

A Survey of American Media Coverage of African Democracies: 1994 – 2004

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INTRODUCTION: The purpose of this survey is to catalogue and characterize the coverage of African democracies by select major American media outlets. This survey is indicative of the continuing challenges faced by African democracies to get fair and balanced coverage in the American press. And this work addresses an issue that has been documented in previous studies.¹

The data – based upon both quantitative and qualitative analysis – points to a decidedly negative bias in news coverage of African democracies. The coverage does not accurately or completely reflect current trends and developments toward democratization and free market reform on the continent.

¹ Previous studies on biased coverage of Africa and the developing world include: “TransAfrica Forum Issue Brief: Press Coverage of Africa, December 2000,” www.transafricaforum.org and “Viewing the World: A Study of British television coverage of developing countries,” July 2000 Department for International Development, www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/viewworldsum.pdf. The role of media also received significant attention in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s recently completed “Commission for Africa: Action for a strong and prosperous Africa,” see www.commissionforafrica.org. See responses section.

METHODOLOGY: This study focuses on 14 countries that are tracked in the center’s *State of Africa Report*. The countries are: Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia.

The study surveys the African coverage of five (5) print media: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. These publications were selected because they are national in scope (*USA Today*, *US News*). They also influence news coverage nationwide, and are considered sources of record for large readerships (*Times*) and strategic constituencies like the U.S. federal government and policy makers (*Post*), or corporate executives and market investors (*Journal*). All have significant Africa reporting capacity via foreign bureaus and or correspondents. The media study is not exhaustive, and the news items were compiled in the following manner:

- Ability to search articles via news outlet’s own online archive
- Country name listed in the headline
- Ability to access full articles
- Articles appearing from Jan. 1, 1994 to Dec. 31, 2004²

In total, 2,706 news items – by lined articles, news briefs, editorials and op/eds or letters were reviewed and placed into 10 categories:

Category	Total Headlines
Elections/ Politics	583
Socio-Economic Development	163
Foreign Aid/ Investment	202
Education	20

² There were two exceptions to these guidelines: *WSJ* articles for 1/1/94 to 12/31/95 were accessed through Factiva, an online archive run by the newspaper’s parent company Dow Jones and Reuters. *US News* articles were searched under the headline term “Africa,” and then categorized by subheads or search terms by country name.

Visual Arts/ Music/ Religion/ Culture	223
Persons Profiled/ Other	201
Travel/Tourism and Sports	269
Poverty/Economic Underdevelopment/ Health	119
Conflict/ Corruption/ Crime	773
HIV/AIDS	153
TOTAL HEADLINES	2706

Finally, the 10-year time frame of this study selected as the defined period for study because it is thematically important. This critical decade of 1994 to 2004 was an era of dramatic change relative to democratic and free market reforms. But more often than not, media coverage defined this period based on episodes of violence – wars in Angola and Congo, among other places - and the genocide in Rwanda. Though winning the peace is an important news story, decidedly less coverage has been given to the affects of the first non-racial, democratic South African election in April 1994, the return to democracy in Nigeria, expansion of true democracy in Kenya, sustainability of democracy in Botswana and other countries, as well as other institutional changes like the formation of the African Union. However, as the results of this survey indicate, this trend of democratic and economic growth and expansion was often reported in terms of turmoil and disaster.

FINDINGS (Quantitative): More than one out of four articles reviewed – 773 – were about conflict, corruption, or crime. The second largest category – with 583 articles – was elections and politics. Quantitatively, this breakdown suggests a balance in coverage. However, a qualitative analysis revealed many of the articles reported elections as less-than-democratic. More will be said about this in the qualitative section.

The total number not only revealed a large percentage of articles that might generally be categorized as negative, but also reflected inequitable coverage of positive developments. For example, the smallest category was education with only twenty (20) articles.

APARC's *State of Africa* report, in 2003 highlighted education advances on the continent including:

- Botswana reported a literacy rate of 90 percent
- Kenya enrolled an additional 1.7 million children in primary education
- Enrollment in Ghana's teacher training colleges rose to 8,500 from 6,000 in 2000
- More than 600 new classrooms were constructed in Malawi³

Neither these gains, nor similar gains, from 1994 to 2004, were reported in the more than 2,700 items surveyed from *The Times*, *The Post*, *The Journal*, *USA Today* or *US News*.

Not only were the total items reviewed negative, an additional adverse effect was that the distribution of news items leaned heavily towards a few countries to the exclusion of the others⁴. South Africa dominated the coverage with 1145 news stories, or 42 percent of all the coverage surveyed in the period. It might seem positive that so many articles were on South Africa, but statistically, some negative trends emerged. First, with so much coverage of South Africa, other democratic countries received substantially less coverage. For example our survey catalogued 202 articles in the foreign aid/ investment category, 148 of those items were about South Africa. Second, the focus on South Africa obscured positive gains elsewhere on the continent. There were 153 news items in the period on HIV/AIDS, and 115 were on South Africa, much of which chronicled the problems with the pandemic in that country. So, both market advances, and economic reforms in other countries, as well as progress against the HIV/AIDS pandemic receive substantially less coverage as South Africa predominates.

Country Name	Total Headlines	% of Total
Benin	14	0.517369

³ APARC's *State of Africa* report has been produced for the years 2002, 2003 and 2004. Each year a "Highlights" fact sheet is produced, bringing attention to specific achievements in African democracies in the areas of education, politics and economics.

⁴ See Appendix of "Headlines" for total distribution of the 2,706 news items by country.

Botswana	34	1.256467
Cape Verde	6	0.221729
Ghana	86	3.178123
Kenya	349	12.89727
Malawi	31	1.145602
Mali	52	1.921656
Mauritius	4	0.14782
Mozambique	99	3.658537
Nigeria	641	23.6881
Senegal	67	2.475979
South Africa	1145	42.31338
Tanzania	94	3.473762
Zambia	84	3.104213
TOTAL	2706	100%

FINDINGS (Qualitative): A cursory review of the headlines reveals a decided bias in the American media's coverage of African democracies. A letter to *The Washington Post* (April 24, 2004) entitled "South Africa's Struggles," offers a pointed summary of the viewpoint reflected in the media's coverage of Africa. While written in response to a specific *Post* article it offers insightful commentary on media bias in general:

Yes, South Africa faces enormous challenges. But we are far from the only society in which unemployment, AIDS and crime would be rated as the 'most pressing problems' in opinion surveys. Whence the assumption that our democracy is threatened by these things? Might it be related to another assumption – that Africa is doomed to fail?

The not-too-subtle assumption that South Africa – and by extension African democracy – is doomed to failure began to show up right at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa's history. *The New York Times*, right after elections published an article entitled, "After all the Buildup, the Vote is a Visual Letdown; Near-news in South Africa cannot compete with disaster and display," (April 27, 1994, Sec. A9). The article reported the election had "produced no made-for-television extravaganza," despite being the first

multiracial election “charged” with “history and portent.” *The Times* followed up, publishing stories like: “Blacks in South Africa Turn to Vigilantes as Crime Soars,” (Nov. 27, 1995, Sec A1), “Drugs, Guns and Vigilante Justice in South Africa,” (Sept. 20, 1996, Sec A4), “On South Africa’s Roads, A Grim Harvest of Death,” (Dec. 26, 1997, Sec A10), “Young, Vulnerable and Violated in the New South Africa,” (July 12, 1998, Magazine). As late as 2003, *The Times* ran an article entitled, “Toddler’s Killing Exposes Ghoulish South Africa Practice,” which suggestively implicates the entire country or culture. The article, however, states, “Muti killings ... are *still occurring*, although most citizens are revolted at the custom and deny having deep-rooted superstitions ... *public outrage is gradually replacing fear*.”⁵

The New York Times’ picture of South Africa is a portrait of disfunctionality. South Africa has had one of the highest rates of rape, including child rape, in the world. South Africa has had one of the highest per capita highway fatality rates worldwide, and South Africa has had a murder rate ten times higher than the U.S. Assertions like these often appear without historical or contemporary context. Thus, the inference is that there is a correlation between such data and black majority rule. A more balance assessment of such data would, at least, offer comparisons to the apartheid period; or, disaggregate such numbers and make comparisons to other countries on other continents at the same stage of development.

The lack of historical context can be seen in a *USA Today* article, which noted the height of American investment in South Africa was 1981, before the end of apartheid (during the period of violent repression of black democratic aspirations).⁶ One could logically conclude from such coverage that the systemic violence in the name of apartheid seemed to have less of an impact on investment than episodic violence under a black majority democratic government. A series of such stories followed almost immediately after elections: *USA Today* reported “South Africa: Open for Business But foreign investors remain wary,” (May 31, 1994, Sec. B1). Such coverage continued through the second

⁵ Italics mine. It should be noted that violence of this sort in Western countries is never identified with the country; it is never reported as an American, French or German practice.

⁶ Stacey, Julie “Investing in South Africa,” *USA Today*, May 4, 1994, Sec. B2

democratic elections in 1999: “South Africa’s Image Problems Deters Investors.” (Oct. 17, 1999, Sec A21) According to that *Washington Post* article, “Germans complained about crime. The British were concerned about the high rate of AIDS,” and this despite, “the peaceful transition from white minority rule to a democracy, and the free-market reforms that have been widely lauded.” *The New York Times* followed a year later with “South Africa’s Economic Lament; With Things Looking Up, Foreign Investors Remain Aloof.” (Nov. 11, 2000, Sec C1)

As stated earlier, South Africa received a disproportionate amount of coverage from major media in the period studied. The qualitative assessment showed that negative trends in South Africa coverage were replicated in the limited reporting on other countries. Another editorial letter to *The Washington Post* – this one about Kenya -- is instructive.

The Post has not told its readers of the many positive developments in Kenya,” the writer states, “especially in economic reforms. ... It has also ignored Kenya’s efforts in mediation in regional conflicts, especially in Somalia and the Sudan.”⁷

One of the more poignant examples of this bias is election coverage, which almost reflexively used negative terms and descriptions. A typical example is *The Post’s* coverage of the 1996 elections in Benin, when it reported that analysts said on the one hand, “*That Nicephore Soglo could be toppled by former president Mathieu Kerekou ... is evidence that this is a working democracy.*”⁸ On the other hand, it was a democratic change of leadership, which would result in the re-election of Kerekou, “*whose 19-year reign as Benin’s president shredded the economy and caused great social upheaval.*”⁹ This is a pejorative description of a free and open election by media. Such reporting reflects something other than news purporting to be fair and balanced.

⁷ “Kenya Safe for Tourists and Investors,” Letters to the Editor, *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1994, Sec. A30

⁸ Italics mine

⁹ Italics mine. The entire quote, actually reads, “That Nicephore Soglo could be toppled by former president Mathieu Kerekou, whose 19-year reign as Benin’s president shredded the economy and caused great social upheaval, is evidence that this is a working democracy, analysts here say.”

Other examples of coverage similar to that of Benin are Zambia and Nigeria. In Zambia, former President Kenneth Kaunda was described as “The Big Man” and an “autocrat” in headlines and articles, when he attempted to run for re-election after having been defeated in democratic elections. Nigeria’s President Olusegun Obasanjo was described as a “strongman” after being re-elected in 2002.

Another area on which American media tends to focus is press freedom. The slant of stories on the subject were suggestive that press freedom should be equated with the right of the press to merely criticize developing democracies. Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa were all criticized by the publications tracked in the survey for their alleged repression of journalistic freedom. Like other “statements of fact” about Africa that find their way into print, such claims were usually made without context – that is Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa have a larger variety of print media than most western countries and different organizations have come to different conclusions viewing the same landscape.¹⁰

CONCLUSION: The findings of this survey indicate that coverage of Africa, by the leading sources of American media, is, at best, dismissive of the continent’s progress and potential, and thus leading to continued “exotification” and marginalization of the African continent. *At worst, coverage disregards recent trends toward democratization, betraying an almost contemptuous lack of interest in the potential and progress being achieved on the continent.* Underneath the present major American media coverage are buried stories of untold and unpublished growth, reform, and sustainability. While this survey was not intended to establish a causal relationship between perceptions about Africa and the preponderance of negative coverage of the continent’s democracies, it is logical and thus reasonable to conclude that there is such a correlation between negative coverage and negative perceptions. Furthermore, it is reasonable to posit that negative perceptions lead to negative outcomes, viz. lower levels of aid and lower levels of investment. In its “Viewing the World” study, DFID makes such a connection.

¹⁰ In the Recommendations section of this report, the difference between European impact and American impact on African media and media coverage will be noted to support this point.

*The content study found a marked imbalance in the way developing countries are portrayed, especially on the news where coverage was generally limited to disasters, bizarre events, or visits by prominent westerns. The audience study found that television was a strong source of beliefs and impressions about the developing world. Viewers generally perceived the developing world in a negative way, blaming this on television images. **This study identified a serious problem with audience understanding of development issues, especially on news programmes.**¹¹*

While the DFID study is about television, and focuses on Great Britain, similar concerns arise in studies of U.S. media. The “Project for Excellence in Journalism,” reported in a 1998 study that in American media there “*has been a shift toward lifestyle, celebrity, entertainment and celebrity crime/scandal in the news and away from government and foreign affairs. ... There is an even more pervasive shift toward featurized and people-oriented approach to news, away from traditional straight news accounts.*”¹² The changing nature of news in American media, combined with the continued negative portrayal of African democracies by leading media outlets can only have negative effects on increasing understanding relative to policies geared toward strengthening ongoing democratic and economic progress on the continent.

Recommendations:

- 1) African countries, and multilateral institutions like the African Union, should develop a set of counter strategies to this negative media portrayal of Africa.**

Included Among the initiatives that should be considered are: (i) developing alternative mediums through which to tell Africa’s story, (ii) a multimedia campaign to counter Africa’s negative image in the American media, and (iii) a strategy for engaging major media outlets, like those identified in this survey, in order to encourage more fair and

¹¹ “Viewing the World,” executive summary, pg 1

¹² “Changing Definitions of News,” Project for Journalism Excellence, March 6, 1998, www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/definitions/ChangingDefinitionsOfNews.pdf

balanced coverage of Africa. Relative to this third point, Europe has taken the initiative, arguing for helping to build capacity in entities like *AllAfrica.com*, as a way of enhancing the media infrastructure capacity of the continent. Sally-Ann Wilson, of DFID, suggested “the establishment of a specific project enabling and monitoring improved media coverage of and from Africa within the G8 Countries.” Wilson also wrote, “The media in G8 nations have a corporate responsibility to accurately reflect Africa to their own populations and to provide room for the African voice to be heard and African viewpoint to be considered.”¹³

2) A plan should be devised to encourage more American NGOs and non-commercial media forums to create new paradigms for training Western and African journalists covering emerging African democracies.

The recently released *Commission on Africa Report* and DIFD studies suggest that some major Western media acknowledge their role in affecting perceptions of Africa and therefore public support for aid and investment. Some European media-focused NGO’s are increasingly sensitive to this relationship between major media and support, and are attempting to address this biases when training media on the continent. For example, London-based *Conciliation Resources*, according to its website, “aims to support African media organizations develop a sustainable capacity to provide more accurate and constructive conflict coverage.”¹⁴ In its 2000 annual report, CR said it worked with several Nigerian media organizations prior to the 1999 general elections. This precedent established by Europe should inform American efforts in this regard.

CR in collaboration with three Lagos-based NGOs organized four election coverage workshops around the country.” The critical issue of approach to journalism is explored, and CR noted, “With the establishment of a democratically elected government after 15 years of military dictatorship, our Nigerian partners raised a follow-up to this initiative. The premise for this follow-up was that many Nigerian journalists having little or no

¹³ Wilson, Sally-Ann, “Submission to Africa Commission re Media Action,” see submissions, www.commissionforafrica.org.

¹⁴ “Media and Conflict in Africa,” Conciliation Resources, www.c-r.org/progs/africmed.shtml

experience of reporting in a democracy, it was essential to equip them with the skills to report the nascent democracy in a constructive manner. The ‘Media and Democracy in Nigeria’ project aims to help the media change its focus from the confrontational style of reporting the military regimes to a more collaborative and less aggressive style.¹⁵ This approach holds promise, although the ultimate outcome is not certain. While the need to increase the capacity, skills, and acumen of African journalists is accepted in practice, the need to do the same relative to Western journalists covering Africa is not nearly as established.

3) A strategy must be developed to encourage leading American schools of journalism and journalism organizations to develop specific training for covering developing democracies and emerging free-market economies, particularly in Africa.

Organizations like the National Association of Black Journalists have long been engaged in the work of improving coverage of various communities. For the most part, NABJ is concerned with issues of media bias toward African Americans. NABJ and other organizations such as the Arlington, Va.-based Freedom Forum regularly hold workshops, symposia and produce working papers and booklets designed to educate both news producers and consumers. Such efforts could be expanded to include Africa. NABJ and African American journalists generally should encourage the entities for which they work to provide specific training about covering Africa, that would include engaging relevant NGOs and former heads of state that can provide important insight on what is happening on the ground. Reporters and editors must become better educated on issues like AGOA, NEPAD, UN Millennium Goals, and other relevant initiatives that do not receive enough coverage in the American media. America’s premier schools of journalism should provide interdisciplinary course work with departments of African studies, international studies, schools of foreign service and business and economics to

¹⁵ “Media and Conflict in Africa: Annual Report, 2000,” Conciliation Resources, www.c-r.org/pubs/annreps/annrep2000/african.shtml

equip new journalists with the tools to combat a bias, which is rooted in a lack of information and understanding. This effort should also include indigenous sources on the continent. An example of this, again, is already taking place in the UK, where the Development Studies Association is collaborating with various agencies, and universities, to educate journalists about development issues.¹⁶ But such partnerships should not be limited to Western-based agencies and media working with each other. These partnerships must include exposing more student and professional journalists to the continent through local partnerships with African-based news agencies, institutions, and individuals.

EDITED BY: The Honorable Charles R. Stith, director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University and former U.S. Ambassador to the United Republic of Tanzania during the Clinton Administration.

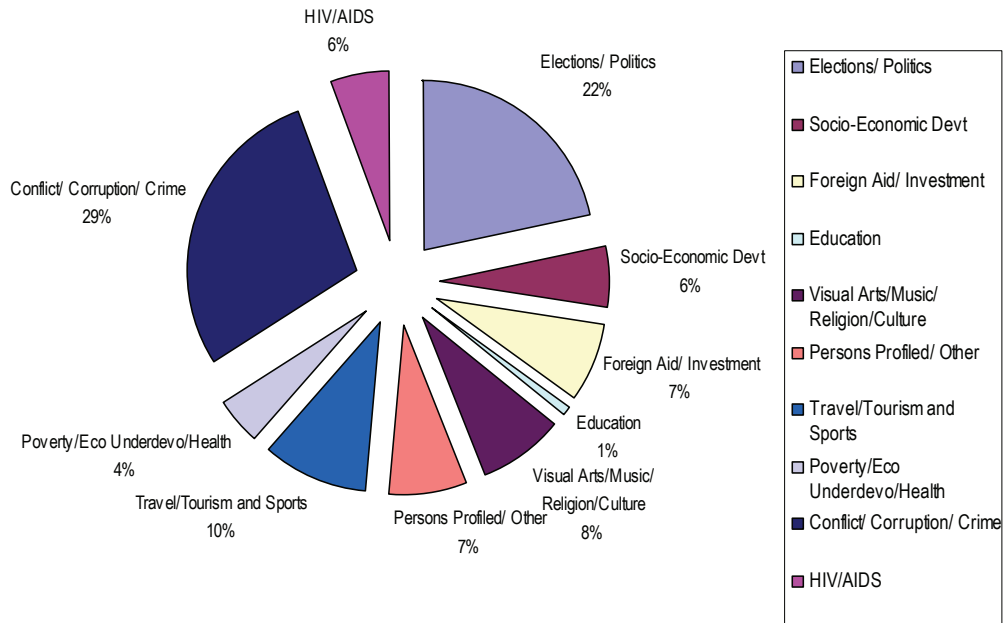
ABOUT THE RESEARCHER: The research for this survey was conducted over a five-month period by award-winning journalist Marlon Millner. Mr. Millner has worked for Dow Jones & Co., American City Business Journals and America Online. He has been published in a variety of publications including The Wall Street Journal, The Atlanta Journal & Constitution, The Chicago Sun-Times and Black Enterprise. He has been a member of Investigative Reporters & Editors, the Society of Business Writers and Editors, and the National Association of Black Journalists. As a member of NABJ he served as chair of the Business Journalism Task Force and was former president of the Washington, DC chapter. Presently, Mr. Millner is pursuing a master's degree at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts and served as an intern at APARC.

¹⁶ See "The Media and Development," Development Studies Association. DSA notes on this page, "We also have a proposal, submitted jointly with City University's School of Journalism, into DFID's Development Awareness Fund and the ESRC for a series of Summer Schools to bring trainee journalists and development researchers together at the beginning of their careers. Should this be successful they will be held at ODI in May 2005," which can be downloaded at the bottom of www.devstud.org.uk/studygroups/media.htm.

APPENDIX 1: American Media Coverage of 14 African Democracies (1994 – 2004):

CATEGORIES

N=2706



APPENDIX 2: American Media Coverage of 14 African Democracies (1994 – 2004):

HEADLINES

N=2706

