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Book Section:

Paterson, CA orcid.org/0000-0003-3843-6355 (2016) *New imperialisms, old stereotypes*. In: *Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century From the "Heart of Darkness" to "Africa Rising"*. Communication and Society . Routledge , Abingdon, Oxfordshire , pp. 214-222. ISBN 9781138962323

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Book Chapter: author accepted manuscript

Chapter 27 in **Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century From the "Heart of Darkness" to "Africa Rising"** Editors: Bunce M, Franks S, Paterson CA. Routledge, Abingdon Oxford

New imperialisms, old stereotypes

Chris Paterson

A theme of this book is the extent to which Africa's external representation corresponds to the realities of a fast-changing continent. It has often proven the case that media portrayals seem unable to keep pace with real changes that signal a break from old colonial ties and mindsets, but in this chapter I'll suggest that an imperial grip on Africa has altered shape, but not disappeared, and that it is supported rather than challenged in media reporting. By focusing here on competing US military, and Chinese commercial, imperialisms that have come to exert unprecedented power across Africa, this chapter assesses the shift from a Cold War-driven news agenda concerning Africa's relations with global superpowers to a post- Cold War agenda that camouflages a no less imperialistic and exploitative modernity. The second half of this chapter assesses how these dual imperial processes, together potentially as exploitative and asymmetrical as the relations between centre and periphery that shaped modern Africa, are represented by three global media organisations: CNN, the BBC, and Al Jazeera English.

In the two decades since this author wrote in the original *Africa's Media Image*, proxy wars in Mozambique and Angola (where 7 per cent of the Angolan population was killed in the US-backed post-colonial civil war, Easterly 2006: 288) were exchanged for a fragile stability marked by tremendous wealth for the privileged few and little material improvement for the rest (Burgis 2015). These Lusophone countries epitomise the consequences of new imperialisms that transpire continent wide with rare critique from global media, cynically fuelling an "Africa Rising" narrative suggesting increasing African autonomy while obscuring processes of neo-imperialism that have mostly seen concessions of African political and financial sovereignty. As economic "reform" made Mozambique a favourite of Western governments through the structural violence of neo-liberal policies (Jones 2005), oil endeared Angola to Chinese and Western oil companies (French 2014). This chapter explores the extent to which these contemporary imperialisms driven by the US and China are made visible by global media.

The reporting on these forms of neo-imperial expansion contributes to both Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist discourses, but in each case positions Africa as an exploitable object lacking an ability to develop and thrive independently of external powers – thereby reinforcing enduring stereotypes. Western commercial expansion and the neo-liberal structural adjustment regimes that enable it have been widely celebrated and condemned (e.g., Easterly 2006), just as fast-paced Chinese state-backed expansion across Africa has been hailed and condemned in equal measure for its differences from those approaches. This research was inspired by an awareness of the lack of investigation into the global media image of Chinese and US expansion in Africa (despite increasing attention to Chinese media expansion in Africa, e.g. Banda 2009; Wasserman, chapter 24, in this volume), in conjunction with the military turn in the West's approach to Africa, whereby a single imperial power has established a military presence across most of the continent for the first time in modern history and US-originating religious fundamentalism has been implicated in human rights concerns and in acting as a driver for that military expansion. The last decade of secretive US military expansion across Africa, with US forces active in nearly every African country, has been exposed by investigative journalists like Turse (2014, 2015a, 2015b) and Scahill (2013), but the present research finds that core international news organisations more commonly follow the familiar pattern of telling a story orchestrated by the US government.

Trends in reporting Africa

Limited investment by larger Western news organisations in Africa has long resulted in a dependence on international news agencies by most media, and for most coverage (Bunce, in this volume; Paterson

2011). A news agency focus on both conflict and on the movement of capital has contributed to replicating what Hawk (1992) called “the primitive archetype”, the image of an Africa both available for exploitation and dependent on the benevolence of Northern countries. In the post-9/11 period, which is the focus of this chapter, the largest television news agency (Associated Press Television News) halved the amount it spent on Africa to shift resources to parts of the world it considered more interesting to the largest global broadcasters (Paterson 2011: 37–41).

Television news agency managers have been consistent in stating, over the decades, that their top-paying clients don't demand broad and consistent coverage of Africa (Paterson 2011). Studies of US television coverage of Africa during the 1980s found that information sources were mostly non-African and tended to reinforce both images of Africa as a powerless victim dependent upon aid, and images of US power and goodwill (Paterson 1992). In her study of how US media construct the topic of hunger in Africa, Kogen found the issue framed “as irrelevant to the public sphere, [with] the victim as removed from political action, and the reader as politically impotent” (2015: 3). But Kogen also observed (in an echo of Bennett 1990) that when the US Congress expresses interest in a story, overall news coverage increases and news stories that propose solutions are more likely.

However, Africa is now covered for the world both by an international press corps more attuned to critiques of Afro-pessimist reporting (see parts I and II of this book), and by powerful global news organisations that claim to challenge what is widely perceived as stereotype-laden Western coverage and limited news frames. Xin explains how the world's largest news agency, and voice of the Chinese government, Xinhua, is deeply embedded in Africa, with over twenty bureaus in place by 2009. But Xin notes that, while Xinhua has an influence on the news coverage of local media outlets in Africa (largely through the provision of free or cheap content), its editorial agenda, like that of most global media, is still significantly shaped by the leading Western news agencies (Xin 2009; also see Marsh, Wan, and Wasserman, in this volume). The other significant new global player in international coverage of Africa is Al Jazeera, to which we turn shortly, after examining the characteristics of the new imperialisms this chapter addresses.

New imperialisms

Chinese neo-imperialism in Africa is well described, if not by media reporting, at least by recent books like those of French (2014) and Burgis (2015), so in this section I focus on the less well documented characteristics of US neo-imperial expansion in Africa. Since the onset of the US “war on terror”, analysts have been warning of a militarisation of Africa stemming from a struggle for resources and influence. Klare and Volman peg the start of that programme of militarisation to April 2002, when the former US ambassador to Chad told the US Congress, “It's been reliably reported that, for the first time, the two concepts – ‘Africa’ and ‘US national security’ – have been used in the same sentence in Pentagon documents” (2006: 298). US military interest in Africa is rooted in the Cold War, but was then conducted by proxy and supported by friendly media coverage in the US (Windrich 1992).

Through the period of its build-up in Africa since the mid-2000s, the US military has taken precautions to avoid the appearance of a permanent presence in all but a few countries, while developing operational capabilities in most of them (Turse 2014); this comes in the context of research suggesting the US operates 700 to 800 military bases in over sixty countries (Dufour 2013; Vine 2015), and, by their own admission, conducted military operations in 135 countries in 2015 (Turse 2015a). Bilmes and Intriligator (2013) argued that the United States is – unsustainably – fighting five simultaneous wars, including one in Somalia (in addition to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen). Turse found that one US Army division “carried out 128 separate ‘activities’ in 28 African countries” in 2013, and in that same year reported that his analysis of official documents and open source information revealed “that the U.S. military was involved with at least 49 of the 54 nations on the African continent during 2012 and 2013 in activities that ranged from special ops raids to the training of proxy forces” (Turse 2014); the collaboration extends to militaries in Africa that have been accused by international human rights organisations and the US government of human rights violations, and, in the case of Mali, the overthrow of the elected president (Turse 2015b; Whitlock 2012). This has been accompanied by a massive expansion of US arms sales to African countries; some of these are sold by the US government directly, or through providing credit, while other arms are bought directly from US manufacturers with State Department oversight. Countries that spent vast sums on US arms

through these programmes in the mid-2000s were Djibouti, Kenya, Botswana, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, Angola, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa (Klare & Volman 2006: 299).

In *The New Scramble for Africa*, Carmody concluded that “US interests in Africa will continue to be dictated by the twin and interlinked concerns of oil and security and the continent will also play an increasingly important role in the global struggle for political influence between the United States and China” (2011: 65). Klare and Volman similarly warned that, though small in relation to military activity in other parts of the world, US and Chinese rivalry over resources in Africa “encourage[s] African regimes to continue to rely on oil-based development, rather than pursuing broader economic development strategies that promote local manufacturing and agriculture”, adding, “the possession of oil by countries in Africa and other parts of the developing world nearly always leads to political repression, corruption, and violence” (Klare & Volman 2006: 306–307).

Another form of US expansionism that has swept across Africa over the past decade is evangelical Christianity. Like US military expansionism, it is well funded and has been implicated as a threat to human rights, but it also, similarly, has met with little external media critique, despite the presence, as noted by van Klinken, of “an emerging narrative of American conservative evangelicals and other right-wing Christian groups exporting the ‘culture wars’ on homosexuality, which they are losing at home, to Africa, using their money to promote homophobia and anti-homosexual legislation” (van Klinken 2016: 494). Analyses link US evangelicals with lobbying for anti-gay laws, such as the draconian anti-gay law passed in Uganda in 2014 (Kaoma 2014; Walker 2014), and one US social justice think tank wrote that these groups “frame their agendas as authentically African, in an effort to brand human rights advocacy as a new colonialism bent on destroying cultural traditions and values” (Smith 2012). De Witte (2011: 190) observed that in Ghana, following the sweeping deregulation of the media in the 1990s, “churches, and Charismatic–Pentecostal ones in particular, have now jumped into the new media spaces, opened up by the liberalization, to exploit their religious, commercial and political possibilities to the fullest and capture new religious audiences,” adding that, around Africa, “media liberalization has enabled new, public manifestations of religion as religious groups assert a powerful and transformative presence in new public spheres” (de Witte 2011: 191).

De Witte (2011) wrote that the US-based evangelical television networks Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), and the Catholic Eternal World Television Network (EWTN) have established programme supply agreements with new commercial broadcasters in Ghana and around Africa. As *Review of African Political Economy* editor Roy Love commented (2006: 619), “The Cold War has been replaced by a new global confrontation whose proponents couch their ideological stances in religious and indeed ‘fundamentalist’ terms.” US involvement in Sudan was largely driven by US religious groups pressuring policymakers (Huliaras 2008), and similarly, the viral Kony2012 video, while rife with stereotypes and misinformation, was a tremendously effective lobbying campaign and cover for further US military expansion in central Africa (Paterson & Nothias 2016). But van Klinken also cautions that, “exportation of American culture wars to Africa has been criticized as a too American-centered perspective on African socio-political dynamics” and that other international and local forces at play, as well as the agency of Africans, can be negated by such a focus (2016; also see Jacobs, chapter23, in this volume).

The view from global online news

Research by this author with Nothias¹ set out to systematically identify and critically analyse instances when three leading global news organisations made reference to these “new imperialisms” in their online output, while determining the extent and nature of those references. The three news organisations were Al Jazeera English (AJE), the BBC, and CNN. These were chosen due to the longstanding hegemonic position in global news provision of the BBC and CNN, along with their important agenda-setting role (Xie & Boyd-Barrett 2015). AJE is the dominant example of a news organisation promoting alternative narratives to those of these established providers, and it is the only such global news organisation with a popular online international news provision, extensive global newsgathering apparatus of its own, and global reach. As with the Venezuela-based TeleSur, AJE has demonstrated audience demand for challenges to traditional US/Europe-dominated news frames. The timeframe for this study was the start of 2011, when the creation of South Sudan and the Libyan

civil war marked milestones in the US and Chinese expansions we focused on, to September 2014, providing the most recent data available at the time of the analysis.

We do not assert that the news coverage of these outlets is representative of all media coverage or, indeed, of the limits of global debate on these issues, but we hoped to demonstrate trends in this coverage that could suggest avenues for exploration of a broader range of media. We found that China's economic expansion across Africa was given less prominence overall than the US military expansion, and that US religious expansion across Africa was all but invisible. These media outlets gave ample coverage to AFRICOM, but also were generally eager partners in constructing a public image of AFRICOM to be "one of humanitarian missions and benign-sounding support for local partners" (Turse 2014).

As research over many years has found, external news coverage of Africa is mostly coverage of a small portion of African countries (Paterson 1992), while most are all but ignored (a problem replicated in research about news coverage, as Scott observes in this volume). In the case of US military expansionism, coverage was limited to a small number of countries, and there was almost no coverage indicating the continental nature of the US military project. However, coverage by the three media organisations we examined that addressed China mostly referred to Africa in its totality, emphasising a continent-wide role for China (while still drawing from examples in fairly few countries, and nearly ignoring countries with the most significant Chinese financial presence, like Angola, or human presence, like Zambia). Through a negative tone, conflation of activities, and implicit distrust of Chinese intentions, the coverage we examined is at risk of contributing to a denigration of China and feeding, as Mawdsley (2008) identified in an examination of UK newspaper representations of the Chinese presence in Africa, a "yellow peril" discourse.

The United States was, by contrast, almost entirely portrayed as a benevolent provider of humanitarian interventions and small-scale military support to capture war criminals and fight terrorists. Few stories reviewed for this study presented US military involvement in Africa as anything other than legitimate and benign, reinforcing Easterly's lament of an efficient postmodern imperialism that uses the cover of militarised humanitarianism to pretend that armies exist for purposes other than enforcing the will of one state on another (Easterly 2006). Across the three media outlets, we found the US generally portrayed as a positive force for change in Africa, while China received less coverage overall (despite now being Africa's largest trade partner: Economist 2013) and was most often portrayed as predatory and caring only for its economic interests.

The two forms of powerful and transformative transnational religious expansions taking place in Africa – the fundamentalist variants of the Abrahamic religions Christianity and Islam (as opposed to the religions in a general sense) – share characteristics in that both have been implicated in the persecution of minority groups, both are substantially dependent on foreign money and the localisation of a foreign ideological brand, and both depend heavily on media campaigns for their expansion (e.g., Love 2006; De Witte 2011; Abubakar, chapter 25 in this volume), but this research found a near absence of coverage of Christian fundamentalism by the media examined (Smith 2014, is a recent exception, but falls outside our sample).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that imperialism in Africa remains pertinent in the form of the largely under-the-radar expansionist exercises of China and the United States – the one mostly commercial though largely state financed (French 2014), the other supplementing the commercial with a poorly understood project of military and religious expansion. This research suggests that global media don't ignore US military activity in Africa, but they do fail to portray it as continental in nature, and as anything more than humanitarian and consisting of a wholly legitimate "anti-terrorism" and humanitarian role, confirming Cook's (2013) view of reporting of US African policy "filtering out the logic of plunder."

Chinese expansion is conversely portrayed in mostly negative terms: one superpower portrayed as morally legitimate, the other not. Critique of US imperialism was rare in the media analysed for this research, although Al Jazeera English did provide exhaustive critiques of US military expansion (for example, *The New Scramble for Africa* 2014), while always separating these generally well-evidenced

commentaries from news content, which was broadly similar to that of the BBC and CNN; a large number of AJE mentions of AFRICOM were in commentaries.

This international news coverage of the most dramatic “new imperialisms” in Africa, as summarised here, offers little agency to Africans. The coverage by three leading international news services that was examined for this research suggested an ongoing external image of Africa as undifferentiated, threatening, eminently exploitable, and reliant on outsiders. Such coverage perpetuates colonial and Cold War discourses that have for so long shaped Africa’s external image, while critiquing “imperialism” in entirely European and American terms.

Note

1 The study performed a critical framing analysis of 492 news articles. This full study is published as Paterson & Nothias 2016, where further detail of the methodology and findings are available.

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