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Image of the World Through the Eyes of Five Nigerian Newspapers

by Idowu Sobowale*

Abstract

This paper questions the popular view that Western media negate the image of the Third World through unprofessionally acquired reports that concentrate on negative activities while ignoring the positive ones. The paper claims that there is no empirical validation of the view that there is an imbalance in news coverage between the West and the Third World. By content-analysing a sample of Nigerian papers, the author arrives at the conclusion that these papers not only do not have a better balance than the Western ones in reporting world news, but they do not even give more prominence to Third World news.

Résumé

Cet article remet en question l'acceptation populaire que les media occidentaux dénigrent le Tiers-Monde à travers des informations acquises de manière non professionnelle qui se concentrent sur les activités négatives en ignorant les aspects positifs. L'article dit qu'il n'y a aucune validité empirique du point de vue qu'il existe un déséquilibre de la couverture informationnelle entre l'occident et le Tiers-Monde. En analysant le contenu d'un échantillon de journaux nigériens l'auteur arrive à la conclusion que non seulement ces journaux ne font pas un meilleur équilibre que ceux de l'Ouest en ce qui concerne les nouvelles du monde mais qu'ils ne donnent même pas prééminence aux nouvelles du Tiers-Monde.

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Introduction

The foreign press, particularly the Western press, is often vilified for the perceived poor image of the developing countries in the eyes of the world (McBride 1980, Ugboajah, 1985). The Western media are often accused of distorting events in the developing countries to suit the prejudices and stereotypes of Europeans and Americans (Giffard, 1984; Charles, Shore and Todd, 1979). Foreign journalists sometimes are alleged to fabricate stories about the goings on in a developing country either from scanty information gathered from capital cities or sometimes from their own imaginations conjured in their hotel rooms (Masmoudi, 1979).

In Nigeria, for instance, official government efforts recently were made to counter the bad press that the country got from foreign journalists.¹ Information officers have been deployed to foreign missions abroad to give out "correct information" about the country.² A news agency with a monopoly of information coming in and going out of Nigeria has even been established (Dare, 1983).

The main concern of government officials and others in the Third World countries is that the foreign media concentrate on the negative aspects of events in their countries (Riffle, 1984) to the detriment of the more positive and more development-oriented events (Larson, 1979).

Available evidence does not appear to justify the verbal assault against the Western Press for its "negative" coverage of Third World countries. Empirical evidence in this regard is rather scanty.³ While many studies about the volume of news flow between the advanced and the developing countries (between the North and the South in the parlance of the New World Information and Communication Order, NWICO) exist (Sparks, 1978; Mishra, 1979; and Semmel, 1976), there is little to suggest that sufficient evidence has yet been gathered on the qualitative nature of the imbalance.

Accusations of both quantitative and qualitative imbalance in the news flow between the North and the South have featured not only in the popular media, but have dominated discussions at learned conferences. In fact, UNESCO has devoted considerable time, energy and resources to debates on this subject (UNESCO, 1979; Righter, 1979; McBride, 1980).

Nigeria is chosen in this study to examine how a country that is claimed to be poorly represented in the eyes of the world mirrors the world to its citizens through its mass media.

Literature Review

Mishra (1979) studied the coverage of the Middle East in four US elite newspapers, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* and the Columbia Broadcasting System television network. The study compared the flow of news from the Middle East in relation to news from other regions of the world. It found considerable concentration of attention on Israel, Egypt and Iran. New stories from the Middle East were not played up as much as expected from the nature of the conflict in that region. The findings also indicated that most of the news items were treated in a "neutral and professional Journalistic" fashion.

In a similar study, Sparkes (1978) found a noticeable imbalance in news flow between the United States and Canada. For instance, he found that while Canadian newspapers devoted 49.5% of their foreign newshole to America, American newspapers spared only 2.3% of their news space for Canadian stories. He, like several other researchers, also found that Canadian newspapers relied on American sources for their foreign stories. Sparkes explained the disparity in terms of America's dominance in its trade with Canada.

In a content analysis of four geographically dispersed prestige dailies, Semmel (1976) compared the foreign news attention patterns of the papers - the *New York Times* (East), *Miami Herald* (South), *Chicago Tribune* (Mid-West) and *Los Angeles Times* (West). He found evidence of geographical influence in the foreign attention pattern of the papers. The study also revealed that the papers paid attention only to events in world capitals, individual elites, elite groups and governmental agencies. Highly industrialised and economically advanced countries were well covered by the four newspapers.

Content analysing three US elite newspapers, Hague (1983) found no support for the charge of quantitative imbalance in news flow between the US and the Third World. He found that the space devoted to the Third World by the three newspapers averaged 65% while only 35% was devoted to the developed countries.

Hicks and Avishag (1974) in a content analysis of three Israeli and one American Newspaper found that the American newspaper - *Times Picayune* - published more news involving the US than it did news not involving the US while the Israeli newspapers were more balanced in their coverage of foreign news stories involving their country and those not involving their country. They found that all papers reported more elite-oriented news than those relating to common people. Significant differences were found in

the frequency of positive, negative and neutral news items. All newspapers carried more foreign news of a positive nature than those portraying the negative aspects of events. The study also found some support for the argument that news flow between big and small nations tends to be one way.

Nwuneli (1971) studied how Nigerian newspapers covered the invasion of Guinea in 1970 and found that although the stories of the invasion reached Nigeria about one hour after the invasion began, the Nigerian press did not carry the stories until the third day; the invasion story was considerably played down when it finally appeared in the media.

In a content analysis of four Nigerian newspapers, Dare (1973) sought to find out how the Nigerian press covered the Middle East war. Dare found that none of the papers studied had a correspondent in the Middle East. He found evidence of bias on the part of the press in both their news stories and their editorial comments.

Nwuneli and Dare (1977) examined how the Angolan crisis was reported by the Nigerian press by content analysing five Nigerian newspapers, *Daily Times*, *New Nigerian*, *Nigerian Herald*, *Nigerian Observer* and *Nigerian Tribune*. The researchers found that the recognition of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) by the Nigerian government influenced the increase in the volume of news about Angola in the Nigerian press. They found that about two-thirds of stories on Angola appeared after her declaration of independence.

Pratt (1974) content-analysed six Nigerian newspapers for their foreign news content ratio in relation to local news content. He found that for every foreign story in the press there was slightly more than three local stories. The papers focused noticeable attention on Africa and Middle-East with Western Europe and America following. The bulk of the foreign stories consisted of political conflicts, war and negotiation for arms, violence and crime.

Methodology

The present study was designed to investigate how the Nigerian Press attempted to portray the world to Nigerians in the past six years. It was assumed that if the journalists agreed with their leaders that foreign media were biased in their reporting, then, they would react by portraying the developing countries to their readers in a "more positive light".⁴ That they would also give greater attention to news stories from these countries than those

from the developed countries. It was also reasoned that Nigerian newspapers would give greater prominence to stories from the Third World countries than they would those from the developed nations. Another assumption was that the government and quasi-government newspapers would be more inclined to give greater attention, prominence as well as positive orientation to stories from Third World countries.

The following hypothesis were then formulated based on the aforementioned assumptions:

1. Nigerian Newspapers would carry more stories from the Third World countries than the developed countries.
2. Since Africa is said to be the "Centre Piece" of Nigeria's foreign policy, Nigeria newspapers would focus more on Africa in their foreign news coverage.
3. Nigerian newspapers would carry more foreign stories on development than other types of news.
4. Government Newspapers would tend to do all of the above more than privately owned newspapers would care to do.

To test these hypotheses, five newspapers were selected based mainly on the ownership factor. The papers were *Nigerian Tribune*, *Daily Times*, *Punch*, *New Nigerian* and *Daily Star*. Two of them, *New Nigerian* and *Daily Star*, are wholly government owned; two, *Nigerian Tribune* and *Punch* are privately owned while *Daily Times* is jointly owned by Government and private entrepreneurs.

A period of six years, 1980-1985, covering the period of the Second Republic and the second coming of the military (1984 and 1985) was chosen. Three months of each year were randomly selected, giving a total of 18 months. Six days in each of these months were then selected randomly; in all, 108 days were selected. All the available six issues of the five papers for these days were content analysed. A total of 648 newspaper editions were selected for analysis.

A class of second year mass communication students supervised by eight masters students did the coding. Inter-coder consensus was arrived at where a particular content did not fit neatly into a content category. A total of 3023 stories were eventually analysed.

The following content categories, among others, were used:

1. Newspapers: defined as the five newspapers to be analysed.
2. Ownership: defined in terms of who was financing or controlling each of the five newspapers.
3. Period: the year of publication of the newspaper.

4. story type: defined in terms of the following broad categories - economic, political, social and disaster.
5. Prominence: defined in terms of the placement of the story in the newspaper.
6. Nature of story: defined in terms of whether the story was of tragedy, crime, entertainment (art, culture, music, film etc.), sports, development (having to do with technological and other innovations), war, oddity and others (all other variables that did not fit into the above classifications).
7. Dateline: defined as the continent where the story originated.
8. Source: defined as the byline on the story.

Analysis

An analysis of the data reveals that only 10.5% of the total news stories in the five newspapers were foreign news. Nigerian newspapers carried less foreign stories about the Third World countries than they did about the developed countries. About 23% of the total foreign news in the five papers came from Europe and Asia while 13.4% originated from North America. Table 1 shows that the preponderance of foreign stories that featured in the newspapers came from the African continent.

Table 1:

Coverage of the World by Five Nigerian Newspapers

CONTINENTS	NEWSPAPERS				
	Nigerian Tribune	Daily Times	Punch	New Nigerian	Daily Star
Africa	36.6	33.9	36.1	33.0	29.9
Australia	24.4	24.5	23.4	24.6	11.8
North America	11.7	14.2	11.7	13.5	23.6
South America	5.5	4.9	6.9	6.0	6.9
Europe and Asia	21.8	22.6	21.8	22.9	27.8
	N - 855	N - 762	N - 435	N - 789	N - 144

$$X^2 - 32.3 \quad df - 16 \quad P - .03$$

The large number of stories from Australia is something of a surprise. Apart from Commonwealth ties and sporting activities - events that sometimes brought the Continent and Africa into conflict over South Africa's apartheid policies - it is not easy to justify such considerable attention from Nigerian newspapers. However, the contrasting postures of Australia and New-Zealand over the vexed issue of apartheid in South Africa and former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Frazer's support for the African position, were of considerable interest to Africans.

Colonial ties, economic relations and South African racial problems might well have been some of the factors that would explain the interest that Nigerian newspapers had in covering events from Europe and Asia. That the attention paid to this area of the world was not more than the data in Table 1 indicate could only have been due to the reduction in the influence of Western wire services⁶ in Nigeria.

The shrinkage in oil sales to the United States and that country's perceived sympathy for South Africa's apartheid policies might have been responsible for the moderate attention paid to North America by the five Nigerian newspapers. Canada has never been known to feature significantly in Nigerian mass media.

On the whole, Table 1 does not seem to support the assumption that Nigerian newspapers gave more coverage to the Third World countries than they did the developed countries. Although Africa got more coverage than any other continent, when the coverage of North America, Europe and Australia is viewed in relation to that of Africa and South America, a better perspective of the relative importance of the Third World as a source of foreign news appears.

However, Table 1 supports the assumption that Nigerian newspapers would focus more attention on Africa than they would any other part of the world.

In effect, Table 1 has provided not enough support for hypothesis 1, but sufficient evidence to justify hypothesis 2.

Table 2 shows that Nigerian newspapers hardly gave prominence to foreign news stories. None of the newspapers in this study used up to eight per cent of its foreign stories on the front page. Although the Nigerian Tribune had up to 13% back page placement of foreign stories, all the other four newspapers did not devote up to eight per cent of their back page newshole to foreign stories. This is in contradistinction to Hague's (1983) finding that three US dailies devoted about 65% of their international newspace to the Third World countries; 44% of the front page stories were international news of which Third World countries accounted for 82%. In the present study only 10.5% of the total news stories in the five papers

over the six-year period were international news.

The conclusion is clear: not only were Nigerian newspapers not covering the world adequately, they perhaps did not give enough prominence to world events.

A possible explanation for this performance could be the distance of the events to Nigeria. The findings of McLean and Pinna (1985) that news interests declined with distance might have found support in the present study. Although Kariel and Rosenvall (1983; 1984) have discounted the possible influence of distance, particularly when the country of origin of the news is far, it seems they have overlooked the "reduction effect" long distance could have on the impact and importance of international news.

Table 2

Prominence Given to Foreign Stories by Five Nigerian Newspapers

PROMINENCE	NEWSPAPERS				
	Nigerian Tribune	Daily Times	Punch	New Nigerian	Daily Star
Front Lead	3.4	3.9	5.2	2.0	7.4
Back Lead	13.3	3.7	6.1	3.2	7.4
Inside	83.2	92.4	88.8	94.8	85.1
	N - 851	N - 765	N - 446	N - 787	N - 148

X - 100.9 df - 8 P - .01

That the five papers analysed concentrated much of their attention on political events (Table 3) is suggestive of a number of things. It could be that the world scene was dominated mainly by political events. And there is plausibility in this argument, given the goings-on in Southern and Northern Africa, Europe and even the United States. It could also be a manifestation of the pre-occupation of the country itself with a stable political order. This assumption is supported by the findings of a study designed to know what kind of events Nigerian newspapers paid attention to in their coverage of national events.⁷ That study covered about the same period as this study.

Table 3

*Nature of Foreign Stories Covered by Five Nigerian Newspapers
Over a Six-Year period (1980-1985)*

NATURE OF STORIES	PERIOD					
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Economical	21.6	19.6	14.1	18.5	18.2	17.4
Political	49.4	58.8	59.0	51.9	50.0	46.2
Social	20.5	17.2	24.8	26.7	28.3	31.0
Disaster	8.5	4.4	2.2	2.8	3.6	5.4
	N-176	N-296	N-505	N-670	N-584	N-184
	X-46.3 df-15 P - .01					

The preponderance of news of social events over those of economic should be less surprising even though the present economic predicament of the world had shown traces of manifestation as far back as 1980. As a point of fact, the events reported could have been the direct consequences of the economic ills. Again, the earlier study showed a striking similarity with trends portrayed in Table 3.

Social occurrences at home could have conditioned the perception of the Nigerian editors about what was important and relevant to print or emphasize.

TABLE 4

Types of Stories Covered Over a Period of Six Years (1980-1985)

STORY TYPES	PERIOD					
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
TRAGEDY	21.1	15.9	10.8	16.2	12.6	14.5
CRIME	9.4	11.5	12.1	15.7	11.5	11.5
ENTERTAINMENT	7.2	9.2	1.4	1.5	3.3	3.5
SPORTS	17.9	7.5	9.2	6.4	10.9	8.4
DEVELOPMENT	19.7	25.6	25.8	24.8	27.8	33.0
WAR	12.6	8.9	11.8	6.1	12.6	5.3
ODDITY	4.0	1.4	2.2	3.9	5.3	3.5
OTHER	8.1	19.9	26.7	25.4	16.0	20.3
	N - 223	N - 347	N - 629	N - 871	N - 723	N - 227
	X ² - 211.1 df - 35 P . 01					

Table 4 shows the details of what types of foreign news stories Nigerian newspapers covered between 1980 and 1985. Table 4 further elucidates why social issues appear so prominent in table 3. In 1980, four types of events dominated the international news in Nigerian newspapers. These were tragedies, development, sports and war. This compares with 1981 when development, other types of events not included in our eight news typologies here, tragedy and crime were the focus of attention. In subsequent years, emphasis shifted to development (excepting 1984) and other unidentified events, tragedy and crime. The preponderance of tragedy and crime news stories over the six-year period is a pointer that all might not have been well socially world-wide. Although this study did not seek to know the causes of the trends here, common sense suggests that the upsurge in tragedy and crime stories could have been the direct result of:

- the political turmoil and economic problems that have plagued the world for some time now.
- a tacit commission by Nigerian newspapers of the same offence for which the Western press has for long stood condemned by Third World countries.
- a function of the classical conditioning and indoctrination of the Nigerian journalist on what makes news.
- inability of the Nigerian journalist to perceive and define news according to the scale of values of his audience.
- it could have been easier and safer to concentrate on social issues to minimise the risk of running foul of press laws or hurting powerful political office holders.

The focus on news of development could have been a result of the concern government officials and the general public had expressed about what they considered an undue emphasis by Nigerian newspapers on "negative and unrewarding" news events.⁹ It could also have been an awareness on the part of foreign news page editors of these newspapers that they could influence development locally by mirroring what happened elsewhere, though this seems less likely.

The data in Table 4 seem to confirm the third hypothesis that Nigerian newspapers would tend to carry more news items oriented toward development than they would other types of news items. The three parts of Table 5 (a, b, c) show that there was no marked difference in the way the government-owned newspapers and their private or quasi-private counterparts perceived and mirrored the world to their readers in Nigeria.

TABLE 5:

Coverage of Continent by Press Ownership

<u>Story Type</u>	<u>Government</u>	<u>Private</u>	<u>Joint</u>
Africa	32.2	36.6	34.0
Australia	22.3	24.1	24.2
North America	15.4	11.9	14.1
South America	5.4	5.9	5.7
Europe	24.8	21.5	22.0
	<u>N - 755</u>	<u>N - 1304</u>	<u>N - 900</u>

Story Prominence by Press Ownership

Front Page	1.9	4.0	4.0
Back Page	2.7	10.6	5.0
Inside Page	95.4	85.4	91.0
	<u>N - 746</u>	<u>N - 1311</u>	<u>N - 900</u>

Coverage of Story Type by Press Ownership

Economic	19.8	15.3	19.7
Political	55.8	50.9	55.5
Social	21.0	30.7	20.1
Disaster	3.3	3.2	4.7
	<u>N - 575</u>	<u>N - 1075</u>	<u>N - 730</u>

Hypothesis 4, which states that government-owned newspapers would give greater coverage to the Third World, focus more attention on Africa and carry more development oriented news stories than privately owned newspapers is not supported. It appears all the papers were under the same influence, shared the same concerns and had similar orientations.

Conclusion

Africa dominated the foreign news in Nigerian newspapers from 1980 to 1985. Australia's dominance in the Nigerian media at this time is something of a surprise.

The coverage Nigerian newspapers gave to the Third World countries was not more than they gave the developed nations.

The study has demonstrated that Nigerian newspapers hardly gave adequate attention and prominence to world events. Only

10.5% of their total news items were international.

Politico-social events dominated the foreign content of Nigerian newspapers during the period under study. Three kinds of news appear to have either dominated world events or they simply had caught the fancy of Nigerian foreign page editors: these were development, tragedies and crime. Although the world had been facing critical economic problems by the period under study, Nigerian newspaper editors seemed not to have paid adequate attention to them.

This study reveals that Nigerian journalists' orientation might not have been too different from their Western counterparts, and consequently, their performance and product could in no way have differed significantly.

A number of reasons have been suggested for the trends which this study has revealed. However, these reasons bear investigating to document their empirical linkages. Also, a redefinition of "news" appears necessary if Nigerian newspapers are to help in redressing the quantitative and qualitative imbalance in the flow of news to and from Nigeria.

There was no striking difference between the way government-controlled and private newspapers treated foreign news stories. They all appeared to have been subjected to and affected by identical influences.

FOOTNOTES

1. A three-day seminar on "Managing Nigeria's Foreign Image: Dimensions and Constraints" was held in Lagos September 17-19, 1986.
2. The permanent secretary in the Information and Culture Ministry announced this at the three-day seminar on "Managing Nigeria's Foreign Image: Dimensions and Constraints" held in Lagos between September 17 and 19, 1986.
3. Measurement of the qualitative nature of news flow imbalance between the North and the South has not been as prolific as for the quantitative.
4. Positive orientation was measured by the type of story the papers featured. The traditional indicator - directionally - was not used because of the possibility of having all the three attributes of directionality, positive, neutral and negative, in a story. Stories which focused on development, sports and entertainment were defined as "positive" while those on tragedy, crime and war were classified as "negative".
5. Some of the papers, particularly those published outside Lagos, could not be traced.

6. The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) enjoys the monopoly of deciding what news from the World Wire Services Nigerian media would get through a cooperative agreement it entered into with the foreign Wire Services at its inception in 1978.
7. The study was conducted by a group of postgraduate Diploma students in my research Methods class in January/February of 1986. The findings were published in two papers included in this study - *Punch* and *Daily Times*.
8. Nigeria had been plagued by a number of social problems, armed robbery, *thuggery* (during the political days), poor health care delivery, etc. etc.
9. The Nigerian press has come under criticism of highlighting only what would sell newspapers at the expense of development-oriented news stories.

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