

The Portrayal of Europe and America in Nigerian Newspapers: The Other Edge of Dependency

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ABSTRACT Dependency is a term that refers to one of the strands of the imbalances in international news flow between the West and less developed countries (LDC). Western news agencies, it has been observed, have cornered the whole process of global newsgathering so totally that LDC media depend on them to get almost any news about the West and other LDC. Since these agencies carry mostly negative news about LDC, dependency, it has been alleged, promotes the dissemination of negative news about LDC both in the West and among LDC. This paper, however, takes on a side of the argument that seems to have escaped notice—the negative impact of dependency on the image of the West. The paper content-analysed the foreign news pages of 262 editions of two leading newspapers in Nigeria and found that most (66%) of the news stories these papers disseminated about the West were negative, and all these were received from Western news agencies. Most of the news stories focused on wars, terrorism and politics. They are such that paint the West as unsafe. The paper concludes that though dependency is pernicious to the image of the LDC, it is by no means favourable to the image of the West. It is double-edged.

INTRODUCTION

Governments, diplomats and policy makers are typically concerned about how their countries are portrayed by the media that are within and outside their territories. In the 16th-century Europe, it was the concern for how the government was portrayed in print and the destabilising impact this was likely to have on citizens' submission to the authorities that led to the situation Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) described as the era of the authoritarian theory of the press (See also Littlejohn 2002). Then in most parts of Europe, governments ensured their security and perpetuity by maintaining a tight rein on the press. Even after William Caxton set up the first press in England in 1476, a breakthrough which held great liberation promises for the press, publishing was not without restrictions and press freedom was quite unthinkable. In fact, in England, the freedom to print was not recognised until 1694 (Emery et al. 1965).

The rise and centrality of freedom in the United States soon marked the decline of the authoritarian press and ushered in what Siebert et al. (1956) described as the era of the libertarian theory of the press. Press personnel were seen as capable of making rational decisions if given the freedom so to do. With freedom came commercialisation—free market and retreating government control. Not a few scholars and observers believe that in the array of factors influencing source decision making in

mass communication up till today, economic considerations have the uppermost hand (Baran 1999; McChesney 2002)

Commercialisation of news and information has deep historical roots, and it may not be a bathetic digression if one devotes a little space to discussing its origin here. Most early newspapers could not afford the cost of telegraph cables, foreign correspondences and independent worldwide stringers. This stimulated the emergence of independent business entrepreneurs capable of footing the bill. The first of these was Charles-Louis Havas who set up a newspaper translation agency in 1832 which in 1835 became Agence Havas. It became a public liability company in 1879, and merged with an advertising company (Societe Generale des Anonces) in 1920. The merger was split in 1940 and the State took over the newsgathering part of the company but for only four years. A series of metamorphosis followed and in 1944 Agence Havas became a public corporation months after it had been named Agence France Presse (AFP). Today, from its main headquarters in Paris and regional centres in Washington, Hong Kong, Nicosia and Montevideo, AFP reaches news subscribers all over the world (AFP 2006).

The closest competitor, better put, rival to AFP is Reuters. Paul Julius von Reuter had begun a queer method of news dissemination in 1849 using pigeons to fly written stock market information between Aechean in France and Brussels. In 1851,

he established his office in London—a place that had become the centre of international trade, finance and commodity pricing—to transmit stock market prices between London and Paris. With the installation of overland telegraph and undersea cables, Reuters expanded its services to other European countries and Far East in 1872 (Reuters 2006). This following the rise in sensationalism in the 1880's in the United States and England, established a special service which supplied sensational news—crimes, scandals, accidents, disasters and riots—to newspapers. So Julius Reuter catered for two markets: a business community to which he supplied instant, exact and copious commercial and political information and a group of newspaper organisations which craved romantic headlines, big stories and not too much substance.

By the end of the World War II, there were five transnational news agencies (TNNA) carrying and distributing news from and to different parts of the world. These were Reuters, Agence France Press (AFP); United Press Association (UPA) which later became United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP) and Wolff. The first four, known as the Big Four, still dominate world news services today. Nearly all of them are multinational corporations, and in line with the old Reuter's style, they supply two kinds of news: one type to commercial and political elites who are interested in news that touch their vested interests and another to the general public who are interested in the unusual and the sensational. Importantly, they are commercial ventures driven by profit. In 1991, AFP alone raked in over one billion francs as revenue.

In spite of their preoccupation with pecuniary gain, these agencies, it has been observed, display a remarkable level of allegiance to their countries reporting news from their national perspectives. Many believe that the national slant is still visible in the reports of these agencies today. In addition, they are said to focus predominantly on the former colonies of their respective countries—Reuters on former British colonies, AP on Latin America and Southern Pacific, AFP on former French colonies and so forth (Meyer 1988; Baran 1999).

The combination of their quest for profit, allegiance to their nations and the need to feed the general public with the bizarre most probably led to the kind of coverage these agencies give former colonies. They portray these former

colonies, in the words of Achebe (1988: 256), as “‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality”, and they “set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negotiations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest”.

Proponents of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) took this up in the seventies following the thoughts of theorists like Herbert Schiller and Johan Galtung (Schiller 1976; Galtung 1980, 1984). NWICO proponents accuse the West (Europe and America) of under-representing and misrepresenting the Less Developed Countries (LDC). News about LDC in Western media was little and that little was negative. According to them, Western media paint the LDC as the place of war, pestilence and political upheavals. This type of news interests Western audience and “keeps them convinced of the miserable living conditions in the periphery countries, and consequently of how fortunate they are not to be there” (Galtung 1984: 120). Not only this, the mass circulation of Western media products in the LDC was leading to the proliferation of Western cultural practices and the endangering of indigenous culture of the LDC—a situation referred to as cultural imperialism.

Much of this damage was done through spotty rather than developmental reporting. Whereas spotty reporting focuses on an event in a snapshot manner and so misses out on the details of its antecedents and medium- and long-term consequences, developmental reporting attempts to imbue all news stories with links between the event and projects of economic and social development. It addresses the background and long-range implications of the event no matter how isolated such an event might be (Meyer 1988). Though condemned for portraying ongoing negative events as unleashed and positive ones as transient, spotty reporting still remains a rampant feature of Western journalism.

In addition, the proponents of NWICO believed that the TNNA, invariably based in the West, have systematically cornered the news gathering business in a way that all LDC depend on them for international news, even news about fellow LDC. This they called *dependency*. One of consequences of this was that nearly all that the people in an LDC know about another LDC was

dictated by the Western news agency, and much of this was negative. Ganley and Ganley (1982) describe it as depending on someone else to “tell me about myself”.

The Problem

We have seen the combination of factors that may likely be responsible for the way Western news agencies portray LDC. These factors can be summed up into two—profit and patriotism. For profit, because the public would ‘buy’ the bizarre, bizarre stories about LDC are fed into the Western media outlets and subscribing outlets. In a show of patriotism, the agencies tell these stories in a way that protects their country’s interest and sovereignty, and enhances its image. But profit and patriotism do not always pull in the same direction; they, at times, conflict. When this happens, the question arises as to which has the upper hand. For organisations that set out as purely commercial outfits, one may suppose that profit would have the upper hand.

In the light of this, it can be expected that at times, Western news agencies will carry negative news about their countries if such news would sell, and to the extent that an LDC media outlet depends on them, it too would carry these negative reports about the West. It therefore appears that dependency may be double-edged—hurting the image of both the LDC as well as that of the West.

A lot of scholarly attention has been devoted to the first of these edges, that is, the nature and impact dependency on LDC (Ganley and Ganley 1982; Uranga 1984; Meyer 1988; Easterly 2007; Golan 2008). Almost invariably, research shows that dependency is hurtful to the culture, politics and racial self-esteem of the LDC. The second edge seems to have escaped attention. In other words, research and diplomatic efforts have mainly been on what dependency does to LDC; what it does to the developed world seems to have been left to assumptions. So the question

remains: if dependency hurts LDC, does it always soothe the West? Stated differently, if dependency perpetuates the negative image of the LDC in Western and LDC media, does it promote a positive image of the West?

METHODOLOGY

The broad guiding questions posed at the end of the last section could be more directly and less laboriously answered by examining the content of Western papers to see how the West is portrayed in its own papers but that would totally eclipse the issue of dependency. Logic seems to prefer working backwards from the manifest content of West-dependent LDC media and seeing the image of the West they portray. This image, to the extent that the papers depend on the Western TNNA, would be what the agencies feed them with. See Figure 1 for the diagrammatic depiction of the progression and study design.

Content analysis was adopted for this study. Defined as a method of studying and analyzing communication content in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables (Kerlinger 1973), the method has been extensively and in most cases, successfully used in the study of media portrayals. Most of the data-backed contributions to the debate on international newsflow imbalance have employed the method. Though criticised for its proclivity towards width rather than depth (Entman 1993), the method continues to be on the first line of choice among content-concerned researchers (Wimmer and Dominick 2000). Since the concern of this work is content, it is the most appropriate method to use.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size: Purposive and systematic sampling techniques were combined in selecting the sample for the work. *The Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers were chosen for the study being the two most widely circulated papers at the period of study. The

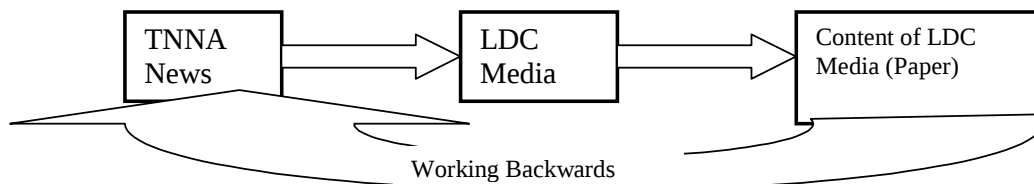


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic depiction of the progression of the study

selection of analysed editions spanned a period of one year: January to December 2002. Systematic sampling was employed in drawing actual editions for analysis: every other month was selected and from each month, all editions were chosen except weekend ones.

In all, two hundred and sixty-two (262) editions were analysed—half of these from each newspaper. Specifically, only the foreign news pages of the papers were analysed; sports pages, even when they had foreign news, were not coded. Though the focus was on the West, all the stories on the foreign pages were first coded before those concerning the nations under focus were sorted out. Nine hundred and forty (940) news stories were coded—597 from *the Guardian* and 343 from *Punch*. Out of the 940, two hundred and fifty two (252) were about the West and only these, in line with the focus of the paper, were analysed further. Ninety-one (91) of these were from *Punch*, and 161 were from *the Guardian*.

The Instrument: A set of content categories made up of three sections was the instrument for the study. The broad categories were direction of coverage, issues covered and story source. By direction is meant the overall tilt of the story—positive, neutral and negative. Stories of war, upheavals and disease outbreak were considered negative while those of reconciliation, trade agreements and the like were coded as positive. Not all deaths were considered negative: those occurring naturally at old age for instance were coded as positive.

Under issues discussed, eight sub-categories were created: *politics*—domestic and international; *economy*—trade, tariffs etc.; *health*—HIV/AIDS, drugs etc.; *terrorism* and fight against it; *war and peace* initiatives; *crisis*—riots, protests; *society*—birthdays, natural deaths, music, entertainment etc.; and *disaster*—natural [floods, hurricanes], accidents [air, road, fire] etc. With regard to news sources, eight sub-categories were created: Agence France Presse (AFP); Reuters; United Press International (UPI); Associated Press (AP); Pan-African News Agency (PANA); News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), and the unidentified. The eighth category was tagged 'Others'. These sources were either not news agencies—they could be media houses—or were unknown news agencies.

Locale was given priority over actors. If, for instance, a European leader paid a visit to an African country, such was considered an African story and so was not analysed since the focus of

the study was on Europe and America. The Unit of Analysis was whole story. Pictures were not coded because of the inherent difficulty in interpreting photographs that do not accompany stories, and the redundancy that can be created in interpreting those which do.

The reliability of the instrument was tested using Ole Holsti's intercoder reliability formula (Wimmer and Dominick 2000). Using the instrument, two independent coders coded 133 foreign stories drawn from editions that were not part of those for the study. When compared, their coding decisions showed an intercoder reliability index of approximately 0.8, which was considered very high.

FINDINGS

Of the 940 foreign news stories coded, 252 (about 27%) were about the West—specifically Europe and America. In the analysis, some of the extant issues about international news coverage earlier discussed were adopted as a guide. The study looked at news sources, the direction of the stories, and the issues under focus.

First to be investigated were news sources in order to establish the presence or otherwise of dependency. Sources of news were not as diverse as expected. In fact, a sizeable percentage of the news (27.7%) was not attributed to any news agency. This left the study with only 184 news stories to analyse. See table 1 which shows how these are distributed among the agencies.

From Agence France Presse (AFP) came the highest number of news stories (63; 34.2%) while the least came from AP. From those categorised as 'Others' came 33.2%. These include the CNN, BBC, Radio France, Deutsche Press Agentur and *New York Times*. Nothing came from UPI, PANA and NAN. If one tallies the total due to the Big

Table 1: Sources of foreign news for the selected papers

Agency	No of News Items	%
Reuters	49	26.6
AFP	63	34.2
UPI	-	-
AP	11	6.0
PANA	-	-
NAN	-	-
Others	61	33.2
Total	184	100.0

Four (Reuters, AFP, UPI and AP), it amounts to 67% of the stories.

Direction of coverage was next. Only 20.2% of stories about the West garnered from the TNNA was positive; 65.9% was negative while

13.9% was neutral. Sixty-nine percent of *Punch* and 64% of *the Guardian* stories were negative. Only 24% of *Punch* and 18% of *the Guardian* stories were positive. *Punch* had a lower proportion of neutral stories (6.6%) than *the Guardian* (18%). See figure 1 which illustrates the aggregate quite vividly. Even if both positive and neutral stories were merged, they would not be as many as negative stories (Fig. 2).

The third point of focus was the issues discussed in the stories. The data showed the most frequently discussed issues to be war and peace initiatives (21.4%); international and domestic politics (20.2%), and terrorism (15.5%). The least frequently occurring issues were crises and health-related issues (Fig. 3). Natural disaster—quakes, hurricanes, disease outbreaks and accidents did not occur as frequently as economic issues.

DISCUSSION

From the findings, there is a remarkable degree of dependency among Nigerian newspapers on the TNNA for international news. Over 73% of

Fig. 2. Direction of news stories about Europe and America

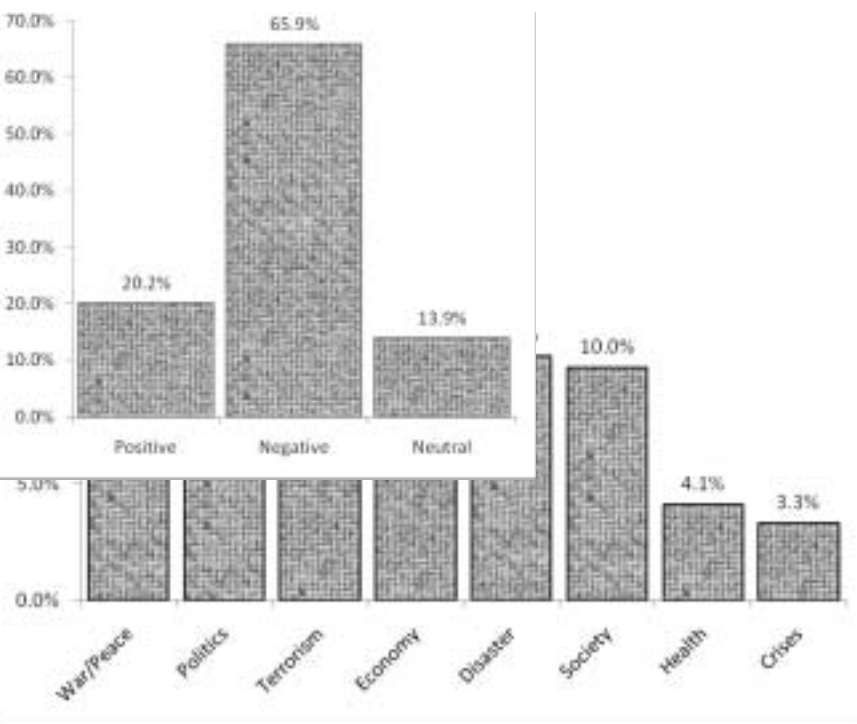


Fig. 3. Issues discussed about Europe and America

foreign stories was attributed to Western news agencies. Specifically, about 67% came from three of the Big Four. These figures roughly agree with those of Meyer (1988). Meyer (1988) found that 56 to 76% of identifiable news sources from the six dailies he studied were attributed to the Big Four. The reason for this is obvious: most Nigerian newspapers do not have correspondents outside Nigeria. However, the figures do not support the flow of news along former colonial patterns. The highest number of stories came not from Reuters but from AFP. It is also instructive, if not outright indicting, that no foreign news about the West was taken from PANA or NAN.

Contrary to the commonly expressed opinion that news from Western TNNA portrays the West positively (McBride Commission 1980; Galtung 1984; Bleiker and Kay 2007), the findings show that majority of the news stories portray the West negatively. Some reasons may be adduced for this. It may be that for the TNNA, profit has really overridden patriotism. It may also be that the Nigerian gatekeepers choose only news items that please them from the quantum received from the TNNA. This, too, in the final analysis is a profit-driven decision.

Again, contrary to what one would expect from pan-Western agencies, rather than focus on issues capable of making Europe and America attractive, the stories focus mostly on war/peace initiatives, politics and terrorism. Health matters rank among the least discussed. At a time when health problems are on the increase globally,—for instance there are rumours of the existence of new viruses deadlier than the HIV—one would expect the TNNA to devote more space to health and society than to war and politics. But again, health stories, because they are hardly amenable to spotty reporting but rather compel the reporter to adopt a developmental approach, are usually not ‘hot-cake’ and copy-selling stories. Therefore, where profit is the overarching motive, health stories are easily consigned to the more obscure pages. The pattern of focus shown by this study is not too different from what Meyer (1988) found about the content of the LDC dailies he studied, much of which focused on negative events about their countries and about other LDC.

The Other Edge of Dependency and Its Implications

Dependency in its broad sense describes a

kind of relationship between LDC and the West such that makes the former incapable of surviving alone on its own resources or ingenuity, and which benefits the latter in most ramifications. It is a parasitic relationship with inverted impact in which the host feeds on the parasite and not the other way round. As a term, it has been used by economics and development scholars to describe the same sort of relationship. In international communication, it refers essentially to the reliance of LDC media on Western TNNA for news and other media products which come in the format that immediately or ultimately benefits the West and further batters the image of the LDC. Dependency has therefore been roundly condemned by scholars and diplomats, and new ways have been charted, or at least suggested. This study however, suggests that dependency, rather than being single-edged, cutting perniciously at the LDC, is double-edged cutting both ways.

When one watches a Nigerian film or musical video with scenes set in the West, one is fazed with the dazzle of opulence and ostentation. These scenes that portray the West as near-paradise most often foreground the poverty and squalor or the oppression by the rich in the scenes set in Nigeria. It is, however the opposite of this that the Nigerian newspapers offer. Though not painting Nigeria as a place of bliss, they also do not paint the West as paradise on earth. In fact, news stories about the West—terrorist attacks, wars in Ireland and the former USSR—are such that should, if one may reword Galtung’s (1984) dictum, keep people in the LDC convinced of the siege in the West and consequently of how fortunate they are not to be there. The other edge of dependency does harm to the image of the West.

This is, by no means, a cause for celebration: getting even in what is wrong is itself wrong. It rather calls for further probe. If Nigerian gatekeepers select bleak news about the West when that is not all they get, that raises a moral question, and directly suggests two possibilities—again, patriotism or profit. If the reason is patriotism, it implies Nigerian gatekeepers are attempting to get even with their Western colleagues who paint LDC black or they are attempting to portray the West negatively to foreground the worth there is in Nigeria. If it is profit, it implies they are attracted by oddity—bad news being good news—in order to sell their papers. As to which is the more likely of the two,

a look at the portrayal of other African nations and at the portrayal (or neglect) of the rural areas in newspaper coverage and the predominance of spotty over developmental reporting in Nigerian newspapers (Akinleye and Ojebode 2004) suggests that the motivation is profit, not patriotism. In the final analysis, Nigerian gatekeepers are identical to their Western counterpart, at least in purpose.

Dependency and its negative impact on the LDC have not gone away with the establishment of LDC-friendly and LDC-financed news agencies. The long-term solution lies in re-orienting the gatekeeper. The Western definition of news and the profit-driven criteria for news selection which are taught in Nigerian mass communication departments, and practised by Nigerian gatekeepers and reporters will continue to nurse dependency and its double edges.

In the LDC, Western journalistic methods must be tempered with development journalism. Newspapers should, of course, not run at a loss but there is nothing to suggest that adopting a developmental approach to news reporting would make that happen. Social responsibility, not market-driven libertarianism, should be the guiding principle.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that dependency is hurtful to the sovereignty, culture and development of LDC. But rather than being a reflection of Western political machinations, it appears to be a manifestation of unquenchable profiteering on the part of Western TNNA complemented by that of LDC gatekeepers and reporters. More importantly, rather than being a pad to the image of the West, it is a herald of the negative image of the West projected by its TNNA. It is, if one may use a rather trite metaphor, a double-edged sword. Therefore, instead of continuing with the decades-old lobbying for a better deal in international newsflow, it is about time LDC looked inwards and planned towards a re-education and reorientation of their gatekeepers. This would mitigate the impact of the edge of dependency pointed towards the developing countries.

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