

Press Coverage of Africa

The coverage of Africa and its people by the western media is often seen by Africans as biased and strife-driven. Africa and its people make the headlines often when there are pictures of starving children, civil wars, military coups and U.S. military actions on the continent. Is this an accurate picture or a simplistic generalization? What is press coverage on Africa really like?

To answer these questions, TransAfrica Forum reviewed two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. TransAfrica Forum chose these two newspapers for several reasons. Apart from having a nationwide readership, these are the newspapers read by both policymakers on Capitol Hill and investors on Wall Street. These two newspapers pride themselves on maintaining accurate non-partisan reporting, and thus are both viewed as reliable sources of information.

The articles¹ sampled for the study were published from the end of March to mid-August of the year 2000. In addition to studying the “hard news” pages, such as the front page and world news section, we also studied the business section and other news-related pages.

The New York Times is located in what is often described as the financial capital of the world, New York City, home to Wall Street and the United Nations headquarters. Located in the nation’s capital, *The Washington Post* has close proximity to the U.S. power base of politics and diplomacy. Location gives these two newspapers credibility among policymakers, business communities, diplomatic circles, and think tanks. The decisions made in New York City and Washington have worldwide impact. Therefore, what residents – especially influential residents – read often shapes their opinions on foreign policy issues.

METHODOLOGY

TransAfrica Forum’s quantitative study used the print editions of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* between the dates of March 27 and August 20, 2000, to search for

¹ Articles, in relation to this study, refer to any pieces in either newspaper that relate to issues in Africa.

articles related to Africa. Three weeks were constructed between these dates by using the Monday of the first week, the Tuesday of the second week, the Wednesday of the third week, and so on (see table 1). After daily compilation of data from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* print editions, TransAfrica Forum cross-referenced this material by using the Lexis-Nexis information retrieval system to search for articles in the two newspapers between the dates chosen.

TABLE 1: DATES FOR EACH OF THE THREE CONSTRUCTED WEEKS

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Monday	3/27/00	5/15/00	7/3/00
Tuesday	4/4/00	5/23/00	7/11/00
Wednesday	4/12/00	5/31/00	7/19/00
Thursday	4/20/00	6/8/00	7/27/00
Friday	4/28/00	6/16/00	8/4/00
Saturday	5/6/00	6/24/00	8/12/00
Sunday	5/14/00	7/2/00	8/20/00

TABLE 2: TABULATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS IN EACH NEWSPAPER OF AFRICA-RELATED ARTICLES

New York Times	Washington Post
37	52

As table 2 shows, out of 89 articles related to Africa, 37 appeared in *The New York Times*, while 52 appeared in *The Washington Post*.

TABLE 3: TABULATION OF ARTICLES IN SPECIFIC CATEGORIES

	New York Times	Washington Post
AIDS	4	8
Conflict	25	38
Development	4	4
Other	4	2

CATEGORIES

In the following section, we divide up all the articles used in this study into four categories: “Conflict,” “AIDS,” “Development,” and “Other.” It is important to note that we have included any article written on Africa during these constructed sets of weeks. The categories have been designed to analyze how many of the articles collected fit into sections on positive developments on the continent, and how many fit into sections on negative developments. In relationship to this study, positive development can be defined as news coverage of social, economic, or political growth. Conversely, negative development is defined as social, economic, or political decay.

Conflict -- We placed all stories dealing with inter-and intra-country wars, military uprisings, or civilian rebellions under the category of “conflict.” We found that 63 of the total of 89 articles fit into this category. The majority of these articles reported on conflicts in Sierra Leone and Democratic Republic of Congo, the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Egypt’s role in the conflict in the Middle East. There were also a handful of stories regarding UN peacekeeping missions in African conflicts.

AIDS -- Any story on HIV/AIDS or other health issues related to the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) was placed under the category “AIDS.” Of the 89 articles examined, 12 fit into this category. While a handful of these articles dealt with stories about Africans living with the disease, the majority were general reports dealing with medical treatments for AIDS, international assistance to Africa for AIDS and the likely socio-economic effects of HIV/AIDS.

Development -- We placed all stories about economic or political progress in Africa under the broad category of development. In this study, we found only 4 articles in each newspaper dealing with development as defined above. All 4 articles either had to do with international aid for Africa or talks between Africa and the United States on economic development. We found no reports on individual country developmental policies or regional economic developments in

Africa. In addition, no stories were found dealing with private sector developments in any of the African countries.

Other -- Any article that did not fit into the above categories was placed under "Other." These 6 articles were varied in their content, typically consisting of specific news events of the day in question. Although most of these 6 articles included components of all the categories discussed above, they were deemed sufficiently different to be placed in their own section.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that there are some serious problems with the way these two newspapers report on Africa. Even though *The Washington Post* had 15 more articles on Africa than *The New York Times*, all three categories (AIDS, development, and conflict) were proportionately covered by both papers. We found no reports on regional economic or political cooperation in Africa. There was no in-depth look at any of the African political economies. The private sector was totally ignored, while all articles related to development were centered on the public sector. The stories considered lacked sufficient context and were predominately negative in content.

The impression Africans have about negative U.S. media coverage of Africa seems to have been vindicated by this study. It is obviously important that the media report on conflicts that occur in Africa and on the multiplicity of problems caused by HIV/AIDS. However, judging from the disproportionate reporting of 'negative' news over 'positive' news, there is an imbalance in the reporting of news from the African continent. One would have expected *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to make an effort to inform American citizens and policymakers in a much more balanced, detailed, and fair manner. Failure to address this issue will contribute to an increase in Afro-pessimism in America.

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