

African News in the World Press: A Comparative Content Analysis of a North and a South Newspaper

by Kwadwo Bosompra*

Abstract

John Lent (1976) contended that charges of bias in international news flow were 'intuitive, (and) not based on research facts'. This response to Lent's comment empirically confirms that there is indeed a flow bias in international news in favour of the North and that the bias is reflected even in African newspapers due to their dependence on Western News Agencies for their sources of news on other African countries. It suggests that African media organizations should increase their sourcing of news from PANA to reverse the current trend.

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Résumé

John Lent (1976) a soutenu que les accusations de parti pris dans l'ordre d'information international étaient plutôt intuitives et pas du tout basées sur des faits de recherches. Cette article, qui est une réponse au commentaire de Lent confirme, de façon empirique, que vraiment il ya un parti pris dans l'ordre d'information international en faveur du nord, et que ce parti pris se retrouve même dans les journaux africains, à cause de leur dépendance vis-à-vis des agences d'information de l'Occident qu'ils utilisent comme source d'information sur les autres pays africains. L'article propose donc que les organisations des médias africains utilisent de plus en plus la PANA comme source d'information, afin d'inverser la tendance actuelle.

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, Third World countries have pressed their case for the establishment of a New Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Prominent among their criticisms of the old order were the imbalance in the flow of news between the North and the South, the dominant influence of the transnational news agencies and their distortion of news about developing countries, and the near absence of any exchange of news among developing countries.

Complaints about reporting the Third World have taken the form of charges that the reports are inadequate, slanted, crisis oriented and generally negative. Attempts to redress the imbalance have led to the establishment of such news organizations as the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool, the Caribbean News Agency, and Pan African News Agency (PANA).

On the research front, the growing volume of literature on the international flow of news has not helped to resolve the issue and, as Lent (1976) put it, 'many of the statements concerning the subject are still intuitive, not based on research facts'.

This study is a response to Lent's comment. It attempts to look at how one daily newspaper each from the North and the South report on Africa in their foreign news columns. The *People's Daily Graphic* of Ghana and *The Times* of London were selected, because both were more easily available than others, for content analysis.

The *People's Daily Graphic* is a government-owned newspaper with a daily circulation of less than 100,000. It is a 16-page tabloid with 7 columns each 3.5 cm. wide. The paper itself measures 39.7 cm. by 6 28.7 cm. It was established by the London-based Mirror Group in 1953 and was acquired by the Nkrumah regime in 1962. Until December 31, 1981, it was known as the *Daily Graphic*.

The Times on the other hand, is an independent newspaper established in 1785 and has a daily circulation far in excess of

400,000. It usually has over 40 pages and 8 columns each 4cm. wide. The paper measures 59.5 cm. by 37.5cm. and is described by *Benn's Guide to Newspapers and Periodicals of the World* as 'a newspaper famous for its home and foreign news service, its correspondence columns and leader comment'.

For both newspapers, we looked at the nature of news items (i.e. issues or topics) on Africa that were carried and the priority (in terms of page placement) that was given to them. We also looked at whether the news stories were accompanied with photographs or other illustrations.

The study also focused on who Africa's newsmakers were, i.e. who were the main actors in the news? Who are responsible for painting the image of Africa as projected by the two dailies? And, is the image positive or negative? We sought to answer these questions by looking at the providers of the news stories, their sources of information, and the direction of the coverage.

Which regions of Africa are most frequently mentioned in the news and which regions of relevant countries make the headlines? Both questions are addressed by the study along with the amount of news space allocated to news on Africa.

Methodology

Originally, the analysis was to include all editions issued during September, 1988. However, due to difficulties encountered in obtaining a complete set of September issues of *The Times*, the sample period was supplemented with issues from July and August. Altogether, therefore, 30 issues of both newspapers were content analysed.

In a content analysis of development news in some Third World newspapers, Ogan *et al.* (1984) discounted a similar methodological problem by contending that 'no matter what the time frame, a newspaper dedicated to covering development news would cover such news at all times of the year. The amount and nature of the news should not vary substantially from month to month'.

The same argument holds in this case. So, although use of the same month for both newspapers would have been better

methodologically, it is contended that for a newspaper interested in African news, the amount and nature of African news carried should not vary substantially from month to month.

We define African news as news originating from Africa. Where it originates outside Africa, it must involve African personalities or events or processes with a direct bearing on Africa and its peoples. In the case of the *People's Daily Graphic*, domestic news was ignored except where it involved personalities from other African countries. For example, news about the recent visit of former Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere, would be defined as African news.

In looking at the nature of the news carried by both papers we drew up five content categories: political, economic, social, cultural and miscellaneous. Political news was defined as news relating to the activities of governments and their agents, to visits of heads of state and government ministers, the activities of political parties, news of liberation movements, border disputes, diplomacy, elections, security matters, etc.

Economic news was defined as news about international loans, economic aid economic negotiations, banking institutions and operations, agricultural development, etc.

Social news referred to news about issues such as urban renewal, health, transportation, education, prisons, labour problems, religious affairs, drought, floods, population matters, tourism, development of the mass media and telecommunications.

The cultural category covered news about sports, cultural festivals, language development, stories on the boycott of the Olympic Games, etc. were classified as political).

Stories that did not fit neatly into any of the four categories were classified as miscellaneous.

Under newsmakers or main actors in the news, we had four categories: political elite, other elite, ordinary people and 'mixed'. By political elite we meant top political or government functionaries. Other elite referred to the top brass in business

and industry, the military and police, the University, labour leaders, paramount chiefs and other local leaders.

Ordinary people referred to workers, middle and lower ranks of the military and police, small-time traders, market women, peasant farmers, students, the unemployed, etc. Where the news was about all the groups, we categorized it as 'mixed'.

Providers refer to whoever made the news available to the newspaper.

We looked at how often the transnational news agencies provided news about Africa as compared to the Pan African News Agency (PANA), the newspapers' own reporters, and other sources.

The journalist or writer's sources of information referred to whether the writer spoke to mainly government officials or sought information mainly from government documents and press releases. Other categories here were non-government officials, non-government documents. Cases of no attribution were also taken note of.

The material was also coded in terms of direction, i.e. positive, negative and neutral. Positive news referred to those items reflecting social cohesion and co-operation, international co-operation, normal communication among nations, government at work, information on affairs of government, society at work, information about groups of people co-operating in non-governmental affairs, 'life goes on' news items about individuals, etc.

Negative news referred to those items reporting social conflicts and disorganization, international tensions, conflicts between nations—military, political and economic, civil disruptions, political economic or social conflicts between groups, crime and vice, accidents and disaster. What did not fall into either of these groups were categorised as neutral.

In terms of the regional distribution of news, we divided Africa into five regions, i.e. northern, southern, eastern, western and central.

Finally, in terms of news space, we had four categories, $\frac{1}{8}$ page or less, above $\frac{1}{8}$ page to $\frac{1}{4}$, less than $\frac{1}{2}$ page but more than $\frac{1}{4}$ page, and $\frac{1}{2}$ page and above. We had to categorize the news hole in this way because of the differences in the sizes of the two newspapers.

Overall, for *The Times*, African news items appearing on the front page or in the 'Overseas News' pages were coded while for the *Graphic*, African news items on the front page or 'World News' page were coded along with news on Africa at the Olympic games.

For both papers, editorials, letters to the editor, columnists opinions, etc. were not coded.

Findings

Overall, the *People's Daily Graphic* carried more news items on Africa (177) than *The Times* (86). The data showed that both papers placed more emphasis on political news, *The Times* more so (61.63%) than the *Graphic* (48.59%). Both papers also emphasized social news as shown in table 1, but whereas the *Graphic* had a fair spread across the political, economic (15.26%), social (23.73%), and cultural (11.86%) categories, *The Times* appeared to be interested in only political and social news (31.4%).

Table 1. News Content Categories

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Political	48.59	61.63
Economic	15.26	2.32
Social	23.73	31.40
Cultural	11.86	4.65
Miscellaneous	0.56	0.00
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 2. Priority Given to Stories

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Front page	2.26	3.49
Back page	0.00	0.00
Inside page	97.74	96.51
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 3. Main Actors in the News

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Political elite	59.89	47.67
Other elite	3.39	8.14
Ordinary people	19.77	18.60
Mixed	7.34	10.47
	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 4. Providers of the News

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Transnational News		
Agencies	60.45	30.23
Newspapers own		
Reporters	1.70	63.95
PANA	16.39	2.33
Ghana News Agency	6.78	0.00
Other foreign sources	6.21	0.00
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

The social news in *The Times* dealt mainly with the floods and the resulting famine in the Sudan.

The cultural news in both papers dealt mainly with the Pope's Southern African tour and some sports news in the case of the *Graphic*.

Both paper's emphases on political news is not unexpected. In a content analysis of material carried by PANA, Ansah (1984) found that 58.3 per cent of the content was political news, with economic news accounting for 18.9 per cent and social news 14.3 per cent.

About 17 per cent of the time, *The Times* illustrated its African news stories with (action) photographs as against only about 8 per cent (mainly non-action) for the *Graphic*.

Both newspapers did not accord much priority to African news and mainly relegated them to their foreign news pages as shown in table 2. In fact, *The Times* had 3.49 per cent of its African news stories on the front page as against 2.26 per cent by the *Graphic* although the difference is not statistically significant.

As far as African news makers are concerned, the two newspapers presented an almost identical picture. As table 3 shows, both papers tended to project Africa's political elite. The activities of heads of state and their ministers along with other top political figures were given more prominence than information about how the ordinary people of Africa live from day to day.

What is more, news coverage was also skewed in favour of urban areas for both newspapers. About 91 per cent by *The Times* touched on personalities, events or processes occurring in the urban areas of Africa, particularly in national capitals. News items on rural Africa appeared 3.39 per cent of the time in the *Graphic* as compared to 4.65 per cent in *The Times*.

Who is responsible for painting the images of Africa as projected by the two dailies? The data appearing in table 4 indicate that the *Daily Graphic* relied on the transnational news agencies for 60.45 per cent of its African news items as compared to 30.23 per cent by *The Times*.

Reuters accounted for 56.5 per cent of the African news carried by the *Graphic* and only 17.44 per cent of *The Times*.

The Associated Press and AFP accounted for 8.14 per cent and 4.65 per cent respectively, of the African news carried by *The Times* while in the case of the *Graphic*, 2.26 per cent of the African news items were provided by AFP, 0.56 per cent by TASS and nothing by AP.

The Times tended to rely more on its own correspondents in Africa who supplied 63,95 per cent of its African news.

Table 5. Writer's Sources

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Predominantly government officials	53.67	46.51
Predominantly gov't documents/releases	14.69	6.98
Predominantly non-gov't officials	13.00	19.77
Predominantly non-gov't documents/releases	1.69	1.16
No attribution	16.95	25.58
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 6. Direction of News

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Positive	44.63	26.75
Negative	33.33	59.30
Neutral	22.04	13.95
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 7. Regional Distribution of News

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Southern Africa	33.33	52.32
Eastern Africa	15.25	27.91
Nothern Africa	13.56	11.63
Western Africa	23.73	4.65
Central Africa	2.26	3.49
General	11.87	0.00
Base totals	100% (177)	100% (86)

Table 8. Allocation of News Space for African News

	<i>Daily Graphic</i>	<i>The Times</i>
1/4 pages or less	80.23	68.60
Above 1/4 to 1/2 page	14.69	20.93
Above 1/2 but less than 3/4 page		
1/2 page	4.52	10.47
1/2 page and above	0.56	—
Base totals	100%	100%
	(177)	(86)

We also found, as shown in table 5, that in most cases, reporters tended to consult government sources more often than non-government sources. Government handouts or documents did not constitute a very important source of news on Africa, being cited 14.69 per cent of the time by the *Graphic* as compared to only 6.98 per cent by *The Times*. In some cases, however, there was no attribution at all.

Critics contend that the Western media tend to project a distorted image of Africa. As table 6 shows, *The Times* carried little positive news on Africa (26.75 per cent) and tended to emphasize the negative (59.3). The *Daily Graphic* reflected both the negative (33.33 per cent) and positive (44.63 per cent) aspects of events and processes occurring in Africa.

Ansah (1986) found that about 60.85 per cent of news carried by PANA was positive. Given the pro-African position of the current Ghanaian government, it was expected that a government—owned newspaper like the *Graphic* would attempt to project a more positive image of Africa. The fairly large amount of negative news could be attributed the *Graphic's* over-reliance on Reuters and the other transnational news agencies for news on Africa. It would do well to broaden its sources and may be place more emphasis on PANA than it is currently doing.

Turning to the regional distributions of news, we found, as shown in table 7, that both newspapers once again, paint an almost identical picture. Both emphasize news from the southern Africa Region. The eastern and northern regions of

Africa are also given some amount of priority. The *Daily Graphic*, as expected, tries to give some priority to news coming from West Africa (23.73%) but this is even less than what it gives to southern Africa (33.33%).

For the *Graphic*, we found that the five African countries that featured most often in the news were South Africa (13%), Nigeria (7.9%), Zimbabwe (6.8%), Kenya (5.7%) and Ghana (4.5%). In the case of *The Times* the top five were South Africa (35%), Sudan (16.3%), Kenya (9.3%), Zimbabwe (8.1%) and Libya (4.7%).

Finally, as shown in table 8, we found that both newspapers tended to carry rather short stories on Africa, most of which took the form of news tit-bits. However, in comparative terms, *The Times* appeared to carry longer news items on Africa than the *Graphic*; over 31 per cent of stories in *The Times* occupied more than one-eighth of a page as compared to just about 19 per cent in the *Graphic*.

Thus overall, if the two newspapers reflect a worldwide situation, then it would appear that the North and the South are equally responsible for the alleged inadequate and distorted coverage of Africa. However, on deeper reflection, the role of the transnational news agencies in the provision of news to the Third World media comes into focus. The *Daily Graphic* projects a similar image of Africa as *The Times* because both obtain news from correspondents of the same ideological hue. Correspondents of Reuters and *The Times* are likely to view and interpret events and processes occurring in Africa from a similar perspective, and therein lies the crux of the problem.

References

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