DISRUPTING OR CONFORMING: A COMPUTATIONAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF AFRICA ON YOUTUBE

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International news organizations have long been critiqued for their portrayal of Africa, often reinforcing narratives of poverty, conflict, and crisis that align with broader historical and geopolitical power asymmetries (Franks, 2014). The dominance of European and North American media in framing Africa's global image has been well documented, with scholars arguing that such representations marginalize African agency and reinforce stereotypical understandings of the continent (Obijiofor & Hanusch, 2011; Wasserman, 2018). However, in recent years, new international broadcasters such as Al Jazeera, CGTN, and TRT World have entered the media landscape, prompting debates over whether these actors are disrupting the traditional, Western-centric portrayal of the Global South (Madrid-Morales & Gorfinkel, 2018). While some research suggests that non-Western news actors such as Al Jazeera and CGTN have introduced alternative perspectives that counter dominant Anglo-American framings of Africa, other studies indicate that these outlets still conform to broader global news values and often reproduce traditional frames of political instability and underdevelopment (Thussu, 2018). The extent to which these actors fundamentally disrupt legacy media narratives remains a subject of debate, with some scholars arguing that their emergence constitutes a shift in geopolitical media flows while others maintain that their influence remains limited by existing global power structures in journalism (Wasserman, 2018).

The rise of digital platforms, particularly YouTube, has further complicated these dynamics, providing alternative avenues for distributing news content and engaging audiences outside legacy media's traditional gatekeeping structures (Gillespie, 2018; Paterson & Domingo, 2008). YouTube has emerged as a critical space for the distribution and consumption of news, offering an alternative to traditional broadcast and print media. Scholars have debated whether the platform genuinely disrupts mainstream narratives or merely extends the reach of legacy media in a new digital environment (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). On one hand, YouTube enables a diversity of perspectives, allowing for greater representation of marginalized voices and counter-narratives (Mutsvairo, 2016). On the other hand, the platform's recommendation algorithms and monetization structures often favor dominant media institutions,

reinforcing existing hierarchies of influence (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). While independent creators and alternative media outlets have leveraged YouTube to challenge mainstream framings of global events, the degree to which this constitutes a rupture in media representation remains contested.

Building on these debates, this paper examines whether international news organizations' reporting on Africa via YouTube represents a rupture from legacy media portrayals, and it explores how audiences engage with and respond to this content. Specifically, it addresses three questions: first, whether YouTube-based news coverage of Africa by international organizations diverges from established legacy media representations (RQ1); second, whether "new" media actors break away from European and North American media framings of Africa or largely conform to them (RQ2); and third, how audiences engage with and respond to these portrayals on YouTube (RQ3).

To answer the questions above, this study draws on a dataset of approximately 250,000 videos uploaded to the YouTube channels of twelve international news organizations over an 18-month period (March 1, 2023 to February 28, 2025): Agence France-Presse (AFP), Africanews, Al Jazeera English, Associated Press (AP), BBC World, China Global Television Network (CGTN), China News Channel (CNC), Deutsche Welle (DW), France 24, Turkish Radio Television (TRT), and Voice of America (VOA). Data collection used YouTube's API to retrieve metadata, subtitles, and user comments, enabling a large-scale analysis of both news content and audience engagement. The selection of these sources is based on their extensive reach on YouTube, their (growing) focus on African current affairs, and the fact that they represent a diverse range of geopolitical leanings.

To examine RQ1 and RQ2, the paper uses BERTopic, a machine-learning-based topic modeling technique, to identify dominant themes in video content across the twelve media organizations. BERTopic is particularly suited as it allows for an unsupervised, interpretable clustering of textual data, revealing recurring frames (Grootendorst, 2022). Topic modeling has been widely employed in media studies to detect patterns in large-scale textual corpora (Jacobi, van Atteveldt, & Welbers, 2016). To address RQ3, the study examines audience engagement with news coverage by clustering and analyzing user comments. Discursive clustering techniques are employed to determine whether audience responses align with or contest the media narratives identified through BERTopic (Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2012). This method allows for a nuanced exploration of audience discourse, revealing patterns of resistance, reinforcement, and negotiation of media portrayals.

Findings indicate that coverage of Africa on YouTube remains largely episodic, with mentions of the continent concentrated in specific news events rather than sustained reporting. As expected, Africanews emerges as the most frequent sourcs mentioning Africa, while other broadcasters provide intermittent coverage. A significant shift in reporting patterns is observed around major geopolitical events, such as the aftermath of October 7, reflecting broader trends in international news cycles. Analysis of geographic distribution also reveals a concentration of news coverage in North Africa, while many African countries, both large and small, receive minimal attention. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the uneven distribution of international

news coverage. Despite the entry of new actors into the media landscape, most broadcasters tend to replicate existing patterns of news reporting rather than offering a distinctly alternative portrayal of Africa. Regarding thematic content, Chinese state-backed media such as CGTN and CNC distinguish themselves by prioritizing stories related to sports and diplomatic relations, often portraying Africa in the context of Chinese geopolitical interests. Africanews stands out with a more diversified coverage approach, addressing a wider range of topics compared to other international broadcasters.

A preliminary analysis of audience engagement data reveals that user interactions vary significantly across different news sources. While Chinese global media, for example, tend to frame Africa in a predominantly positive light, reflecting state narratives that emphasize development and cooperation, audience responses to this content are mixed. Some users reinforce these portrayals, while others critically engage with or reject the narratives presented. The findings underscore both the persistence of dominant media frames and the potential for alternative storytelling facilitated by digital platforms.

By critically examining the intersection of international journalism, digital platforms, and audience agency, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the role of online media in shaping global news flows. It interrogates whether YouTube facilitates a rupture in traditional representations of Africa or whether it ultimately serves as a new distribution channel for entrenched media narratives. As global media consumption increasingly shifts to digital platforms, understanding how Africa is framed in these spaces and how audiences respond is crucial for broader discussions on media influence, representation, and power.

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