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HOW WESTERN JOURNALISTS ACTUALLY WRITE ABOUT AFRICA

Re-assessing the myth of representations of Africa

Toussaint Nothias

Over the last 20 years, journalism scholars have criticized Western media for their reporting of Africa. Scott recently argued in this journal that this criticism has become taken for granted to the point of becoming a “myth”. This article constitutes the first academic response to Scott and revisits empirically what we think we know best about Western media coverage of Africa. It identifies and assesses three claims about this coverage, namely that it systematically (1) refers to “darkness” and “tribalism”; (2) it presents Africa as a homogenous entity; and (3) that it relies predominantly on Western sources. The corpus includes 282 articles published across eight British and French newspapers (2007–2012). The textual analysis—complemented by interviews with correspondents—finds that the claims that coverage systematically refers to “tribalism” and “darkness”, treats Africa as a country and relies pre-dominantly on Western voices are not empirically supported. Nonetheless, it reveals that processes of conflation are at stake, and that the framing of African voices is impacted by a linguistic bias linked to peculiar perceptions of African political leadership. The article concludes that the critical ethos of postcolonial critique is best served by transparent and nuanced interpretation of textual data.

KEYWORDS Africa; Afro-pessimism; foreign correspondents; linguistics; newspapers; post-colonial; representation; tribalism

Introduction

I feel like I’m on trial and you are confronting me with the evidence of my past sins! [laughing] (David Smith, Africa correspondent for *The Guardian* from 2010 to 2015, interview with the author, 2013)

In 2005, Kenyan writer Binivyanganga Wainaina published an essay turning into derision the way Western authors—from journalists to novelists—write about Africa. His advice: “always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’ in your title ... Also useful are words such as ‘Guerillas’, ‘Timeless’, ‘Primordial’ and ‘Tribal’ ... In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country” (Wainaina 2005, 92). In a few years, his satire of “How to Write About Africa” became the most shared article of the *Granta* journal and reached the status of essential reading on the debate on representations of Africa. In addition to being discussed in major mainstream publications, such as the *New Yorker*, a video was made in 2009 where Beninese actor Djimon Hounsou narrated with gravitas Wainaina’s text. Ironically perhaps, Djimon Hounsou had played a major role a few years back in a movie, *Blood Diamond*, often held as an example of Afro-pessimist representation of

Africa (Evans and Glenn 2010). By that time, the success of Wainaina's piece suggests that he had tapped into a *zeitgeist*, namely that contemporary Western media representations of Africa are still shaped by colonial ideas, exoticism, feelings of white superiority and, ultimately, racism.

In the field of media and journalism studies, there is a significant body of literature that has supported this analysis, from the early 1990s onwards. In fact, the majority of research into the topic appeared after 2007 (Scott 2015, 9), precisely while Wainaina's piece was gaining prominence. However, in this journal, Scott (2015) recently made an important and somehow controversial intervention in the debate. He argued that these ideas about Western media representation of Africa are largely mythical. In a Barthesian sense, a myth is when a sign—the combination of a signifier and a signified—becomes itself a signifier and reaches a point where it becomes taken for granted, naturalized and obvious, hereby concealing its ideological dimension and historical formation. In this case, the myth is that we know that Western media portrayal of Africa systematically reproduces stereotypical, racist and colonial representations. Arguing against the consensus in the literature, Scott claims that previous studies fall short of providing the empirical basis to support the dominant argument perfectly captured in Wainaina's satire.

This article offers the first academic response to Scott's concerns about the myth of representations of Africa. It proposes to revisit what we think we know best about Western media coverage of Africa. I start by setting more fully the context within which Scott made his argument. I then identify three of the most significant claims in the literature about Western media coverage of Africa, namely that it systematically (1) refers to "tribalism" and "darkness"; (2) it presents Africa as a homogenous entity and (3) that it relies dominantly on Western sources. I subsequently turn to the research design and rationale. I then present the empirical evidence in the form of a textual analysis of several linguistic features (including lexical fields, overlexicalization, generalization, comparisons, sources quoted and quoting verbs) in 282 articles published across eight British and French newspapers between 2007 and 2012. I conclude on the meaning and significance of these results for research into media representations of Africa.

The Myth of Representations of Africa

There is a long-standing critique of Western media coverage of Africa in media and communication studies. Broadly, this critique has been concerned with the perceived failure of Western media to offer a balanced representation of Africa. This literature finds that the media have generally failed to fulfill their ethical requirement to minimize harm—in that case, harm to global representation of Africa. Especially since the 1990s and the advent of 24-hour rolling news, it is claimed that the coverage of Africa has reproduced dehumanizing stereotypes, racist discourses and colonial ideas decades after the formal end of colonialism. Theoretically, these observations have regularly been grounded in the attention to language, discourse, power, ideology, stereotyping and difference characteristic of the critical ethos of postcolonial theory and cultural studies.

This critique now extends beyond academia to public debates and popular culture. In addition to Wainaina's satire, there are many examples of such broader awareness. The Norwegian organization SAIH, for instance, created a viral video humorously calling Africa to help freezing Norwegians by sending radiators, as a way to fight the "image of Africans as exotic other" (Poulsen Viki 2016). The organization went on to create in 2013

the Radiator Awards recompensing both the non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) campaigns that reproduce the worst stereotypes and those creatively "stepping outside of the common way with using stereotypes". The media themselves appear to have taken that criticism on board, as can partly be seen in a recent wave of positive coverage of Africa (Nothias 2014; Bunce 2016; Wright 2016). As part of their global promotional campaign "hear the human story", Al Jazeera English appealed implicitly to the critique of Western media coverage of Africa. The campaign was launched from South Africa and featured a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. Given that the reporting of Rwanda has been a focal point of this critique, the Al Jazeera English campaign promised that their reporting would reflect humanity and show care for African lives—in implied contrast to Western media (Paterson and Nothias 2016). Through social media, African voices have also contributed to a sustained public critique of Western media representations of Africa, from Kenyan twitteratis criticizing foreign correspondents for their coverage of the 2013 elections (Tully and Ekdale 2014; Bunce 2015) to Ugandan bloggers reacting to the Kony2012 video (Nothias 2013).

These examples point to an awareness that extends beyond academia, but they also highlight what concerns Scott, namely that the Western media representations of Africa have become taken for granted. Scott set out to critically investigate this consensus by assessing the empirical evidence on which these assertions are based. To do so, he conducts a comprehensive scoping review of the literature. His analysis of 163 studies reveals that the existing research "is heavily focused on a small number of countries, events, media and texts" (Scott 2015, 16). Such a narrow focus and bias in research design, in turn, could explain that the amount of studies on news media and crisis reporting (respectively, 66 and 52 percent of all studies) "is often mistaken for evidence that media coverage of Africa is dominated by news coverage of crises" (16). In sum, Scott argues, "the widespread belief that we know how Africa is represented in the US and UK media is shown to be a myth" (1).

Why it matters then is because this myth appears to be instrumentalized by many stakeholders with competing agendas—from NGOs and media organizations to government and corporate entities. Scott (2015, 17) notably highlights a range of corporate interests that discursively rely on such assumptions about representations of Africa, such as Tullow Oil, Africa's largest independent oil company, who appealed to the need to "challenge misconceptions" about Africa when announcing that its Invest in Africa initiative would sponsor Sunderland Football Club. One can also think of FIFA and the South African government that branded the 2010 World Cup a tool in the fight against Afro-pessimist representations of South Africa and Africa (Chari and Mhiripiri 2014). Similarly, in previous research, I found that a trend for more positive coverage of Africa—presented as a remedy to the "traditional" negative representations—was related to the trickling down of a corporate discourse that favors neoliberal policies and extractive, exploitative economies (Nothias 2014). By constantly relying on the assumption that we know what Western media coverage of Africa is like, Scott (2015, 18) therefore worries that academic research becomes "embroiled in the exercise of hegemonic power".

While Scott paints the picture of a sub-field that seemingly makes the same arguments over and over again, there is a new wave of research into media representations of Africa that engages the topic with more reflexivity and nuance. The journal *Communication, Culture & Critique* published a special issue in 2016 dedicated to "Africa, Media and Globalization" (Steeves 2016). A new book, *Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century*:

From the "Heart of Darkness" to "Africa Rising" (Bunce, Franks, and Paterson 2016), was also published. In both cases, the contributors engage with a wide variety of issues and media, and with the representational complexity brought about by a globalizing media environment, from digital development video games (Fisher 2016) to slum tourism (Ekdale and Tuwei 2015) and self-representation on Instagram (Becker 2016).

What emerges from this wave of research is the recognition that representations of Africa are entangled in complex structures of production, where competing, even conflicting, values interact to shape sometime reductive representations, but also more empowering ones, or representations at odds with one-sided negative ones. Bunce (2010), for instance, notes the growing role of local journalists in the Reuters newsroom in Nairobi—a shift accompanied by a clash of values in how African news items should be covered. Haavisto and Maasilta (2015, 327) delineate the contour of a journalism of hope surrounding European cultural products focused on violence in the African Great Lake region; a journalism that challenges "narrow and ingrained discourses of Africa as a region without hope". Conrad (2015), drawing on his personal experience, highlights the gap between the intention of freelance journalists and the framing of their work by institutions to Western audiences. Gagliardone (2013) highlights that the growing presence of Chinese media in Africa is accompanied by the production of more positive news stories about Africa. Similarly, Marsh (2016, 185) finds that CCTV Africa "is adopting some elements of 'constructive journalism'"—a shift also "marked by a lack of critical focus on China and a reluctance to hold African leaders and officials to account".

These studies enrich our understanding of media representations of Africa, and also call our attention to the need to move beyond Western-centric approaches to the question. That being said—and in relation to the point critically raised by Scott—these studies generally rely on a consensus about what the existing literature has shown.

In light of both this new wave of research and Scott's critique, I propose in this article to make a step back to make two steps forward, so to speak. Indeed, I would argue that it is necessary to revisit what we think we know best and to empirically assess the validity of important claims that make up the myth of representations of Africa. If we are not to take the existing literature at face value, as Scott argues, then we need empirical data to support, challenge and/or nuance our pre-conceptions.

Before turning to the choice of the site of analysis and the presentation of the results, I propose in the following section a synthetic, reflexive and analytical review of the main claims found in the literature—with a particular focus on the qualitative feature of the coverage.

Tribal and Dark, Homogenized, Voiceless: What We Think We Now

The first observation that previous studies offer is that Western journalistic coverage of Africa is scarce. Wilke, Heimprecht, and Cohen (2012) investigated the content of foreign coverage of television news during four weeks of the year 2008 across 17 countries from five regions. When we focus on the results of the six European countries included in the study, the coverage of Africa represents 4 percent of foreign news coverage, as opposed to 76 percent of the coverage focusing on other European countries or North America. Overall, their analysis shows that Africa (3 percent) is the least covered continent along with Australia/Oceania (3 percent), South America having 9 percent, the Middle East 18 percent, Asia 19 percent, North America 23 percent and Europe 40 percent (Wilke,

Heimprecht, and Cohen 2012, 309). The 3 percent of coverage is in stark contrast with the fact that Africa is home to about 15 percent of the world's population.

It is not clear if Africa constitutes the most neglected continent in foreign news. Research by the Oxford Internet Institute found that between January 1979 and August 2013, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 13.4 million of stories as opposed to 60 million for North America and Europe combined, 32.6 million for Asia and 23.5 million for the Middle East and North Africa (Graham and De Sabbata 2013). Latin America and the Caribbean accounted for only 6.5 million, and Oceania 3.4 million. In fact, if one were to add the countries from North Africa to those of sub-Saharan Africa, the continent would register nearly as many events as the Middle East. De Beer (2010), for his part, explored UK, US and German television news coverage over the year 2008. He found that while Africa (10.8 percent) received significantly less coverage than Asia (25.5 percent), the Middle East (22 percent) and North America (21.4 percent), it nonetheless "received substantially more coverage than South America (1.9 percent)" (De Beer 2010, 603). Whether Africa is the most neglected geographical area in Western media or not, the existing literature shows that it has consistently been one of the most neglected.

The second consensual observation in the literature is that the coverage focuses on "negative stories" and follows a "crisis-driven news agenda". Domatob (1994) found that crisis and disaster stories dominated the coverage of US news magazines, and Brookes (1995, 465) that "civil war, civil conflict, aid, human rights, politics, crime and disaster account for 92% and 96% of all news about Africa in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*, respectively". Schraeder and Endless (1998, 32), for their part, established that some 73 percent of the articles published in the *New York Times* between 1955 and 1995 communicated "negative" images of politics and societies, and that there had been an increase in "negative" news, from 67 percent in 1955 to 85 percent in 1995. More recently, Golan (2008, 53) also found that "the majority of stories about African nations focused on negative and highly deviant issues such as conflict and disasters both natural and human caused". Looking at British television, the Glasgow Media Group (2000, 20) concluded that the issues most frequently reported concerning Africa and the developing world appear to be related to conflict, war and terrorism. These various observations concur to support the widespread claims in the literature that "some overselection of negative news from Africa does seem to occur" (Zein and Cooper 1992, 137).

However, there are several pitfalls in reducing the analysis of Africa's coverage to a focus on "negative" news. Firstly, the phenomenon of "bad news" is not specific to Africa. De Beer (2010, 604), for instance, found that the tone of news reports about Africa in Western media is mostly negative (54.1 percent) but that it is even more so for Central America (55.4 percent). Along with the adage "if it bleeds, it leads" the idea of news more generally is crossed by a negativity bias.

Secondly, the existing evidence for such a "negative" focus may not be as strong as suggested by the widespread claims in the literature and may be a question of interpretation of the findings. For instance, Lugo-Ocando and Malaolu (2015, 88) conclude "Nigeria is predominantly portrayed negatively" on the basis that 58.9 percent of the articles link the country to crime, corruption and fraud, whereas "only" 41.4 percent link it to sport, democracy and infrastructure. Yet, one could give another reading of these results and suggest that given the in-built tendency of news to focus on negative issues, and the significant presence of "positive" aspects, these results are far from being compelling. Furthermore, Scott (2009, 547)—also looking at the British press—reveals that, when

we combine the main “negative topics” (civil war, civil conflict, aid and debt relief, terrorism, natural disasters, living conditions, health and disease, and human rights), they amount solely to 23 percent of the articles. He concludes: “coverage of Africa, in the UK press at least, is not as negative as is often assumed” (548).

Thirdly, “negativity” is a fairly subjective criterion. For instance, in October 2014 Burkina Faso experienced a wave of demonstrations and riots in response to President Blaise Compaoré’s attempt to amend the constitution so as to run in yet another election. Most studies quoted previously would characterize this as “negative news” through categories such as “social unrest” or “political instability”. This popular uprising eventually led to Compaoré resigning from the presidency after 27 years in power, and to the establishment of a transitional government. In another reading of the event, we can thus see it as an empowering and “positive” popular movement that succeeded in its demands for greater political accountability and democratization.

Finally, an exclusive focus on “negativity” risks sidetracking what constitute the core features of the criticism of media representations of Africa in the literature, namely the language, images, rhetoric and narratives used. A plethora of studies have argued that Western media rely on a specific set of vocabulary, metaphors and explanatory frameworks when reporting on Africa, and that these contribute to creating a peculiar image grounded in a colonial repertoire (Fair 1992, 1993; Hawk 1992; Brookes 1995; Myers, Klak, and Koehl 1996; Ogundimu and Fair 1997; Wall 1997; Allen and Seaton 1999; Beattie et al. 1999; Moeller 1999; Philo et al. 1999; Styan 1999; Brijnath 2007; Pontzeele 2008; Kothari 2010; Ibelema 2014). This has notably happened through the reliance on “tribalism” as an explanatory framework used specifically for African conflicts and not for European ones (Mano 2015, 7). In doing so, media coverage contributed to create a sense that conflicts in Africa are essentially different, that explaining them escapes the bounds of Western rationality.

Different types of news events throughout Africa appear to be reduced to an Africa-specific system of linguistic, semiotic and symbolic references. For instance, metaphors and expressions such as “Dark continent”, “in darkest Africa”, “out of Africa” or “heart of Darkness” have been regularly observed in contemporary journalistic writing (Hawk 1992; Spurr 1993; Brookes 1995). These phrases directly refer to the colonial literature of the nineteenth century travelers and colonizers, and inscribe journalistic discourse in a discursive continuum where literary and journalistic styles collide. This process, as Fair (1993, 5) perfectly puts it, shows how “‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ constantly reinforce each other in the construction of Africa and Africans as the undifferentiated ‘Other’”.

As a result of the inscription of different news stories in a cohesive symbolic system of references specific to “Africa”, journalistic discourse reproduces a view of “Africa as a country”, as “a homogenous block with violence, helplessness, human rights abuses and lack of democracy as its main characteristics” (Brookes 1995, 465). There has been a tendency to relate an event located in one country to events happening in other ones, or even to relate it to the continent as a whole. Looking at the Rwandan crisis, Wall (1997, 131) found that it was also by virtue of portraying all the neighboring countries as “just as chaotic and violent” that the coverage inscribed the event in a broader “African” framework.

Studies have also regularly criticized the coverage for relying on Western sources and foreign interviewees over local ones. In her study of the coverage of US food aid in Africa between 1980 and 1989, Fair (1992, 116) found that “of the 134 stories about US food aid

sent to Africa, only a handful of stories used as sources the common person, Africans unconnected to governments or relief agencies". Focusing on the reporting of the frontline states on US television in the 1980s, Paterson (1996, 68) observed a similar tendency: "only 46 of 110 interviews appeared to be with black southern Africans. The remainders were with Americans, Europeans, white South Africans, and white Zimbabweans". More recently and in the British context, Malaolu (2014, 31) found that over 10 years of coverage of Nigeria in five British newspapers, only 28 percent of the sources were Nigerian while European/foreign sources make up 67 percent. These studies along with those of Higiroy (1988), Myers, Klak, and Koehl (1996) and Styan (1999) concur in assessing this bias as one that discursively reinforces the view of a world where the authority to speak about and for Africa is located externally.

In summary, we can delineate three main features that work in conjunction but that can be separated for analytical purposes. These are:

1. The use of the vocabulary of "tribalism" and "darkness".
2. The presentation of Africa as a homogenous block.
3. The overreliance on Western voices.

The literature suggests that these features have been observed nearly systematically in previous studies. Beyond scarcity and negativity, they are what makes the discursive construction of Africa in international media peculiar and link it to colonial representations and stereotyping. In fact, these three claims relate to processes of *racialization*, *homogenization* and *selectivity* that are important discursive tools in the construction of an Afro-pessimist discourse (Nothias 2012). They thus constitute cornerstones of the myth of representations of Africa, which I now propose to assess empirically.

Research Design

The empirical analysis focuses on the British and French broadsheet coverage of the 50th anniversaries of independence of 24 African countries. This site was selected and designed to address several gaps and biases in previous studies as revealed by Scott's study.

Despite France being historically one of the most influential colonial powers in Africa—and thus a key actor in the "Western" invention of Africa—French coverage of African news has seldom been studied, in particular in a comparative perspective with Anglophone media. A correlative of this Anglophone bias is that there are only a very few studies shedding light on how Francophone African countries are covered (Scott 2015, 11). In contrast, five Anglophone countries (South Africa, Sudan, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Somalia) make up 44 percent of existing studies. Scott (2015, 14) also observes the tendency to take the case of the coverage of one African country and use it as an example of how "Africa" is covered. My investigation focuses on the period 2007 to 2012 during which 24 African countries (including 15 French and 7 British former colonies) celebrated their 50th anniversary of independence. While it does not include every single African country, this site includes a significant number from which to draw more solid conclusions and also contributes to our knowledge of the coverage of Francophone countries.

In addition, the literature tends to focus on the coverage of a narrow range of topics related to war, conflict, disaster, crisis and violence. This possibly points to a bias in research design where researchers look in the coverage for what they set out

to find in the first place. In particular, the coverage of more banal and mundane news stories has seldom been studied. These 50th anniversaries of independence constitute an invitation to look back at the past, assess the present and think about the future. As news events, they fall outside an expected focus on war and crisis, and defy easy, *a priori* categorization into negative or positive news. In sum, these anniversaries offer an interesting vantage point to assess the more banal coverage that has been taken for granted in the literature.

Finally, Scott found that 48 percent of the studies are about newspapers and/or news-magazines. The focus is usually on broadsheet media but only on a few publications from this section of the industry. My focus on broadsheets thus allows the area we think we know best to be revisited, but in a more rigorous manner by including four newspapers¹ in each country, hereby covering almost this entire section of the industry.

The articles were collected from LexisNexis using the 2007–2012 timeframe and a combination of keys words (such as the name of each country which celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence, “independence”, “jubilee”, “anniversary”, “50”). Overall, the corpus of relevant articles consisted of 282 news articles (154 for French newspapers and 128 for British ones). The articles were coded manually to assess a number of textual and linguistic features as part of a broader project on postcolonial representations and Afro-pessimism. Several of these categories were specifically designed to assess systematically the aforementioned three most common criticisms of Western media coverage of Africa. I used several tools borrowed from the field of linguistics and discourse analysis; these are introduced in more detail throughout the analysis section.

The textual analysis is complemented by material retrieved from interviews conducted with Kenya- and South Africa-based correspondents who were directly involved in the production of some of these articles. Some spoke on the record, while others preferred to remain anonymous. As such, while my methodological approach emphasizes the analysis of media content (Fürsich 2009), it recognizes the importance of taking into account their context of media production (Philo 2007). Overall, then, the approach is resolutely interdisciplinary in that it borrows tools developed in linguistics to reflect on journalistic practices in relation to the themes of power and representation central to cultural and postcolonial studies.

Analysis

Tribal and Dark?

I assessed the first claim—the systematic references to “tribalism” and “darkness”—through an analysis of the lexical fields found in the coverage. Drawing on Fowler (1991), Machin and Mayr (2012, 31) compare a lexical field to a map of meanings that symbolically delineates areas of salience and foregrounds certain features, ideas and values. I tracked a range of lexical fields to get an overall sense of the map of meanings surrounding these anniversaries across all articles (Figure 1). The categories were developed using some of the most common themes referred to in existing studies. I also added categories that allow the capture of other lexical fields such as “economic growth”, “progress and achievements”, “good governance” and “culture”. Looking at lexical fields therefore provides an entry point into the discursive construction of Africa in that it gives a sense of the vocabulary most commonly used in those stories.

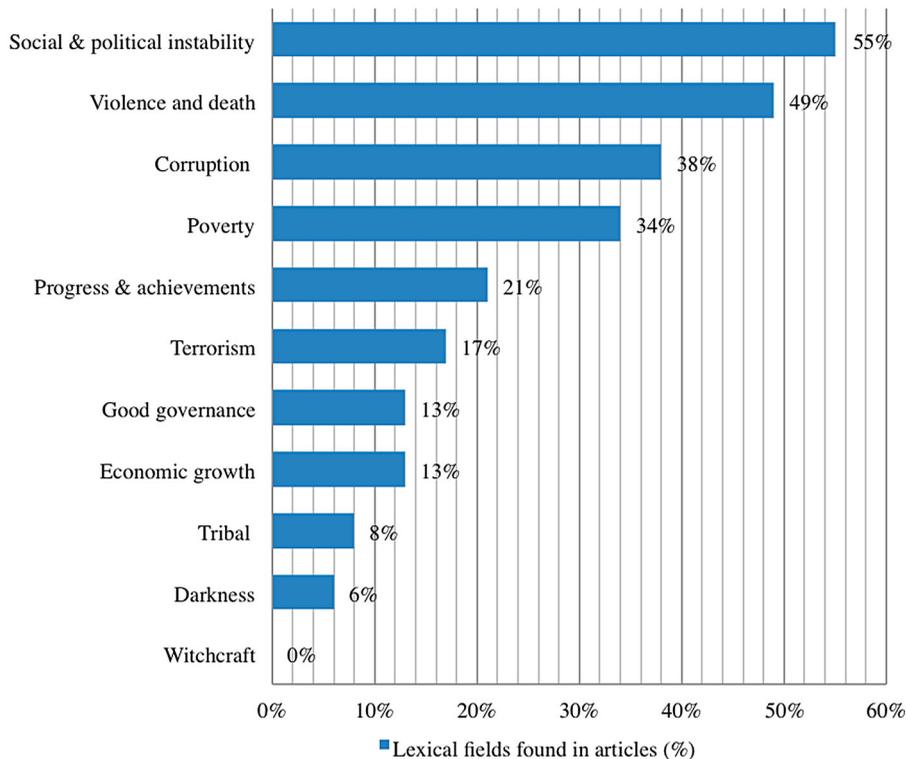


FIGURE 1

Percentage of articles containing selected lexical fields

The four most prevalent lexical fields were those of social and political instability (55 percent), violence and death (49 percent), corruption (38 percent) and poverty (34 percent). The coverage routinely commented on these anniversaries in relation to “poor” or “impoverished” people “at risk of dying” and “victims of violence”, to states being described as “collapsing”, “anarchic”, “oppressive” and to leaders as “corrupt”, “despotic” or “autocratic”. However, the lexical field of “progress and achievements” comes fifth in these results (21 percent), and 13 percent of articles contained the lexical fields of “good governance” and “economic progress” which suggests that the coverage also contains contrasting aspects that are not entirely marginal.

Moreover, and quite significantly, the lexical fields of “tribalism” (8 percent) and “darkness” (6 percent)—that is, the use of words such as “tribe”, “tribalism”, “tribal”, “ethnic” or “dark”, “darkness”, “darkly”, “gloom”, “gloomily”, “bleak”—were far from being systematic features of the coverage. While the most prevalent lexical fields do paint a picture of instability and violence, references to “tribalism” or the “Dark Continent” were far from being systematic.

Homogenized?

In a debate organized by *The Guardian* to debunk the “Myths about Africa”, panelist Onyekachi Wambu opened the discussion by saying that “the biggest and most pernicious

myth about Africa is that you can talk about a continent that can contain China, the United States, most of Western Europe, India and make these kinds of generalization" (Chambers 2014). In order to assess the extent to which media coverage contributes to a view of Africa as homogenous, I used several tools.

I tracked all generic references to Africa, that is, instances where articles refer to "Africa", "African" or the "continent". This is done through the use of various nouns and adjectives that can appear negligible ("governance on the continent", "Africa's biggest oil industry", "most African countries", "the continent's most effective fighters"). One generic reference in an article does not necessarily make for a clear case of conflation. But it can act as a subtle linguistic marker that activates in the reader's mind an "Africa frame".

In order to identify more precisely whether journalistic writing contributes to a conflated view of the continent, I looked at three further linguistic strategies: active generalization, comparison and overlexicalization.

Active generalization. This is when one country is taken to evoke a larger African phenomenon, when a text relates a specific case to Africa as a whole, for instance:

Ghana, which on independence had an economy larger than South Korea or Malaysia, is in many ways the tale of modern Africa. (Financial Times, January 8, 2009, my emphasis)

Here, the reading and understanding of the story is actively framed within a broader "Africa" framework that conflates Ghana's situation with that of "modern Africa".

Comparisons. Another strategy is comparison. For instance, Philippe Bernard in *Le Monde* paints a broad-brush comparison between six different countries so as to ultimately evoke, explicitly, a generalized view of Africa:

From Liberia to Sierra Leone, war lords driven by a murderous madness and sustained by the wealth of raw materials turned children into killing machines (1989–2003). From Sudan to Angola and from Somalia to Congo, Africa was a patchwork of civil wars for the control of natural resources and power. (Le Monde, January 14, 2010, my emphasis)

There were other ways for comparisons to be used to contribute to evoke a larger African framework:

Although not a "Narco-state" like Guinea-Bissau or Conakry, Ghana is showered with money and drugs, among the political class as well. (La Croix, December 5, 2008)

Senegal is often presented as model of democracy compared to other countries on the continent. But this assessment should not blind us to the fact that several acts of violence have hindered the democratic process in the country. (La Croix, January 27, 2010)

Here the comparisons start by differentiating the situation of one country (Ghana and Senegal) to its immediate neighbors (Guinea-Bissau and Guinea Conakry) or "other countries on the continent". At first, the comparison seems to introduce a positive statement ("Unlike elsewhere ..."); however, this is instantly undermined as the articles note dysfunctional aspects ("showered with money and drugs"; "several acts of violence"). In doing so, these comparisons not only turn a similarly positive statement into a negative one, but they also implicitly but actively create a broader "African" reference framework which is simultaneously mobilized to frame these statements.

Overlexicalization. Machin and Mayr (2012, 37) define overlexicalization as the “abundance of particular words and their synonyms” that creates a form of over-persuasion. In my case, I looked at the overlexicalization of generic references to “Africa”, “African” and/or “the continent”. For instance, the previously quoted article from the *Financial Times* on Ghana contains in each of its six paragraphs at least one generic reference to Africa. This overlexicalization serves to discursively foreground the particular case of Ghana within a continental framework.

The foreign correspondents I interviewed claimed to be careful about generic references and conflation. Aislinn Laing, the *Telegraph* Southern Africa correspondent explained, “If you are writing about one particular issue that is that country’s issue, then you don’t need to broaden it to say Africa ... I think I resist any attempt to refer to Africa as a whole” (interview with the author, 2013). An East Africa correspondent recognized that “you can see generalization creeping in, but I hope not ever in my writing”.

Figure 2 shows that 73 percent of all articles made use of generic references. Because 17 countries celebrated their 50th anniversary during the year 2010, 33 percent of the stories were framed around the idea of a continental anniversary. This was notably the case in France where, for instance, the government invited armies from its former colonies to parade on the Champs-Élysées for Bastille Day. The results thus show a discrepancy between generic references to Africa (73 percent) and articles that had an initial continental framing (33 percent). This discrepancy is greater in the context of British reporting (74 percent of generic references versus 17 percent of articles with a continental framing) than in the French context (72 versus 46 percent of articles with a continental framing).

Overall, conflation was certainly part of the coverage: 47 percent of the articles contained cases of conflation through active generalization, comparisons and/or overlexicalization. While foreign correspondents claim to avoid generalization as much as possible, this finding suggests that this may occur more often than they are keen to admit.

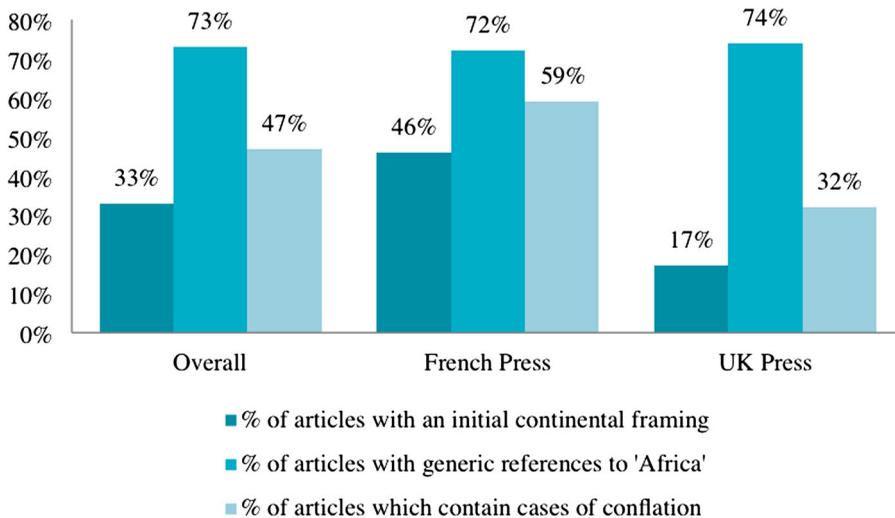


FIGURE 2
Percentage of articles containing generic references to Africa and conflation

These conclusions echo the results of an application created by Nicolas Kayser-Bril (2013). Using the APIs of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, the application measures how many articles mention “Africa” without referring to a specific country. This result is then compared to articles that refer to “Asia” without mentioning a specific country. The results demonstrate that there are many more articles referring to “Africa” in generic terms than to “Asia” with, respectively, 8601 and 2783 articles in *The Guardian* since January 1, 2012. In addition, it shows that articles mentioning Africa in generic terms are much more likely to occur than articles that mention one of the three biggest African economies, with South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria appearing in 6871, 4394, 2343 articles, respectively. Again, these results are at odds with those for Asia, where China was referred to in 15,126 articles, India in 8309 and Japan in 7913.

While my findings support the view that conflation is a significant part of journalistic writing, one observation nuances these results: 33 percent of the articles contained an initial continental framing which already constitutes a process of conflation. If we remove those 33 percent from the 47 percent of articles containing conflation, the proportion of articles focused on individual countries that contained cases of conflation is lower (around 20 percent). In that sense, conflation through generalization, comparison and/or overlexicalization was a feature observed in the coverage but it was not systematic.

Voiceless?

Sources. While the overreliance on Western sources continues to animate perceptions of Western media coverage of Africa, the extent of such bias has not really been followed up on in more recent studies. When it comes to newspaper analysis, this may have to do with the difficulty in assigning a category to an individual based on textual material only. Here I made the choice to categorize speakers according to (1) their professional occupation and (2) nationality or the national affiliation of the institution they represent, insofar as the text makes this evident. This categorization does not seek to make a statement about the individuals’ identity—something fundamentally multifarious, unstable and complex. Rather, it is interested in understanding how the media come to frame individuals as representative of certain nations and parts of the world, and especially if this is done at the expense of others.

Politicians are the most visible, with $N = 80$ and $N = 116$ in the UK and French press, respectively (Tables 1 and 2). This result aligns with the long-standing and broader tendency of news to give prominence to official voices, in particular government representatives.

When it comes to the use of Western sources (French, British, other European and US), both the French and UK press favor national sources. But, overall, do journalists significantly quote more Western sources than African ones? Figure 3 provides the aggregated numbers of Western sources (as defined above) in comparison to overall African sources. The results highlight that the media use either as much African as Western voices in the French press (48 percent for both), or more in the UK press (32 percent of Western voices as opposed to 61 percent of African voices).

On the one hand, these results seem to undermine the idea that there is a strong bias in favor of Western sources. In fact, my interviews suggest that foreign correspondents are aware of the representational issues involved in source selection and pay particular

TABLE 1

Individuals quoted in the British press

	French	British	Other European	US	African	Unable to identify	Sub-total
Politician	6	12	5	5	52	0	80
Civil society	0	0	1	0	25	0	26
NGO	1	10	1	0	4	6	22
Vox pop	0	0	0	0	20	1	21
Academic	1	5	0	0	8	1	16
Business	0	9	1	0	4	1	15
Other	0	0	2	0	8	4	14
Journalist	0	2	1	0	8	0	11
Expert	0	5	0	0	0	0	5
Sub-total	8	43	11	6	129	13	210

attention to balancing. One East Africa correspondent gave the example of the reporting of South Sudan in 2011 where

What you would see is that the voice of reasonable authority would be a white man. And then, the kind of local color would be a dude seating under a tree ... That kind of thing really worries me so I would always make sure that I always quoted a South Sudanese brain. Because, of course, it is really easy to ring WHO [World Health Organization]—they have a good press department—so that you can get the authority voice, and then do a vox pop in the street ... If you look at who gets quoted, that is part of—I don't know if it's Afro-pessimism—but of the failure of journalism to capture the complexity of such situations. (interview with the author, 2013)

On the other hand, one could make the case that a significant part of African news stories remains told through the voice of Western individuals. Future research could help to shed light on whether this ratio is still relatively high by comparing the amount of Western versus “local” sources in other contexts. Moreover, and as the previous quote highlights, it is important to ask what kinds of African voices are given space to speak in the news (Tables 1 and 2). Elite voices are given the most weight, with nearly half being

TABLE 2

Individuals quoted in the French press

	French	British	Other European	US	African	Unable to identify	Sub-total
Politician	56	0	2	2	56	0	116
Journalist	10	0	3	0	15	1	29
Academic	13	0	1	0	8	0	22
Civil society	2	0	0	0	15	1	18
Expert	12	0	0	0	1	1	14
Other	2	0	0	0	8	3	13
NGO	5	0	0	0	1	3	9
Vox pop	0	0	0	0	7	1	8
Business	3	0	0	0	0	0	3
Sub-total	103	0	6	2	111	10	232

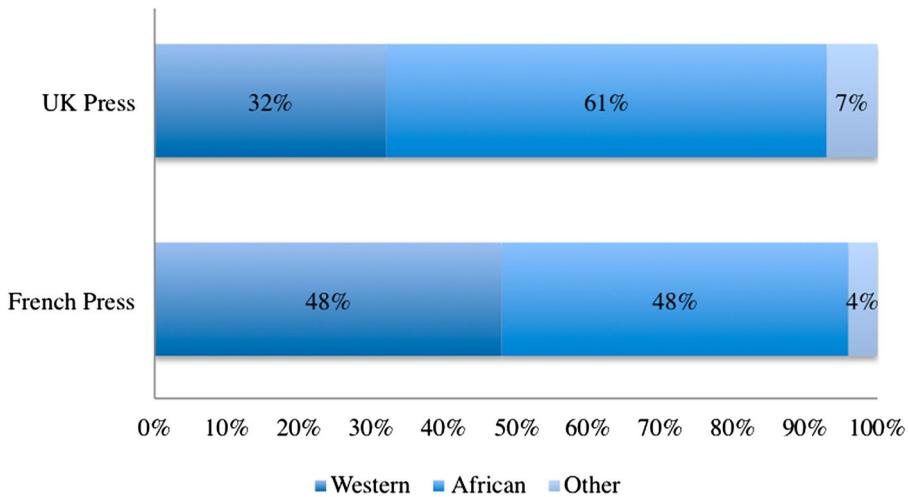


FIGURE 3
Proportion of Western versus African interviewees

politicians (45 percent); they are followed by members of the civil society (17 percent), journalists (10 percent), vox pop (9 percent) and academics (6 percent).

This salience of African politicians and government officials may be related to the fact that the analysis focuses on anniversaries. Still, it should be understood in the context of a broader framing of African leadership. While only a few articles under study focused on Zimbabwe ($N = 11$), Robert Mugabe was the second most commonly mentioned African head of state in the UK press ($N = 23$), after Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan ($N = 24$). Similarly in the French press, Laurent Gbagbo from Ivory Coast was the most commonly mentioned African head of state (in 13 articles, whereas only 6 articles were about Ivory Coast).

Reporting on the ceremony organized in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for the 50th anniversary of independence, British journalist David Smith wrote:

A total of 18 African presidents, including Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, watched a parade of 15,000 soldiers and 400 tanks and heard Congo's leader, Joseph Kabila, call for a "moral revolution". (The Guardian, July 4, 2010, my emphasis)

While it is understandable that a news article cannot list all the names of 18 heads of state, the singling-out of Mugabe is a telling example of a peculiar discursive construction of African leadership. Smith explained:

Part of the British media's obsession with Zimbabwe is the historical link. But also it has its own characteristics about this dramatic fall from grace. And Robert Mugabe has become almost this symbolic African dictator figure. He's a news celebrity so we are much more likely to write about him than Paul Biya who most people in Britain have never heard of, whereas they probably have heard of Mugabe. This again is sort of indicative of how all news, not just African, really feeds off personalities. You have to give something a human face. You have to tell the story through a person. And Mugabe is this sort of larger-than-life figure so that's often the touchdown. (interview with the author, 2013)

When presented with the example above taken from his article, he said:

I feel like I'm on trial and you are confronting me with the evidence of my past sins! [Laughing] "18 African presidents, including Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe", yes that's right. But a lot of this, one has to bear in mind, is something that's not unique to Africa but is actually representative of the way the media works worldwide. (interview with the author, 2013)

Here, the specificity of news—beyond the particular case of Africa—is pointed out to account for this linguistic choice. While this provides some answers as to *why* this occurs—a *why* located partly in the specificity of news production—this choice has a clear representational impact that links to a broader and very peculiar postcolonial narrative about "bad African governance" (Willems 2015, 305). By associating Mugabe with other African leaders, then, such instances simultaneously frame, conflate and frontload a very specific idea of African leadership as systematically and essentially dysfunctional, something made very explicit in the headline of an opinion piece published on Ghana's jubilee: "Wearing a Red Nose for Africa's Corrupt Clowns is a Bad Joke" (*The Telegraph*, March 11, 2007).

Quoting verbs. Finally, another way to understand how those voices are framed is to look at the quoting verbs. The way a speaker is introduced impacts how the readers are invited to engage with that person. These subtle linguistic choices implicitly convey judgments, connote or undermine agency, and can even make evaluation as to whether the person should be trusted or dismissed. Drawing on Caldas-Coulthard's typology (1994), as summarized by Machin and Mayr (2012), I coded the quoting verbs in seven categories:

- (1) *Neutral verbs* such as "say" that do not introduce any particular judgment or evaluation about the speaker.
- *Metapositional verbs* that convey the author's interpretation of the person quoted and which can be broken down into three types: (2) *assertive verbs* such as "explain" or "announce" where the speaker is positioned as a reliable, balanced and rational voice; (3) *directive verbs* where the speaker "orders" and which can connote authority and control; (4) *expressive verbs* such as "complains" or "claims" that frame the speaker in more emotional terms, as more defensive and possibly less in control.
- (5) *Metalinguistic verbs* characterize the language used by the person to talk such as "recount".
- (6) *Descriptive verbs* such as "laugh" which relate what is being said to the attitude of the speaker.
- (7) *Transcriptive verbs*, finally, signify that what is being said relates to things previously discussed or marks the continuation of someone's speech, for instance "add" or "go on".

Table 3 provides an overview of the quoting verbs used to introduce interviewees identified as African or Western (as defined previously). To begin with, there is a clear journalistic difference between the two countries, with an imbalance in the use of neutral verbs (46 for 303 for quoting verbs in the French press; 167 for 249 quoting verbs in the British press). In their typology of journalistic cultures, Hallin and Mancini (2004) identified France as part of a polarized pluralist model characterized by more opinion-based journalism and literary writing. British journalism, for its part, is part of an Anglo-American tradition that favors objectivity and neutrality. Thus, the imbalance in the use of neutral quoting verbs

TABLE 3

Quoting verbs used to introduce African and Western voices

	French press			UK press		
	African source	Western source	Total	African source	Western source	Total
Neutral	21	25	46	104	63	167
Assertive	34	86	120	8	24	32
Directive	9	2	11	5	1	6
Expressive	61	16	77	19	8	27
Metalinguistic	5	1	6	1	1	2
Descriptive	6	1	7	2	2	4
Transcriptive	18	18	36	5	6	11
Total	154	149	303	144	105	249

partly testifies to these historical, and ongoing (Esser and Umbricht 2014), journalistic differences.

But in both cases, the chances of an African source being quoted assertively were much lower than for a Western source (22 percent versus 58 percent in France; 5 percent versus 23 percent in the United Kingdom). Similarly, the chances of an African source to be quoted expressively were higher than for a Western source (40 percent versus 11 percent in France; 13 percent versus 7 percent in the United Kingdom). There was little use of directive verbs but, once again, the chances of African interviewees being framed in a directive way were much higher. It should be noted that expressive or directive quoting verbs do not have a single connotative value. They do not necessarily imply a value judgment as to the legitimacy of the authority or the emotions. These results should therefore be read against the specificity of this site of analysis, and in particular the fact that politicians dominated African voices. But politicians also dominated Western voices. Therefore, such consistent discrepancies—most notably, that African voices were systematically framed as less assertive—suggest a subtle bias in how journalists framed African voices in this site.

In sum, although there were as many if not more African voices as Western ones in the coverage, the coverage did not necessarily constitute a media space that empowers Africans to tell their own stories and address their own concerns, given that this space was heavily dominated by politicians which, additionally, were framed in such ways.

Conclusion

This research does not paint the picture of media coverage of Africa systematically pervaded by generalization about Africa as a country and by constant references to “tribalism” and “darkness”, or overly dominated by Western voices. Instead, it offers a more nuanced account of the discursive construction of representations of Africa in British and French print media.

Looking at lexical fields, I showed that direct references to “tribalism” and “darkness” were far from pervasive, these being found in only 8 and 6 percent of all articles, respectively. In relation to conflation, journalists routinely included references to Africa as a whole in their articles. However, I argued that one such reference did not necessarily make for a

clear case of conflation and I thus analyzed three further strategies, namely *active generalization*, *comparison* and *overlexicalization*. Overall, 47 percent of the articles contained clear cases of conflation. Accounting for an initial continental framing in 33 percent of the articles, the proportion of articles about individual countries that contained clear cases of conflation amounts to 20 percent. Thus, conflation was a feature observed in the coverage but was not systematic.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that journalists used either as many African as Western voices in the French press (48 percent for both) or more in the British press (32 percent versus 62 percent). This result suggests that, quantitatively, African voices are not as marginalized as it is often argued in the literature. However, when looking at which African voices are given the most space and how they are framed through quoting verbs, my findings highlight that (1) these were dominated by politicians who were more broadly framed in a way that undermined a sense of African agency or empowerment, and that (2) there was a subtle linguistic bias in that journalists systematically framed African voices as less assertive than Western ones. The analysis also reveals several differences between French and British press coverage. In the context of this site, French journalists appear to use fewer neutral quoting verbs and African sources than their British counterparts. There is also a greater tendency in the British press to use generic references to Africa.

These results challenge what we think we know about how Western journalists write about Africa. While they highlight some representational continuity entangled in colonial discourses, they also point to the fact that some of the dominant claims about Western coverage of Africa are not empirically supported in the case of British and French broadsheets. In particular, the idea that it contains constant references to “darkness” and “tribalism” appears to be an exaggeration.

Could it be that these results testify to improvements made by Western journalists in writing about Africa? As the criticism of Africa’s image has become more widespread—both within and beyond academia—it might be that foreign correspondents are increasingly attentive to issues of postcolonial representations. This thesis is partly supported by the findings of Vicente, Rodny-Gumede and Conrad. A survey with 124 correspondents in Africa shows that the majority are aware of the “representational deficits regarding Africa’s media image” (Vicente 2013, 24). In her interviews with 17 international journalists based in Johannesburg, Rodny-Gumede (2016, 91) found that “many of the interviewees acknowledge some of the problems with regard to foreign reporting—and the reporting of the African continent in particular”. In his auto-ethnographic investigation of the production of a story on the Dandora dumpsite in Nairobi, Conrad (2015, 275) demonstrates that “issues of framing, representation and ideology ... are being hotly contested within [foreign news production]”. For instance, the editor of a US newspaper who declined their story and images explained to them “great journalism does not have to be confined to slums, wars, and corruption. I know that in Kenya somewhere is a great story about an inventor who made a new water pump” (283). These contestations within the journalistic field echo—beyond the case of Africa—the cosmopolitan inflections observed by Cottle (2013) among British foreign correspondents around the world.

Another explanation, however, may be related to academic research in the topic itself. Scott argues that previous studies have tended to focus on a few African countries only and on a specific set of topics aimed at confirming pre-established ideas about the coverage. This study, instead, set out to investigate a topic that *a priori* falls outside easy

categorization of war and conflict and to assess the coverage of a much greater number of African countries. This way, the differential results could be related to a differential research framing. This would give credence to Scott's (2015, 4) suspicion that a key reason why the existing literature has taken-for-granted representations of Africa is an implicit confirmation bias in designing research to confirm what we think we already know. Seen in this light, then, what this study has highlighted as changes in coverage might actually not be changes, but rather aspects of the coverage that previous studies failed to capture due to this bias.

My point is not to undermine the critical ethos that postcolonial critique brought to previous research into Africa's media image. On the contrary, I would argue that such critical ethos is best served by careful empirical research that shows precisely where colonial continuities are at stake, and indeed where they might be disappearing. Otherwise, as Scott points out, there is a risk for academic scholarship on Africa's media image to become instrumental in supporting the very system of hegemonic power it seeks to challenge in the first place. Power could be *redone* precisely where it is sought to be *undone* (Ahmed 2012, 13). This article sought to challenge this co-option by offering a reflexive review of the literature and by providing an empirical analysis that, while critical, also accepted going against the grain.

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NOTE

1. I selected the newspapers to keep a balance between the two countries in terms of political and editorial orientation. In the United Kingdom, these were the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times*. In France, these were *La Croix*, *Les Échos*, *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*.

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