to (and producing) their own stories.

I argue that, yes, it matters a lot. This negative portrayal shapes the overall Europe-Africa relations. It easily points to external answers to local solutions and promotes continuous western engagement in African matters. Such representation perpetuates the familiar asymmetrical relationship of dependence. As Louis Michel, the former EU Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid once said:

Afro-pessimism is too prevalent in Europe, not just in the circles of power, but in public opinion, too. Africa continues to be regarded as a 'problem'. In counterpoint to this perception is the moralising,

| *charitable approach that ultimately provides a blinkered view of the relationship with Africa.*[1]

As history is written by media these days, they have their share in creating this dark picture of Africa in our minds. To Ama Biney, a Nigerian and editor in chief of *Pambazuka News*, this pessimist view is doing disservice to its audiences and to Africans in general:

There is still a certain negative and racist attitude in terms of how the West interprets and perceives Africa ... The West often gleefully relates stories of corruption in Africa, but rarely investigates the role that Western companies play in the scandals African people are always in need, they are dependent of the white, industrial society. I think this is ultimately harmful to Africa.[2]

The impact on Europe

The problem is that it is not just Africans that suffer from this never-ending negativity. It hurts Europeans, too! As *African Business* wrote in November 2014, the United Kingdom, for example, 'is being ruthlessly pushed to the back of the queue of trade and investment in Africa.'^[3] British companies faced with shrinking markets in Europe, and intense competition in Asia, are finding it more and more difficult to prosper in Africa. They are not getting lucrative contracts on the continent anymore as the Chinese get them first. UK-Africa trade is lagging behind China, US and India, as British investors are not sure why go to Africa in the first place if it's all doom and gloom. Therefore, some level of good news, or more accurate news, might be required for investors to be able to make sound investment decisions.

But the good news from Africa goes largely untold. By 'good' I do not necessarily mean stories of 'happily ever after.' It is true that many challenges are still present on the continent. Security is still an issue in many countries as well as corruption, fiscal discipline, or poverty. Bad things happen, we know that. But in every story on a disaster, whether 'natural' or 'man-made', there can be something positive. For example, almost always there is some local action to address the problem, local experience, or local agency, determination and willingness to bring solutions. African people are not always helpless, or waiting for solutions from outside. Such stories, however, rarely find their way to European newsrooms.

Could we hope for **more balance** in European reporting on Africa? Could we, one day, read that, yes, Ebola virus happened, undeniably, but African people decided to do something about it, too? Will we hear that Africans themselves mobilised their efforts to combat the disease? That Western African artists, too, recorded their own Ebola-song (because they did and only the BBC informed about it) and organised international fundraising across borders? Could we learn that a number of African states got together and sent troops to fight extremists in northern Nigeria? Is it widely reported by western media that African countries are progressing in leaps and bounds in terms of doing business, and that they are now amongst the world's top reformers? Can we sometimes find a story that would include words like 'recovery', 'improvement', and 'progress', and that Zambia is more than just copper, and that Katanga is more than just mining?

Could we hope for **more honesty** in European reporting on Africa? Can we learn, for example, that a backward 'African tradition' of not educating girls is not entirely 'African'? Can European media honestly admit that the custom was exported to Africa first by the early European missionaries who educated boys for service in church, and later maintained by colonial administrations which trained men for military and administrative positions within the colonies? Girls were delegated to domestic duties in white settlers' homes and few, if any, places were reserved for them at schools. Gendered relations and educational practices were, thus, to a large extent defined by colonial administrators and inherited by newly independent African states. Later, austerity measures coming from the international financial institutions reinforced schooling of boys making parents pay for education, a measure not implemented anywhere in Europe, and in many cases Africans were forced to choose between educating their sons

or daughters.

Europe's desperate plea for influence

There is a possibility that European influence in Africa may be weakening compared to the rapidly increasing influence of new actors such as China, India, Turkey and Brazil. They are self-confident, they do not carry colonial baggage, and they mean business. In the face of this new competition, European media's reporting of Africa may simply look as a desperate attempt to uphold European norms and values on the African continent in the global contest for influence, supremacy and power. European media seem to be serving as political transmitters of western-liberal norms, pushing for political reforms based on their own understanding of societal order. But how long will Africans accept it, especially now that they have choices? What kind of relationship is there for both sides based on this prejudiced and one-sided view?

Today, African audiences can pick and choose amongst world's largest and best media, not only speaking to them from Europe, but also from China, the Middle East, and more importantly from their own towns and cities, broadcasting and writing to African audiences in their own languages. Values, norms, political and business models proliferate. This abundance of choices combined with the pervasive lecturing by Europeans can quickly result in African audiences abandoning European media altogether. Does Europe want that to happen?

The last part of my research will find out what African people think about media stories told about them by international broadcasters from Europe. I'm hoping to discover that Europeans are loved, not loathed, that European news programs inform, not dis-inform, and that European perception of the continent allows audiences on both sides, in Europe and in Africa, to see Africa the way it is, not the way it has always been (mis)represented by word and image.

By Eva Polonska- Kimunguyi

[1] Michel, L. (2007) 'Europe-Africa: The Indispensable Partnership', speech delivered to the European Policy Centre, Brussels, November 2007

[2] EJO (2013) 'Africa Stereotypes in the European media', interview with Ama Biney, European Journalism Observatory (EJO), July 25, 2013

[3] African Business (2014) 'Return of the UK?'; November 2014

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