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Definition and scope of Afro-pessimism: Mapping the concept and its usefulness for analysing news media coverage of Africa.

by Toussaint Nothias

Many observers of African affairs, or academics with a focus on Africa, will have heard of the idea of Afro-pessimism. Broadly, it refers to a sense of pessimism about the continent's ability to overcome pressing challenges related to poverty, health, development or governance. This concept will often be summoned in the discussions around Africa's image in Western media, to attack coverage seemingly reductive, negative and grounded in colonial tropes of the continent (e.g. De Klerk and Leridon 2010). As Scott (2012) argues, however, this narrative against Afro-pessimism usually takes for granted the media coverage, without strong empirical evidence. More importantly, I would argue, there is a lack of clarity about what we mean by Afro-pessimism in the first place. For instance, does the simple fact of reporting a civil war or an undemocratic election in an African country necessarily amount to Afro-pessimism? This paper draws on the literature on Afro-pessimism in an attempt to identify what makes the specificity of this discourse, particularly in relation to news media. It highlights five analytical components to this discourse: essentialisation, racialisation, selectivity, ethnocentric ranking and prediction. Subsequently, I discuss the awareness - on the side of journalists - of the problems of Western media representation of Africa, as well as the limit of such reflexivity. Eventually, I question 'newer' discourses about Africa in news media, and the extent to which these narratives are constructed through a framework radically different from Afro-pessimism. The paper concludes by advocating for a clearer use of the term in order to guide further empirical research.

There is a growing body of literature on Afro-pessimism which remains largely disjointed (Hawk 1992, Ahluwalia 2000, Momoh 2003, Hunter-Gault 2006, De B'Beri and Louw 2011, Schorr 2011). Quite importantly, there does not seem to be a clear and set definition of the phenomenon. As Louw and De B'beri (2011) suggest, the difficulty of reaching a definition arises from the various perspectives that exist on the topic. Yet, when it comes to Afro-pessimism in relation to media coverage, there is a shared sense across the literature of what it refers to, although it has not yet led to an authoritative definition of the phenomenon. Drawing on this literature, and for analytical purposes, I have identified five key aspects explored in more details below.

For Alhuwalia, Afro-pessimism has a "tendency to homogenize the 'African tragedy', concluding that Africa has neither the political will nor the capacity to deal with its problems" (2000: 30). This reveals a feature usually associated with Afro-pessimism; i.e. the idea that it is a discourse about Africa as a whole. As

such, it necessarily implies a generalisation about the continent, which, more often than not, contributes in erasing the diversity of its 54 countries. However, that Afro-pessimism is a discourse about the continent as a whole does not mean that it cannot emerge in the coverage of a specific African country. A compelling example of how this happens can be seen in the international media coverage leading to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Following a terrorist attack on the Togo team in Angola in January 2010, by a separatist group of the Cabinda exclave, international media turned to South Africa with worries that it possibly signified violence to come during the tournament. Interviewed by journalists, Chief World Cup organiser Danny Jordaan responded: "If there is war in Kosovo and a World Cup in Germany, no one asks if the World Cup can go on in Germany. Everyone understands the war in Kosovo is a war in Kosovo" (Myers and Smith 2010). For Gumede (2010), this coverage revealed that "western media too often see the whole continent of Africa as one country rife with corruption, 'tribal' conflicts, natural and humanitarian disaster". This example – in which a local event is related to Africa as a whole - highlights one of the core processes of Afro-pessimism i.e. the essentialisation of the continent. With this generalised view of the continent, then comes the risk that journalists lack accuracy and context in order to report African news. Chari (2010) found such instances in the coverage of the 1994 Rwandese genocide in *The New York Times*. The role of the French government in supporting the regime of Juvenal Habyarimana was downplayed and the focus, instead, was put on the 'tribal' and 'instantaneous' dimension of the conflict, without acknowledging that the genocide was planned and long in the making.

But 'African' as it is used in Western media, it has been argued, does not really refer to people living on the continent as a geographical entity (Hawk 1992: 7). Instead, it signifies people who are black and live in Africa (ibid., Mudimbe 1988, Bassil 2011). Such a division of the continent along the skin-colours of its inhabitants is most visible in the light of the recent uprisings in Tunisia or Libya. They might take place on the African continent, yet the media refer to them as the Arab Spring (despite Libya, in particular, being historically at the forefront of the African Union). For Hawk therefore (1992: 7), African as used in western media is a colonial label that encompasses the racial category of 'blackness' which has led some to talk of Afro-pessimism as a "racialized phenomenon" (Evans 2011: 399).

Because Afro-pessimism *essentialises* and *racialises* the continent, it is therefore highly selective. This relates to the broader issue of the selection process inherent to news production - the focus for media scholars interested in news values and gatekeeping. When it comes to the selectivity of the coverage of Africa, there are two key aspects. The first is quantitative. A 1995 study mapped the flow of international news, looking at two weeks of international coverage in

newspapers throughout 44 countries (Wu 2004). Based on statistics of the research, I counted 722 African news stories, which amount to 1.67 per cent of the total of international coverage, a number in sharp contrast with the fact that the African continent is home to nearly 15% of the world population. The scarcity of the coverage has been informed elsewhere and many times (Sreberny-Mohamadi Nodredenstren et al 1985, Golan 2008). A more recent study on the geography of international news in 17 countries seems to confirm this trend, with countries in sub-Saharan Africa nearly absent unless a "crisis attracts attention" (Wilke, Heimprechet et al. 2012: 307). This finding is consistent with much research suggesting that news media are generally ethnocentric and favour geographical proximity, and also reveals the hegemonic organisation of international news into centre and peripheries, where countries which concentrate the means of production dominate the news coverage and the stories about disadvantaged regions are absent unless they become "hot-spots" (Van Ginneken 2005: 143).

But in fact, and this is the second point relating to the selection of African news, the few stories that attract media attention are selected in a specific way. In particular, the coverage focuses almost exclusively on 'negative' stories. Schraeder and Endless (1998), for instance, looked at *The New York Times* portrayal of Africa between 1955 and 1995 and found that "73% of all articles provided negative images of African politics and society" (32). While in 1955 they found that images were mainly "negative" at 67 %, this trend reached 92% in 1985 and 85% in 1995. A similar study by the TransAfrica forum (2000) looked at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* coverage of Africa between March and mid-August 2000 and found that out of 89 stories 84% were 'negative'. They concluded that "judging from the disproportionate reporting of 'negative' news over 'positive' news, there is an imbalance in the reporting of news from the African continent" (2000:4). Research on news values suggests that the selection of 'negative' stories is a regular feature of Western news media (Galtung and Ruge 1965, Harcup and O'Neil 2001). In the case of Africa, however, "some overselection of negative news from Africa does seem to occur" (Zein and Cooper 1992: 137). This idea of a selective coverage – scarce and focusing on 'negative' events – constitutes a core claim of much research on Africa's media image and heavily contributes to the discussion on Afro-pessimism (Ojo 2002, Schorr 2011).

However, there are limits to analysing Africa's coverage solely on the basis of negativity – a criteria after all quite subjective. More importantly, it risks missing an important aspect of the coverage of Africa – including the language, image and rhetoric used by news media. This relates to the fourth component of Afro-pessimism, the idea that it constitutes an ethnocentric framework through which the continent's progress is assessed. Garret and Schmidtt conceptualise

Afro-pessimism in a broader context of neo-liberal politics and a narrative of progress heavily produced by the "literature and rhetoric of development" (2011: 425). This idea of progress is extensively shaped along ideas of neo-liberalisation, free trade, structural adjustment or what is sometimes referred to as the Washington consensus (2011: 429). In this global narrative, the African continent seems unable to put itself on the track of progress and to live up to its postcolonial expectations (2011:425, Louw and B'Beri 2011: 339). This echoes the 19th century racist theories of civilisations and history of Hegel and Renan for instance, as well as their contemporary reactualisation in the work of Huntington (1997) or in Fukuyama's argument (1992) that Western liberal democracies constitute the final stage in the narrative of progress. Put into this broader framework, Afro-pessimism appears as deriving from a discourse of measurement standard, which assesses the failures of the continent against standards established by the West, thus ultimately implying the existence of a cultural and essential 'African' problem. Afro-pessimism has therefore been referred to as a postcolonial phenomenon that attests of the ongoing impact of colonialism on contemporary discourses (Schmidt and Garrett 201: 423-425). This idea of assessing the progress of the African continent against standards set by the West is perfectly captured in the 2000 cover by *The Economist* "The hopeless continent" which portrays Africa filled with a picture of a black man carrying a shoulder-fired missile gun.

This cover by *The Economist* in fact also reveals the 5th and last component of Afro-pessimism; i.e. the idea of a prediction. It is what 'pessimism' stands for in Afro-pessimism. As Evans highlights in her study of South African Afro-pessimism online:

> Online expatriate responses to events in South Africa perpetuate its [afropessimist] thinking to varying degrees, with openly racist declarations and fantasies of recolonisation sitting at the extreme of the continuum, and predictions about the country's decline and apologetic speculations about the benefits of apartheid situated further along the scale (2011: 400).

From the belief in recolonisation to feelings of bitterness and renunciation, her research suggests that a key component of Afro-pessimism is indeed the idea of actively predicting a dark future for the continent – a view which echoes once again colonial narratives about Africa as the Dark Continent (Mudimbe 1988, Bassil 2011). With this prediction component, Afro-pessimism works not only upstream by reproducing colonial thinking but also downstream by predicting the future of the continent.

In fact, that such a strong and active pessimism is indeed part of Western media discourse remains to be investigated, in particular through a careful and qualitative analysis of news content. It is, however, important to stress that it

does not necessarily constitute an entirely 'abnormal' or marginal phenomenon. Stephen Smith, recognised journalist for *RFI, Reuters, Le Monde* and *Liberation* and visiting professor of African studies in the School of Public Policy at Duke University, won recognition for his book *Negrologies. Pourquoi l'Afrique Meurt* (2004). In the introduction, he writes "The African continent, this borderless "Ubuland", the land of massacres and famines where all hope dies. *Why is Africa dying?* Mostly, because it commits suicide. It is as if a group of people on a *pirogue*[1] were taken into the violent seas of globalisation and, instead of working together to reach the land, kept on making holes in their puny boat" (2004: 13). One could argue that his analogy of the pirogue shows the extent to which Smith is ingrained in an exotic view of the continent. One could also wonder why this book was directly translated in Afrikaans while no English version can be found, even though Smith is American. Even more compelling is the energy he devotes to demonstrate that Africa is in a state of decay, that it is going to get worse and that the real problem of Africa is essentially Africans themselves. That such a book won recognition with a prestigious prize from France Television, the French public national broadcaster, is assuredly a cause for worry, and calls for further and thorough empirical investigation into the actual state of Afro-pessimism in international media.

Still, Western media generally come under intense criticism for their reporting of Africa - from academic, development workers but also politicians on the African continent. The backlash that followed the success of the *Kony2012* video demonstrated the level of scrutiny that accompanies Western media representations of Africa. But included in this backlash were also the voice of many Western journalists who complained about the lack of accuracy and context provided in the video, as well as it colonial undertones (Wilkerson 2012). In fact, it is likely that Western journalists, perhaps more than anyone else, are aware of the difficulty of covering the African continent. Robert Guest, former Africa editor of *The Economist*, reveals the awful 'stigma' he suffers from being a journalist in Africa: "When on a holiday in Africa, as soon as I reveal what I do for a living I am usually harangued by the tour operator for the excessive attention Western hacks pay to stories of bloodshed" (2004: 254). Renowned Dutch photo-journalist Pieter Van Der Houwen, in a recent conference at the University of Leeds (2012), commented on his experience covering the continent explained that he reached a point in his career where he felt that "he had taken more than he had given". In an interview with *The Guardian,* respected journalists George Alagiah explained:

> For most people who get their view of the world from TV, Africa is a faraway place where good people go hungry, bad people run government, and chaos and anarchy are the norm. My job is to give a fuller picture. I have a gnawing regret

[1] Flat-bottomed boat used in West Africa as traditional fishing boats.

> that, as a foreign correspondent, I have done Africa a disservice too often showing the continent at its worst and too rarely showing it in full flower (May 1999).

If this article is a great piece of self-reflexive assessment made available to casual readers, thus showing that a critical discourse about coverage of Africa is starting to filter through the media themselves, the article's title "New light on the Dark Continent" shows the limit of this critical assessment. As Ankomah notes:

> Even when Alagiah was pleading that "historical baggage" should be dropped, *The Guardian,* in its infinite mercy, still put the abominable "Dark Continent" headline on the very article in which Alagiah was making his plea (2011).

No one better than Mbembe provides the tool to reflect on this paradox. As an opening thought to his famous *On the Postcolony,* he writes:

> it is as if the most radical critique of the most obtuse and cynical prejudices about Africa were being made against the backdrop of an impossibility, the impossibility of getting over and done "with something without running the risk of repeating it and perpetuating it under some other guise" (2001: 1).

Moreover, it is not clear that such awareness on the side of journalists necessarily leads to the questioning of their own practices. Robert Guest, appealing to an enduring professional ethos of journalists reflecting 'reality', writes: "the reason (journalists) report that Africa is plagued by war, famine and pestilence is that Africa is plagued by war, famine and pestilence. They will stop reporting this when it stops being true" (2004: 254). This awareness on the part of journalists, its limits and how it relates to Afro-pessimism is surely an issue that deserves critical attention in the future.

Finally, there are a number of 'newer' narratives about Africa emerging in Western media; and the extent to which they provide a counter-weight to Afro-pessimism needs to be assessed. The role of China in Africa, for instance, is becoming a regular feature in media coverage. As Franks and Ribet (2009) argue, there are a range of voices on the issue with, on the one hand, those who "applaud the pragmatic and effective nature of Chinese-backing for African economic development" (2009: 129) and "rejecting much of the criticism as a paternalistic hangover from colonial times" (ibid.). On the other hand, there is also a view, on the left, more "hostile towards China's apparent willingness to ignore human rights abuse" (ibid.). In her study of British broadsheets coverage of China-Africa relations, Mawdsley (2008) for instance "identified consistent narrative tropes that endorse images of African weakness, Chinese ruthlessness and western trusteeship" (Franks and Ribet 2009: 133). To what extent, then, this narrative about Africa-China relations constitutes a practice of

representation that breaks free from the burden of colonial thinking – and Afro-pessimism - remains to be assessed.

There is also a more 'positive' discourse about Africa that is appearing. *The Economist*, which was and still is vilified for its cover "The Hopeless Continent", dedicated its December 2011 cover to "Africa Rising". Similarly, *The Times* published an editorial on "Get into Africa. It's resource-rich, young and growing" (June 2012). This coverage on Africa is surrounded by a neo-liberal jargon of growth, investment and progress; the same jargon attacked by Garrett and Schmidt (2011) as constituting Afro-pessimism as a ranking framework. If such coverage provides a welcome counter-weight to the litany of tragedies that have historically dominated Western media coverage of Africa, we still need to ask: does it really constitute a new paradigm through which Africa is apprehended? After all, doesn't this discourse also *essentialise, racialise, rank, describe selectively* and *predict* (in positive term this time), thus echoing the five components of Afro-pessimism?

This paper has drawn on the literature on Afro-pessimism in order to clarify the phenomenon that is referred to, in particular in relations to Western news media coverage of Africa. I identified five key analytical components that underlie these discussions: essentialism, racialisation, selectivity, ranking framework and prediction. This is not to say, however, that Afro-pessimism dominates western media coverage of Africa. As Scott (2012) argues, media coverage of Africa "is not a question of adopting either a 'liberal' or 'dominant' perspective. Rather, it is an entirely empirical question. And this question continues to remain unanswered". Without a strong definition of what Afro-pessimism actually is, we run the risk of reducing the debates to a simplistic 'negative/positive' framework, as can be seen in BBC World debate dedicated to "Africa's image. Prejudiced or justified?" In quantitative terms, recent research by Scott (2009) suggests that UK press coverage of Africa was "not as marginalised, negative or trivial as it is often accused of being". In qualitative terms, there is also much to investigate. While discussing journalists' reflexivity and 'newer' narratives – Africa China relations and Africa Rising – I have highlighted that these aspects deserve more attention both to understand the map of meaning about Africa created by news media, but also to assess the extent to which media discourses manage to break free from a certain framework to apprehend the continent. Equally important is the need to assess media representation of Africa in other contexts. For instance, the way Chinese media portray Africa would be an interesting case. Ma Guiha, a former Nairobi correspondent for Xinhua news agency now based in London, stressed her astonishment about the Western media portrayal of Africa. More precisely, she condemned the on-going and constantly negative portrayal of the Africa-China relations by Western media (Franks and Ribet 2009: 133), hence showing that Western media constantly

find ways to focus on 'negative' aspects when it comes to Africa, and in the process "undermine African agency and vilify the Chinese as the threatening 'Other'" (ibid.) But how much of Chinese media portrayal of Africa differs from Western media remains to be shown. Similarly, there is a crucial need to understand how African media themselves portray the rest of the continent. In a comparative study of *Time*, *The Economist* and *The Financial Mail* (South Africa) portrayal of Africa, Botes found that "the only local, African magazine included in this analysis, was also found to support these negative representations of Africa" (2011: 94). Beyond preconceived generalisation, the study of media representations of Africa and Afro-pessimism in fact has a fertile research agenda to attend to.

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