IS BAD NEWS FROM AFRICA
GOOD NEWS FOR WESTERN MEDIA?

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This article examines the elements that underpin the controversy over Western media's coverage of Africa, including growing perceptions by African political leaders and journalists of the increasing distortion of Africa by Western media, as well as how the conventions of news selection and reporting serve to create a particular media discourse about Africa. The author poses the questions: Why is Africa depicted in the Western media as an economic disaster, a continent of contradictions, a continent marked by political instability, poverty, diseases, as well as bizarre traditional belief systems and cultural practices? Does bad news about Africa make good news copy for Western journalists? These questions and more are explored in this article.

Keywords: Africa, Africa's image, bad news, journalists, news reporting, news media, Western media.

The images of Africa in the Western media are, by and large, images of misrepresentation (Michira, 2002).

Many Americans have images of Africa that are anachronistic, partial, and often inaccurate… The perception of Africa that most of us grew up with – unknown lands somehow exotic and divorced from the rest of the world – has unfortunately persisted in some quarters despite the last 25 years of Africa's independence and increasing presence on the world stage. It is a misconception that ignores compelling realities (Schulz, cited in Terrell, 1989, p. 132).

T̲he way Africa is reported in Western news media and the image of Africa that has emerged from the reportage of Africa have remained a touchy topic of discussion among

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African scholars and political leaders. The debate is not likely to end soon, essentially because nothing much has changed in the way the Western media reports Africa. In the 21st century, Western media's fascination for negative news about Africa has remained as intense as it was during Africa's colonial experience.

There is indeed a plethora of literature on how Western media coverage of Africa and other developing countries is distorted and framed in negative concepts (see Golan, 2008; Franks, 2005; Michira, 2002; Chaudhary, 2001a&b; Beaudoin and Thorston, 2001; Chavis, 1998; Domatob, 1994; Fair, 1993; Reeves, 1993; Anyaegbunam, 1993; Ebo, 1992; Hawk, 1992; Bosompra, 1989; Terrell, 1989; Pratt, 1980; Masmoudi, 1979). The vast literature shows that the image of Africa portrayed by Western media is riddled with misrepresentations and stereotypes. Terrell (1989, p. 132) quotes former US Secretary of State George Schulz who criticized the ignorance and misrepresentations that underpin American media's coverage of Africa. According to Schulz:

> Many Americans have images of Africa that are anachronistic, partial, and often inaccurate… The perception of Africa that most of us grew up with – unknown lands somehow exotic and divorced from the rest of the world – has unfortunately persisted in some quarters despite the last 25 years of Africa's independence and increasing presence on the world stage. It is a misconception that ignores compelling realities. (Schulz, cited Terrell, 1989, p. 132)

Nevertheless, some Western editors and journalists still dismiss complaints by African leaders about the misrepresentation and stereotyping of Africa in the media as part of a growing movement in Africa to bash Western journalistic practices. Regardless of Western editors' vision of Africa, research evidence (as illustrated in the preceding paragraphs and elsewhere in this paper) continues to show quite clearly that Western media coverage of the continent consists of a diet of negative news and stereotypes.

WHY AFRICANS SHOULD WORRY ABOUT
HOW THE CONTINENT IS REPORTED

Why should Africans bother about how Africa is depicted in Western media? This question underscores the importance of foreign news and how it is reported. It is important for Africans to be concerned about how the continent is reported because the way Africa is reported affects not only how the world understands Africa and its people but also how the world interacts with African people. Wolter (2006) argues that foreign news is important because the way it is reported affects how we perceive and react to people from different parts of the world. Wu and Hamilton (2004) concur, stating that foreign news reporters

influence the public's and the government's knowledge of foreign events. "Foreign correspondents have a dominant role in informing the public and, at times, the government about foreign events" (Wu and Hamilton, 2004, p. 519).

Apart from how we perceive people from other cultures and how we communicate and interact with them, foreign news also influences the direction of foreign policy. Amanpour (1996, web document) draws on endless media coverage of the conflict in Bosnia in the late 1990s to illustrate the power of foreign correspondents to influence foreign policy. She notes that the US government ignored the conflict in Bosnia until three-and-a-half years later when the "genocidal ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, mass murder, cities under siege, shell-fire and sniping" forced the US to take the lead to intervene in the Bosnian conflict, in concert with NATO member states.

Governments simply hated seeing the constant stream of blood from Bosnia spilling onto the front pages and TV news broadcasts, increasing the pressure on them to do something. It's a phenomenon that has become known as the CNN Factor (Amanpour, 1996, web document). Amanpour argues that the media was able to influence the foreign policy of the US government and NATO members because of a policy vacuum. According to her: '… the media's influence only really applies when there is a policy vacuum. When governments do not have a coherent policy, press reports and TV pictures rush to fill the gap' (1996).

The preceding analysis suggests that negative portrayal of Africa in the Western media has consequences not only for how Africa relates with the world but also how the world understands, perceives and engages with Africa.

AFRICA AND BAD PRESS

There are many reasons why Africa attracts negative coverage in the media. Some of them are external to Africa. Others are indeed home-grown. Perhaps the most consistent reason why bad news about Africa makes good news copy in Western newsrooms is the media's fascination for negative events. Incidentally, negativity and conflict constitute two of the dominant news values in journalism (see Conley and Lamble, 2006; Harcup and O'Neil, 2001). Conflict and negative news events serve the interests of media audiences. As Conley and Lamble (2006, p. 87) put it, "Conflict attracts reader interest and, therefore, has news value." Chaudhary (2001b, p. 242) believes that negativism is a common news value in western newsrooms.

Among Western broadcast journalists, negative or 'conflict' news is an unquestioned news value. Several communication scholars examining the news selection patterns of journalists have found evidence that journalists rate negative news as more important and

more newsworthy than positive events and that they give preferential display to negative events.

The unanswered question remains: Why do Western media present proportionately higher negative news about Africa than they do in their reporting of Western countries? Michira (2002) identifies a number of reasons, one of which is the growing commercialisation of the media in the West and the commercial media's focus on profit margins. As he explained it:

> The media select stories that can sell and omit those that cannot; then they report those selected in a way that makes them sell well. The result is the trend of crisis-driven journalism of churning out news faster, going for the quick and headline-seeking superficial coverage that seizes on the outrageous, the dramatic and the exceptional without bothering to place it in its proper context (Michira, 2002, web document).

With regard to the US media, Shoemaker *et al.* (1986) believe that deviance is a major reason for US media coverage of foreign events. But Golan (2008, p. 53) argues that 'deviance alone does not make an event newsworthy. It is possible that the visual images linked to an event may also influence its newsworthiness. Gatekeepers might select the more visually sensational footage of a train crash over visuals of hungry children in Mali.'

Africa's misrepresentation in the Western media could be attributed to journalists' inability to understand and communicate the most basic facts about Africa: that is, Africa is a vast and complex continent of no fewer than 53 independent countries made up of more than 700 million people who speak over 1500 languages. Culturally, politically and economically, African countries differ in various ways. Unfortunately, these differences are not reflected in Western media's reportage of Africa. It is lousy journalism combined with lack of editorial supervision that endorses a news report in which Africa is depicted as one country rather than a continent of many independent countries.

One of the problems with Western media's reportage of Africa is that some of the reports about Africa lack contextual information. Hawk (1992, p. 4) identifies some of the factors that highlight lack of context in stories about Africa: 'Media presentation of needed contextual information about Africa is limited by commercial and financial considerations of editors, the personal opinions of editors and correspondents, and press restrictions of host governments.' Writing in Nigeria's *Punch* newspaper, Ishiekwene (2008, web document) insists that lack of context in Western media coverage of Africa also exposes the contradictions in Western-style journalism:

> [W]hen people have complained about how Africa is reported, it is the context question
> that is at the heart of the debate. Context that does not deny that corruption is endemic
and must be confronted head on, but one that also recognises that in some of the worst corruption cases in Africa, big foreign firms such as Halliburton or Siemens have been implicated as well.

Context that recognises that one-pill-cures-all prescriptions from international financial institutions, especially the IMF, have sometimes worsened some of the basket cases. Context that recognises that Africa is a continent that is as diverse and complex as it has a lot in common. Context that recognises that Nicolas Sarkozy's peccadilloes, for example, cannot be anymore a representation of the political ethos of the European political elite than Robert Mugabe can be said to represent the values of all politicians in Africa.

One consequence of this style of reporting is that, over a number of years, the mental and psychological image of Africa presented by Western media to Western media audiences is that Africa is a failed continent ravaged by political instability, economic backwardness, extraordinary famine and drought, poverty, diseases and culturally primitive ways of doing things. For instance, in reporting conflicts in Africa, the contextual background such as the underlying causes of the crises, including how the West contributed to the underdevelopment of Africa, are conspicuously absent from Western media reports about Africa. It is perhaps this missing element in Western reporting that prompted Nyarota (2004, p. 35), seasoned former editor of *The Daily News* of Zimbabwe, to argue that Western news organisations that assign reporters to cover events in Africa deprive 'African journalists the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the coverage of countries they understand better than the average Western journalist'. This argument assumes that African journalists would do a better job of reporting Africa than Western journalists on the basis that African journalists have the background knowledge of the continent and perhaps better understanding of the sociopolitical and economic contexts that inform African events.

In an argument that resonates the notion of 'parachute journalism', Nyarota (2004, p. 35) states: 'When Western correspondents fly in to cover an event at short notice, they can gain only a superficial understanding of the crisis and, also, they might have limited or no access to the most knowledgeable and relevant sources. And in places where dictators are in power, the locals can be suspicious of Western journalists, while government officials are fearful of association with them'. Although parachute journalism has come under fire from a number of journalists and journalism academics, Erickson and Hamilton (2007, pp. 141-144) argue that parachute journalism is not necessarily a bad thing because it is used to: complement foreign coverage, not to cut down on it; add more expertise to the pool of foreign correspondents maintained by news organisations (e.g. US news media that sent religion experts to Rome to cover the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II); and to provide an opportunity to retain former foreign correspondents who might be intent on joining other news organisations that could post them overseas again; etc.

While Nyarota makes a valid point about Western correspondents' lack of background knowledge of Africa and lack of access to reliable sources, it is important to note that the same fear and suspicion that government officials have of Western reporters is also extended to African journalists.

Nyarota points out another drawback of Western correspondents' reporting of Africa, that is, their inclination to rely on foreign diplomats, staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies in Africa as authoritative sources of African news. This raises the question of bias in news sources used by Western correspondents in Africa. The weaknesses inherent in Western-style reporting of Africa should not imply that, in covering the continent, African journalists present flawless reports. It is important to mention that the involvement of local reporters in the coverage of Africa can often be problematic, especially in societies riven by inter-ethnic politics where journalists fail to resist the temptation to reflect ethnic bias in their news reports. As an endorsement of this point, Nyarota cites as an example the unprofessional conduct and biased reportorial style of Rwandan journalists during the 1994 ethnic conflict in the country. According to him, the jailing of three Rwandan journalists on war crimes' charges illustrates vividly the extent to which the media can go to perpetrate ethnic hatred. Indeed, the Rwandan example shows that the media can serve as an instrument for dissemination of falsehood and the promotion of inter-ethnic violence. Similar partisan coverage has been identified in the different ways that Arab and American journalists represent the war in Iraq.

Worried by growing misrepresentations of Africa by Western news media, Nyarota (2004, p. 35) asked: 'Could African journalists not make a greater contribution towards the coverage of their own continent in the Western media?' The notion that the problems of Western-style reporting of Africa could be overcome by Western media hiring local Africans to serve as regional correspondents for Western news organizations is also problematic. For example, the use of local journalists by Western media organizations does not preclude the Western media from insisting that local correspondents should adopt Western angles and perspectives in covering foreign events. It is the Western media that dictates the kind of news stories that their foreign correspondents should report, including the angles to be adopted in reporting those stories. In essence, Western media can hire African reporters to cover events in Africa but the news reports can still be Western in orientation, tone, language and angle of coverage. That is, the message can remain the same even if the messenger has changed.

Further evidence of Western media's misrepresentation and stereotyping of Africa has been reported by Beaudoin and Thorston (2001). In their analysis of foreign news published in the home edition of the *Los Angeles Times* between August 1997 and July 1998, they found that Western Europe and Canada were portrayed as beautiful while Africa was presented as a continent dogged by power issues (and not engaged in peace). The authors concluded that 'depicting Africa in terms of only power (and not peace) may fail to characterize the nations' vast complexity of languages and cultures and its sense of harmonious gradualism' (Beaudoin and Thorston, 2001, p. 501). Similarly, a study of US television network coverage of Africa between 2002 and 2004 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' (Golan, 2008, p. 53). Additionally, research

by Larson (1979) showed that developing countries were poorly reported on US network television channels and that the stories tended to be crisis-driven. Pratt (1980, p. 39) studied the reportage and image of Africa in six US news and opinion magazines and found 'a preponderance of conflict-type and opinion issues'. He also found that 'Africa is not simply portrayed as politically gullible, naïve, and immature, but also as a continent whose course of action is precariously dependent on the Big Powers. As a conflict-ridden continent, it provides a good chessboard for flexing diplomatic muscle by the world's superpowers, …' (Pratt, 1980, p. 42).

One way to improve media coverage of Africa is for African news media to take up the challenge of reporting the continent. To do so, it will be enormously important for African news media to maintain their own staff of foreign correspondents. This implies that African correspondents and reporters can report and interpret the world for Africans. Africans don't necessarily want news of Africa and the world reported through American eyes or through British eyes or through Asian eyes or through Latin American eyes. Essentially, Africans need African journalists, African foreign correspondents to interpret the world for Africans. When Western news media and their foreign correspondents appropriate the coverage of Africa, the image of Africa depicted in Western media reports is often less than respectable. The consequence has been that Africa's image is presented in a disagreeable manner. This is the reason why Nyarota (2004) argued that African reporters and correspondents would do a better job of covering the continent than Western correspondents are currently doing. But Nyarota's call was mainly in the context of Western media hiring African reporters to cover African events. The challenge is for African media organizations to access the resources that would enable them to engage in comprehensive and well informed coverage of Africa. This should include hiring African reporters who will report Africa and also serve as the main sources of Western news reports about Africa.

NEWS SELECTION, REPORTING AND PRODUCTION CONVENTIONS

The question has often been asked: Does negative news about Africa make good news copy in Western newsrooms? This question has received considerable attention in the literature on foreign news reporting. There are professional and non-professional reasons why Western media report Africa the way they do. There are also other reasons that shape the way Africa is framed in Western media reports. Some scholars see in Western reporting genre a conspiracy by the media to denigrate and devalue Africa. Fair (1993), for example, argues that 'good news' about Africa does not fit Western media's conceptions about Africa. She contends that, 'for African countries to be part of "all the news that's fit to print", as the slogan of *The New York Times* reads, it seems that news stories must include three elements: events, crisis, and conflict' (Fair, 1993, p. 7).

As the media constitutes the chief source of information on Africa for much of the world, the danger is that media reports about Africa, distorted and inaccurate as they might be, could form the basis of the knowledge that Western media audiences have about Africa and its people. Using the United States as an example, Hawk (1992, p. 3) emphasizes the power of the Western media to influence the American audience. 'Americans' knowledge of Africa is formed from many sources: school textbooks, the news media, church missionaries, and the entertainment industry. Among these sources, the media hold special importance, for it is to the media that individuals look to be informed... The media give meaning to current events and identify for the reader those events that are important.' This point resonates the agenda-setting role of the media.

The principles of news reporting operates at various levels, including how news events are selected and framed, the language in which the news is framed and the meanings attached to the events. For example, in reporting news, editors make judgments about which events to select and which events to ignore. Selection is a very important process of editorial judgment because newspapers are limited by space and there is no way a newspaper can accommodate all the news that it receives every day. Similarly, radio and television are limited by time. Radio and television organizations are guided by program schedules which specify what news items should be broadcast at a specific time and for how long. There are exceptions in which program schedules are not followed but, in most cases, they serve as a guide for each day's activities. In this context, news selection and production processes highlight the power of editors and other gatekeepers in the news production chain.

As mentioned earlier, journalistic news values such as conflict and negativity influence news making decisions. The standard news values cited in many journalism texts include conflict, impact, proximity, prominence, timeliness, currency, human interest and unusualness (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Conley and Lamble, 2006). By constant reference to news values as factors that determine foreign and local news selection, editors and journalists make judgments about what is likely to be of interest to their audiences. These judgments may be based more on anecdotal evidence than on scientifically verifiable fact. However, whether news values are applied in an unbiased manner or whether journalists' personal biases, attitudes and expectations influence their news judgments depends on individual journalists, their commitment to their professional and ethical values and the policy of their news organizations. It is in the process of selecting certain events and rejecting others, and in the process of explaining the selected events that journalists define social reality and also shape the way the public perceives that 'reality'. As Fair (1993, p. 13) pointed out, 'By choosing certain events, emphasizing certain "facts", and giving stories a certain tone, the news media structure and define reality'. In the case of Africa, the 'reality' that is presented by the Western media about the people and the continent is often far from real. For example, Hess (1996, p. 74) has suggested that news editors almost always adopt

a 'one-size-fits-all' definition of foreign news: news (was) a cyclone, a fire, an election, someone shooting someone else.

Fair (1993, p. 11) also perceives news stories as ideological texts positioned to serve as reflections of social reality conceived by the West. In doing so, the specificity of African experiences and actions is lost, and news of Africa essentialized and reduced to generalities. When the news media report on violence occurring among blacks in Africa it may be labeled 'black-on-black' or 'tribal'. That violence among whites is not labeled 'white-on-white' or 'tribal' (if it is labeled at all, violence among white 'tribes' is called 'ethnic' or 'nationalist') points to the powerful process of naming and un-naming. What is attributed to black Africans – and for that matter to all peoples of African descent – is named in ways shaped by trans-cultural and essentialized racial characteristics defined by dominant white European and American cultures.

In a related sense, Chavis (1998) demonstrates not only the power that journalists wield in reporting about different people and their cultures but he also illustrates how easy it is for Western journalists to demonise Africa and Africans:

> With the stroke of a journalist's pen, the African, her continent, and her descendants are pejoratively reduced to nothing: a bastion of disease, savagery, animism, pestilence, war, famine, despotism, primitivism, poverty, and ubiquitous images of children, flies in their food and faces, their stomachs distended. These 'universal' but powerfully subliminal message units, beamed at global television audiences, connote something not good, perennially problematic unworthiness, deplorability, black, foreboding, loathing, sub humanity, etc. On the other hand, little is said about Africa's strategic importance to so called industrialized nations; her indispensability and relevance to world development, global technology, and the wealth of nations, derived from involuntary African largesse, are not acclaimed in the media (Chavis, 1998, web document).

One of the criticisms leveled against Western reporting of Africa is that, while negative news events abound in Africa, there are also positive news worthy of media coverage which are in general overlooked. Keane (2004) argues that Africans are beginning to hold their governments to account and this should be regarded as positive development in the continent. Using Kenya as an example, he states that corruption is being exposed and government officials are being dragged before the judicial commission of inquiry. Sadly, none of these positive developments is given attention in Western television news. Bleasdale (2004, p. 14) insists that journalists covering Africa have a responsibility to report good news and bad news. To dwell on bad news, the conflicts, the catastrophes and disasters that befall Africa and disregard the good news is unprofessional journalism practice. This skewed pattern of reporting also plays into the hands of those who accuse Western correspondents of bias in reporting Africa. However, Bleasdale (2004, p. 15) sees some positive results from media reporting of bad news about Africa:

Steady and strong attention by journalists can foment change. Faulty leadership can be exposed. Suffering and injustices can be reported. And when they are, slowly change can come at a political level. But if the circumstances are hidden, the voices of those who are suffering are silenced, and explanations about the crisis aren't provided to the rest of the world, then how can anyone be persuaded to act?

Why do Western correspondents often ignore positive news about Africa? For an insight, we must revisit the all-powerful news values, those elements which editors and journalists use as justification for covering or ignoring certain events. As noted in various parts of this paper, among professional news values used by journalists to assess the newsworthiness of events, conflict and negativity stand out. In fact, Galtung and Ruge (1970) proposed that the more negative an event is in terms of consequences, the more likely it is that the event would make the news. As Keane (2004, p. 10) acknowledged, 'We thrive on drama, and this habit of ours isn't going to change overnight.'

Should journalists – Western and African – continuously report on disasters that plague the African continent? This is a question that many journalists have grappled with for decades. While many journalists agree that news events in Africa or elsewhere should be reported in full, others worry about the impact of excessive focus on negative events in Africa. For example, Keane (2004, p. 9) states: 'What profoundly concerns me is the real damage to Africans' sense of themselves and of their nations' potential in the midst of journalists' relentless focus on their misery… from Congo in the early 1960s through Biafra, Ethiopia and into Sudan today… little has changed in our reporting of Africa's stories.' In a somewhat open admission of the flaws that undermine Western reporting of Africa, Keane (2004, p. 9) notes that 'Since the end of colonialism, Western correspondents have stood in front of emaciated Africans or piles of African bodies and used the language of the Old Testament to mediate the horrors to their audiences. That practice began four decades ago, and the template hasn't changed all that much.'

DOES RACE MATTER IN REPORTING AFRICA?

In her analysis of how race shapes the construction of Africa's media image in the Western press, Fair (1993, p. 8) raises an important question: 'Why are the countries of Africa and African people so under-reported or covered within such narrow framework?' Arguing that the coverage a country receives in the US media is directly proportional to the extent of that country's ties with the US (e.g. economic, social and cultural, geographic, and political proximity), Fair (1993, p. 8) states that: 'Because Africa, rightly or wrongly, is perceived by journalists and editors as not newsworthy when compared to other countries or regions where US geopolitical interests are seen as stronger and because these same

journalists perceive a lack of interest in Africa by the US public, reporting news from African countries is not a "good buy".'

To understand how Africa is framed in the Western media, it is important to examine also the image of Africa that exists in the 'Western mind'. It is this image that sustains Western discourses about Africa. Fair (1993, p. 10) puts it eloquently thus:' "Africa" in the Western mind cannot endure outside Western discourses…, for it is within these discourses that the West confirms the "Otherness" of Africa it has created. Africa's media image as it exists in the American press has been formed, informed, and re-formed within these Western discourses in which the meaning of "Africa" is made. Within news stories occurs a reproduction of hierarchy and domination reworked and updated.'

Fair (1993, pp. 9-10) further explains that 'The values and routines that go into producing news stories represent cultural conventions, rules, and codes that serve to construct boundaries of meaning. Within the news text, the journalist, as storyteller, relies upon ideas and images drawn from dominant interest, thought, and meaning but evoked as "fact". In the coverage of African countries and peoples, one "fact" that explains much of African events is rooted in notions such as "blackness", "primitiveness", and "savagery" '. As she argued, 'In the process of making "black" different, the representation of black Africa and the historical and cultural experiences of black Africans have been objectified through systems of classifying continents, countries, and peoples' (Fair, 1993, p. 11).

CLASH OF CULTURES

The image of Africa depicted in Western media has been traced to Africa's colonial history and its relationship with the West, in particular relationships developed with Europe over years and centuries of colonial rule. Appropriately therefore, we must revisit history in order to understand the roots of Afro-pessimism, the subtle subjugation of African cultures and values by West European values and practices. The historical relationship between African people and European colonisers was the subject of a powerful editorial in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. In the editorial, Anyaegbunam (1993) traces the origins of the ideological struggle between Africa and European colonisers, including attempts by the West to impose its values on Africa. As Anyaegbunam (1993, p. v) explained, 'both physical and intellectual confrontation between Africa and the West have been common occurrences since the mid-17th century when Europe began to colonize, re-invent and re-name Africa' in an attempt to reshape Africa to fit European ideological agenda and the African image the colonisers wanted. Anyaegbunam (1993, pp. v-vi) notes that, while the struggle for political independence might have subsided in Africa,

struggles against a certain type of domination still continues on the continent. This time, however, the fight is not for physical but intellectual liberation: namely the decolonization of the African mind… the colonization of the African mind was more subtle… Western colonizers won this battle without a shot being fired. To achieve this feat, they caused to be reified a set of views and values that placed everything African and black as the antithesis of everything Western and white; a dichotomy in which according to Mudimbe (1988: 16), darkness, evil and ugliness (black) was contrasted with light, good and beauty (white). With this mindset, Western missionaries and educators went to Africa with the goal of supplanting local cultural originality and creating in the African soul an inferiority complex…

Sardar et al. (1993) explore this 'master-servant' theme in their book – *Barbaric Others: A manifesto on Western racism*. In the book, they examine the codes and policies used by the West to justify colonialism, including reasons why colonised people often found it difficult to break off from centuries of European domination. Even after the colonial masters had left, many developing nations found regrettably that they were still mired in many problems, some of them caused by internal factors, others still a legacy of years of colonial rule. Sardar et al. explore these issues in their book, including various perspectives on how the West colonised Africa, Latin America and certain Asian nations.

On her part, Fair (1993, p.10) provides a disarming account of the historical process that led to the stereotyping of Africa and African people.

The hundreds of years of Africa's unequal engagement with the West through the slave trade, colonial and post-colonial relations has produced a system of classification of people and societies, which has left Africa marginalized… It is within this location of Africa on the margins, where Africa occupies a space between so-called tradition/underdevelopment and modernity/development, that the weight of historically bound relations of domination manifests itself. This manifestation takes place in the images and representations of Africa and Africans produced by and for white Europeans and Americans. These images and representations, drawn from a range of sources such as religious tales, storytelling, popular ideas, and scientific thought…, are tropes for relations between the West and Africa, naturalized and objectified for ready consumption.

Four years earlier, Terrell (1989) had examined a similar theme - the notion of 'civilised' European explorers and colonisers and their experiences with the 'primitive' Africans. He highlighted poignantly the tradition of unequal relationships between colonised people in Africa and the colonizers.

The tradition was carefully designed to maintain whites – regardless of nationality – in upper caste positions. Indigenous Africans and other non-whites were relegated to the lowest castes… All aspects of life in the Colonial societies, including churches, schools,

residential neighborhoods, financial associations and political organizations were carefully monitored to ensure white dominance and black subservience. In addition, whites used their courts and laws to maintain their privileged position. Newspapers and other organs of the Western press were integral to white domination (Terrell, 1989, pp. 136-137).

OBSTACLES TO COVERAGE OF AFRICA

It has been suggested (Fair, 1993) that Africa is full of hazards that undermine the efforts of Western journalists to cover the continent fairly. These hazards include 'sources reluctant to speak for their own safety, difficult travel conditions, censorship, inadequate communication facilities that make transmitting stories at times nearly impossible' (Fair, 1993, p. 7). Apart from these problems, Beaubien (2004, p. 10) has also listed other factors that undermine the coverage of Africa. While official corruption stands as a major problem, other obstacles include crumbling infrastructure, unstable electricity supply, internal rebellion, high prices of goods and services, and the dangers associated with air travel in Africa. While these problems should be acknowledged, it is curious that Beaubien did not explain how they differ from difficulties encountered by reporters who cover other continents such as South America and Asia.

Reporting Africa has never been an easy task for local and foreign correspondents. There are documented cases of official harassment and intimidation of journalists in some African countries such as Zimbabwe, Uganda, Sudan, Rwanda, Malawi, Swaziland, Namibia and Nigeria (especially during the military era). See, for example, Kanuma (2004, pp. 37-39) and Chipare (2004, pp. 39-41). In Africa, abuse of human rights and press freedom is common. As Kanuma (2004, p. 38) notes:

> Most of the continent's regimes are highly undemocratic; a good number of them are led by people who shot their way to power after ruinous rebel wars. Others 'inherited' power and occasionally a leader might legitimately win an election. What almost all of these leaders have in common is that, once they are in power they entrench themselves at the expense of everything else. They rig elections, and they divert the constitution or rewrite it to contain provisions for a lifetime presidency. They deal with political opponents or dissidents by locking them up indefinitely in degrading conditions. They also legislate draconian press laws to muzzle the inquisitive, critical elements of the press.

If Western correspondents are looking for evidence of negative events in Africa to justify their portrayal of the continent, the evidence is all laid out in various parts of Africa. Africa has contributed to its own downfall and especially the image the West holds about the continent. Perhaps it is fair to say that Africa's greatest enemies are embedded within the

continental ridge. These include the extra-judicial killings in various parts of Africa, the endless conflicts and wars that ravage various parts of Africa, including the endless conflict in Darfur, Sudan — to name just one intransigent case. Also to be highlighted are the 2008 xenophobic attacks against foreigners in South Africa and the ongoing Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria. There are more. These conflicts create the impression – rightly or wrongly – that Africa is a continent of political instability.

CONCLUSIONS

Against the background of political tensions and endless conflicts in Africa, including the unequal relationships between European colonisers and African people, as well as the difficulties that Africa confronts as it struggles to free itself from mental, psychological and intellectual inequality with the West, it is not surprising that reports about Africa, cultivated during colonial times and sustained in modern times, have formed the basis for the way Africa is framed in media reports in the 21st century. The absence of deeper knowledge and understanding of Africa's history, including lack of appreciation of the diversity of African cultures and traditions have contributed to Western journalists' distorted images of Africa. An understanding of Western media's misrepresentations of Africa and the negative portrayal of the continent requires a good grasp of African history. This historical context is crucial because of the impact of colonialism on Africa. Overcoming the existing inaccuracies in Western media portrayal of Africa will involve untying the historical and economic knots that have cast Africa as the weakest link in the relationship of unequal partners. It will also require political, social, economic and cultural transformations within Africa.

To change the way Africa is represented by Western media, Michira recommends greater efforts by governments and the private sector to break the monopoly that Western media conglomerates enjoy through ownership, production and distribution of media products. It is a valid point but it fails to identify how the goals could be achieved. The call on African governments to establish alternative media to report accurately on African news events is not new. Following the recommendations made by the MacBride Commission (1980) during the debate over a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) at UNESCO in the mid 1970s and up to the early 1980s, several developing countries and regional organisations enthusiastically set up their own news agencies in order to disseminate more news about their countries and region. The objective was not only to increase the quantity of news about developing countries but also to pay more attention to positive news (often referred to as 'development news'). In the age of the Internet, it is important to investigate how technological changes have impacted the image of Africa in the

Western media. In essence, has Africa's image in Western media improved or deteriorated? Have new technologies resulted in greater quantity and diversity of news about Africa? To what extent are African media organizations able to source their own news without relying on the multinational Western news agencies?

The most pragmatic way for Africa to project its image to the rest of the world was laid out by Hachten (2004, p.87):

> If Africa is to develop economically and politically in the coming years, Western news media must do a better job of reporting events there. But even more important, African nations must acquire free and independent news media of their own – news systems that utilize the new information technologies – communication satellites, global television, high-speed computer exchanges – that most of the world now uses.

In the age of new technologies, African countries must not only adopt the new technologies to facilitate improvements in the socioeconomic conditions of their people, they must also promote free and independent journalism, something that is currently lacking in many African countries.

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