

## 2      **Constructing images of Africa: from troubled pan-African media to sprawling Nollywood**

George Ogola

In March 2012, the Atlanta-based international news channel CNN was forced to pull a video from its website following online ‘protests’ criticising the organisation’s coverage of a story in Nairobi, Kenya. CNN’s Nairobi correspondent David McKenzie had covered an incident in downtown Nairobi where suspected Al-Shabaab militants threw grenades into a bus terminus, killing and injuring several people. The story was introduced with a bold banner that read: ‘Violence in Kenya’, superimposed on a graphic of the Kenyan flag. The story was quickly picked up by the rest of the international media. Seemingly enraged by the coverage, the Kenyan online community condemned McKenzie and CNN on Twitter, Facebook and other social networking websites. Many demanded that McKenzie and CNN apologise for ‘poor reporting’ and for (mis)representing the country. McKenzie however insisted that the report was factually accurate, as did CNN, their removal of the video notwithstanding.

Importantly, the dispute centred on the perceived (deliberate) construction of a problematic image of Kenya as ‘violent’. Informing this disagreement were arguments appealing variously to the producers and the imagined audiences which offered very different renderings of same event. On the one hand was CNN inserting the story within a much broader narrative framework informed in part by Kenya’s recent history of electoral violence but also by (arguably) the largely invisible discursive frames used throughout international news that tend to totalise ‘African’ stories and strip them of their complexity. On the other hand were Kenyans, aware of the implications of allowing

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

that image of Kenya as 'violent' to be defined elsewhere and portrayed as 'common sense'. They wanted to (re-)define that image and create a new narrative framework within which the story could be interpreted.

This brief anecdote is of fundamental importance in two ways. First, it lays bare the notion of image as a contested construct defined as much by its producers as by its consumers. And second, it reveals how international news is a site where assumed centres and peripheries are constantly involved in a struggle over the construction of an interpretive habitat against which events should be understood. As Gurevitch *et al* observe, foreign news is made intelligible to primary audiences by 'casting faraway events in frameworks that render these events comprehensible, appealing and relevant to domestic audiences... and by constructing meaning of these events in ways that are compatible with the "dominant ideology" of the society they serve' (1991: 206). The Kenyan story was a complex one which had to be made accessible to a world audience. To do so, CNN silently but deliberately invoked a 'familiar' narrative frame that made the story 'easy' to comprehend. In the process it was rendered both true and untrue. It is this contradiction that is at the heart of this discussion; the politics around the making and unmaking of the image.

The struggles over 'ownership' of international news narratives have generated heated debates over its ability to represent Africa. A number of studies on international news coverage seek to show how the world is not only unevenly represented but also how it is implicated in much broader ideological and political contestations (Van Ginneken, 1998; Shoemaker & Akiba, 2005; Sreberny et al, 1997; Nyamjoh, 2005). These studies argue that Africa and much of the developing world often feature less in international news, relative to the more affluent global North.

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

More significant however is the widely cited contention that poorer parts of the world are routinely 'misrepresented' in international news. A number of critical works on representation in international news contend that Africa's coverage in particular is often broadly located within a discursive regime of Otherness, a paradigm of difference that consistently relies upon pre-determined news templates and many unqualified generalisations (Van Ginneken, 1998; Thussu, 2007; Ebron, 2002, Williams, 2011).

Ebron, for example, argues that the continent often 'enters a global imagination through news accounts of ethnic wars, famine, and unstable political regimes' (2002: 2). In global news, she writes, 'a cycle of destruction and unrest encircles sub-Saharan Africa like a swarm of bad omens that, more often than not, fails to distinguish national differences or historical moments. Africa is often portrayed as a timeless story of tribal rivalries, intended to invoke in the minds of its spectators the pre-modern' (Ibid). The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina captures this coverage in a satirical essay 'How to write about Africa':

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Maasai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'. Also useful are words such as 'Guerrillas', 'Timeless', 'Primordial' and 'Tribal'. Note that 'People' means Africans who are not black, while 'The People' means black Africans. (2005)

But not all agree with this argument about negative representation. Indeed, writing in *The Africans*, nearly two decades ago, David Lamb complained that those who criticised negative coverage seemed instead to desire:

a style of advocacy journalism that concentrates on civic centers and ignores the warts. It wants a new set of journalistic guidelines for covering the underdeveloped world, one which, if used in the West, would tell journalists to

disregard the Watergates and Charles Mansons and concentrate on the positive and uplifting. It wants to be covered by historians not journalists... I am not sure who would really benefit if foreign correspondents wrote about Africa as some people wish it were rather than as it is (cited in Cavanagh, 1989: 250-1).

In other words, Lamb suggests that calls for a more 'sensitive' coverage of Africa merely amount to a cessation of criticism and a presentation of an Africa designed to support African elites and vested interests. Lamb appears to reify the contention that the African elite seek to control and centralize the broader discursive narrative frameworks within which Africa must be interpreted. The insistence on the equivocality of these narratives and logos is the very reason some find their position problematic. They tend to imply a homogeneity that is often at odds with the lived experiences of Africans.

These diametrically opposed meta-narratives, while both open to criticism, have nonetheless continued to shape debates on the image of Africa in international news. Beyond that, they have played a critical role in ideologically shaping several pan-African media initiatives primarily aimed at contesting and redefining international news narratives on and about the continent. Using pan-African(ist) media initiatives including Pan-African News Agency (PANA), SABC Africa, and South Africa's Multichoice Limited as illustrative and explanatory examples, this chapter seeks to do three things. First, to examine and challenge the ideological frameworks within which some of the media initiatives are anchored. Second, to explore some of the political, economic and institutional challenges these media initiatives face, and finally, to propose an embryonic 'third way' in conceptualising the increasingly elusive pan-African(ist) media agenda.

### **Explaining that which is called Africa**

Discussions on pan-African media typically employ a familiar if sometimes problematic conceptual vocabulary. The discussions are often dominated by references to concepts such as ‘contraflows’, ‘counter hegemonic narratives’, ‘African values’, ‘Western values’ among others – terms which generally delete nuance and contradictions in favour of much simpler binaries. While these terms do in fact have some analytical purchase, they also consistently totalise experiences without adequate qualification. I would argue that the apparent failure or the deliberate refusal to unpack or problematise the conceptual vocabulary around which the pan-African media agenda is primarily anchored is a fundamental weakness manifest in some of the failed interventionist media projects.

For instance, let us linger on one of the key legitimating arguments in this project – the idea of ‘contraflows’. To be sure, ‘contraflows’ is a term broadly used to refer to ‘mass media programming that reverses the dominant (Western, First World) direction’ (Kavoori, 2007: 50). At its core is the assumption that within international news is an ‘unreflexive Western dominance and its natural result: global cultural homogenization’ (Ibid). Contraflows, Kavoori argues, ‘in the end are placed in the specific diacritical space of localism with only one of two options available to it: assimilation or defiance. Little attention is given to the range, diversity and complexity of such programming and to the world they are shaping’ (Ibid: 51).

Pandurang expresses similar objections to the range of conceptual vocabulary cited above, arguing that some of these analytical models ‘are not adequate for exploring new forms of multi-culturality that are in the process of emerging’ (2001: 2). He argues that ‘what is needed is a theoretical framework that goes beyond formulations of cultural imperialism and simplified binaries and speaks from the affective experience of social marginality and from the perspective of the edge – they offer alternative views of seeing

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

and thinking, and thereby allow for narratives of plurality, fluidity and always emergent becoming' (Ibid).

The other related conceptual problem is the belief in the existence of 'a set of stable empirical referents – of spatial location and spatial exclusivity of cultural products' (Kavoori, 2007: 49). For example, a number of African media initiatives assume a common existential empirical constant – that which is called Africa and of things African, authentic and unadulterated. From a theoretical perspective, the task of defining and therefore understanding Africa is a difficult one. This is because Africa, particularly as it is mediated or mediatised is neither obvious nor uniformly perceived across its users and referents. V. Y. Mudimbe's books, *The Idea of Africa* (1994) and *The Invention of Africa* (1988) provide us with historical references of Africa as an ambiguity, which must be unpacked and explained. In *The Invention of Africa*, he explains that 'Africa as a coherent ideological and political entity was invented with the advent of European expansion and continuously re-invented by traditional African and diasporan intellectuals, not to mention metropolitan intellectuals and ideological apparatuses, educational institutions and then attendant disciplines, traveler accounts, popular media and so forth...' (1988: 23). This argument may be contentious, not least because as critics such as Oguide argue, it tends to deny the constructed Other any agency in shaping its form and narratives. Oguide contests the idea that Africa was 'formed' 'on the terms set by colonialism/modernity' (2012: 6). But as Julia Gallagher argues in the introduction of this book through her reading of Shonibare's 'Scramble for Africa' (2013), Europe and Africa are connected in ways that make it impossible to tell where Africa starts and where Europe ends. This relationship strongly calls into question the legitimacy of arguments that only limit agency to the colonial project and Africa's reaction to it.

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Whether ‘created’, ‘invented’, ‘negotiated’ or indeed ‘imagined’ as Anderson (1991) suggests, the indigenes have since taken ownership of the continent; it is therefore far from being merely a fantastical ambiguity. However, this does not necessarily qualify its assumed monolithic, coherent and homogenous existence. Africa remains internally incoherent both as an idea or set of ideas and as a ‘thing’. The two should not be conflated. Be that as it may, the belief in its ‘existence’ has been so widely and powerfully circulated that there is now a tendency to ignore the chaos of its historical formation and the impact of globalisation on it; its hybridity, plurality and indeed fluidity (Pandurang, 2011) both as an idea and as a ‘thing’. Recognising these factors, fraught with contradiction as they must be, should allow us to begin to understand why Africa’s ‘story’ is so difficult to tell; why the pan-African media therefore remains in many ways, a dream deferred.

It is germane therefore to point out that a number of pan-African media initiatives often start off by validating the very contentious narrative they seek to contest. The failure to acknowledge the instability of the referent – Africa – partly legitimises the very essentialisation of a diverse continent as an undifferentiated space and culture. Precisely because of this, we paradoxically end up with its misrepresentation in the very attempts to revise the same in the international news media.

Erasing differences to create an *Africana* – the idea and the thing – is problematic as it recreates a narcissism of sameness. Difference ‘is subjugated under the imperialism of the same’ (Xie, 2000: 2-3).

These arguments seek to underscore the problematic theoretical and ideological premises upon which some of these pan-African media initiatives are usually anchored. For while they correctly identify the Othering in international news, they seem to lack the

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

conceptual vocabulary to offer an alternative. They invent a problematic *Africana*, one that fails to acknowledge the inherent difficulties imposed by an imagined sameness.

### **Constructing the 'African Voice': from NWICO to PANA**

The 1970s saw heated debates about the uneven flows of international news from the global North to the global South within the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UNESCO. Although coming after the idea of a pan-African media had first been canvassed, it was these debates that led to the first major proposals for new continental news agencies to address the international news flow imbalance between the global North and South.

Although the debates at ITU and UNESCO were about correcting the uneven international communication structures, they were also hugely political and ideological. Many countries from the global South had raised concerns over the domination of international communication by Western-based transnational news agencies principally Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters and Agence France-Press (AFP). These concerns ranged from fears about 'cultural imperialism' to accusations of Western media 'encroachment' on national sovereignty. Newly independent states were particularly anxious about the implications of these uneven news flows on their 'independence'. For these countries, the control of the media and news flows was considered an important variable in their new matrices for national development.

The debates that took place at UNESCO, broadly pitting developing nations with the support of Moscow, against Western news agencies, eventually led to a series of contested proposals on a new communication order called the New World Information



Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

and Communication Order (NWICO). It was developed by the MacBride Commission chaired by the Irish politician Sean MacBride. Political, economic and ideological interests invested in international news meant that most countries remained divided over NWICO. Western news agencies and organisations solicited support from their governments to reject the project, many arguing that the new order was ‘a barely disguised edict condoning censorship and denying freedom of expression’ (Kavanagh, 1989: 354). In protest, the UK and the US decided to withdraw their funding for UNESCO, ensuring that the NWICO proposals could not be implemented.

Although the NWICO project never quite came to fruition, it did lead to the establishment of a number of news agencies in the developing world including InterPress Services (IPS), Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool (NANAP) and Pan-African News Agency (PANA). However, PANA’s establishment was also partly the fulfillment of a political dream by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which quickly appropriated it to its cause. The setting up of an African news agency was one of the key proposals set out by the OAU in its inaugural assembly in 1963 (Kavanagh, 1989: 354). PANA was therefore expected to help pursue the OAU’s pan-African political project. On paper, PANA was to play the dual role of pooling information fed by Africa’s state-owned media while also carrying news from its own pool of correspondents to cover the continent. Its central mandate was to ‘correct the distorted picture of Africa, its countries and peoples resulting from the partial and negative information published by the foreign press agencies and to assist in the liberation struggles of peoples against colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, racism, Zionism and all other forms of exploitation and oppression’ (Kavanagh, 1989: 354). This nationalist orientation was to become one of its major weaknesses.

Its overtly political mandate weakened PANA’s ability to succeed as a news agency. By

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

becoming a platform for various national state media, which mainly covered 'protocol' news, the agency was quickly discredited, seen as a mouthpiece for several repressive governments within the continent. Not only were its stories not used by the international media, they were also disregarded by most news organisations within the continent.

But PANA faced other equally significant challenges. Poorly financed, the agency was confronted by the logistical nightmare of covering a continent with nearly 50 states, hundreds of languages, and varied political and economic interests. By 1988, PANA was barely financially solvent as most states failed to honour their budget contributions to the organisation. Indeed, in the late 1980s, PANA was already operating on a budget deficit running into millions of dollars and was on the verge of collapse (Kavanagh, 1989).

Unable even to pay its own correspondents, it relied mainly on news sent by state news agencies most of which were unedited government press releases. Much of the news from PANA was also old by the time it was sent out to media houses, having already been covered by other international news agencies with both the technical capacity and finances to collect and disseminate the news. Indeed, a report published by the *New York Times* in 1988 found that nearly 70 per cent of news used by African news organisations was supplied by Western news agencies. PANA reports were the least used, if at all (Van Ginneken, 1998).

PANA's agenda thus remains largely unrealised. The agency lacked and still lacks the necessary financial resources and expertise to cover the continent and while it is no longer necessarily exploited by national governments, ideologically it remains trapped in a political time-warp. PANA's nationalism was the product of a specific historical juncture and over time its role has become increasingly ambiguous. The political consciousness that the 1960s Pan-Africanism evoked was ideologically tied to the fight for self-governance. The period demanded a specific fabrication of Africa and of a discourse that

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

would create political solidarities and turn Otherness on its head. The broader narrative of political emancipation demanded a stylisation of a very specific image of Africa that found space and relevance in organisations such as PANA. Africa today is a radically different continent with new political and economic realities which demand new responses.

### **A case of two 'African brands': South Africa's SABC Africa and Multichoice Limited**

As the continent's largest economy and with some of the most vocal Pan-Africanist leaders, South Africa has played its part in the calls for an 'African media voice', not least because it also has arguably the most developed media infrastructure in the continent. Former president Thabo Mbeki's calls for an 'African Renaissance', codified in his brainchild the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) project was a case in point. But South Africa also provides two interesting if contrasting images of Africa. The two pan-African media initiatives, SABC Africa and Multichoice, provide varied readings and approaches to the pan-African (media) agenda.

SABC Africa was created as the external arm of the state-owned SABC. It was formed following the 'amalgamation of two previously separate channels – its namesake SABC Africa which was a news, current affairs and documentary channel beamed to the rest of the continent, and Africa-2-Africa, an all entertainment channel made in Africa for Africa' (Teer-Tomaselli et al, 2007: 159). The symbolic import of the channel's adoption of the name Africa was instructive. At one level it gestured at a very nationalistic orientation. Indeed, it stated as its 'philosophy' the need to 'celebrate the positive side of Africa and being African' (Ibid).

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

SABC's 'African(ist) ambition' was manifest in its rapid expansion in Africa and around the world. In 2007, it set up Africa's first 24-hour rolling news channel SABC News International and opened bureaus in Beijing, Dakar, Brussels, Sao Paulo, New York, Jamaica, the DRC, Washington DC, Harare, Lagos, Nairobi, London and the UN. The locations of the bureaus clearly indicated the organisation's conscious attempt to cover the global South even as it maintained a presence in the more established news capitals of Europe and the US. But statements made by Mbeki at the launch of SABC News International in 2007 seemed to suggest that the station had a very specific political and ideological agenda. Mbeki's words were particularly unambiguous with regard to SABC's international vision:

For far too long we have relied on others to tell us our own stories. For that long we have seemed content to parrot the words and stories of others about us as if they are were the gospel truth.

This is not a lament about some dim and distant past but the contemporary reality facing Africa and all its citizens. As a result of this, most of the time we are unable to tell our own stories; we are afraid to sing our own songs and are thoroughly intimidated to respect our cultures and honour our true heroes and heroines.

We become incapable of articulating our own reality and celebrating our own achievements because we are told that the few setbacks relative to our many successes, should forever define our existence.

Colonial and apartheid legacies abound. A telephone call from Ghana to Nigeria may have to go first to Europe before being rerouted to its destination in the neighbourhood. Often, the news and stories in our publications seem to be

following the same colonial routes even if not physically, at least philosophically.

The international broadcast news landscape is not only dominated by a few resource-rich channels, but even when African broadcasters participate in the dissemination of news it is always in the context of stories filed by foreign news agencies, with headquarters in Atlanta, New York, London and other major cities of the powerful nations.

Accordingly, we trust that the new SABC News International will tell the African story in as much depth and contextual detail as possible and physically get around the continent identifying the successes and reverses so as to reflect what is really happening on our continent. (2007)

Mbeki went on to say that SABC News International would also ‘serve as one of the critical building blocks that should help us to realise the vision of the African Renaissance’ and become ‘our dependable mirror reflecting to us our African actuality and which, through its high quality journalism, news-gathering operations, pursuit of truth and correct contextualisation of events and processes liberate us from those who, for too long, have told half-truths and lies that have served to magnify a negative image of Africa’(Ibid). In a similar speech delivered while opening SABC International’s East African Bureau in Nairobi, then Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said the bureau would help generate news ‘with the right African perspective’ (2007).

Almost, *a la* PANA, SABC Africa and its News International channel was ideologically oriented to serve a political project. But the market seems to have judged this political project rather harshly, for in just two years, the bureaus in Beijing, Dakar, Brussels, Sao Paulo, Jamaica and DC had all been closed with the rest reportedly put under constant evaluation (Bailey, 2009). Before long, many of the international stories, even those

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

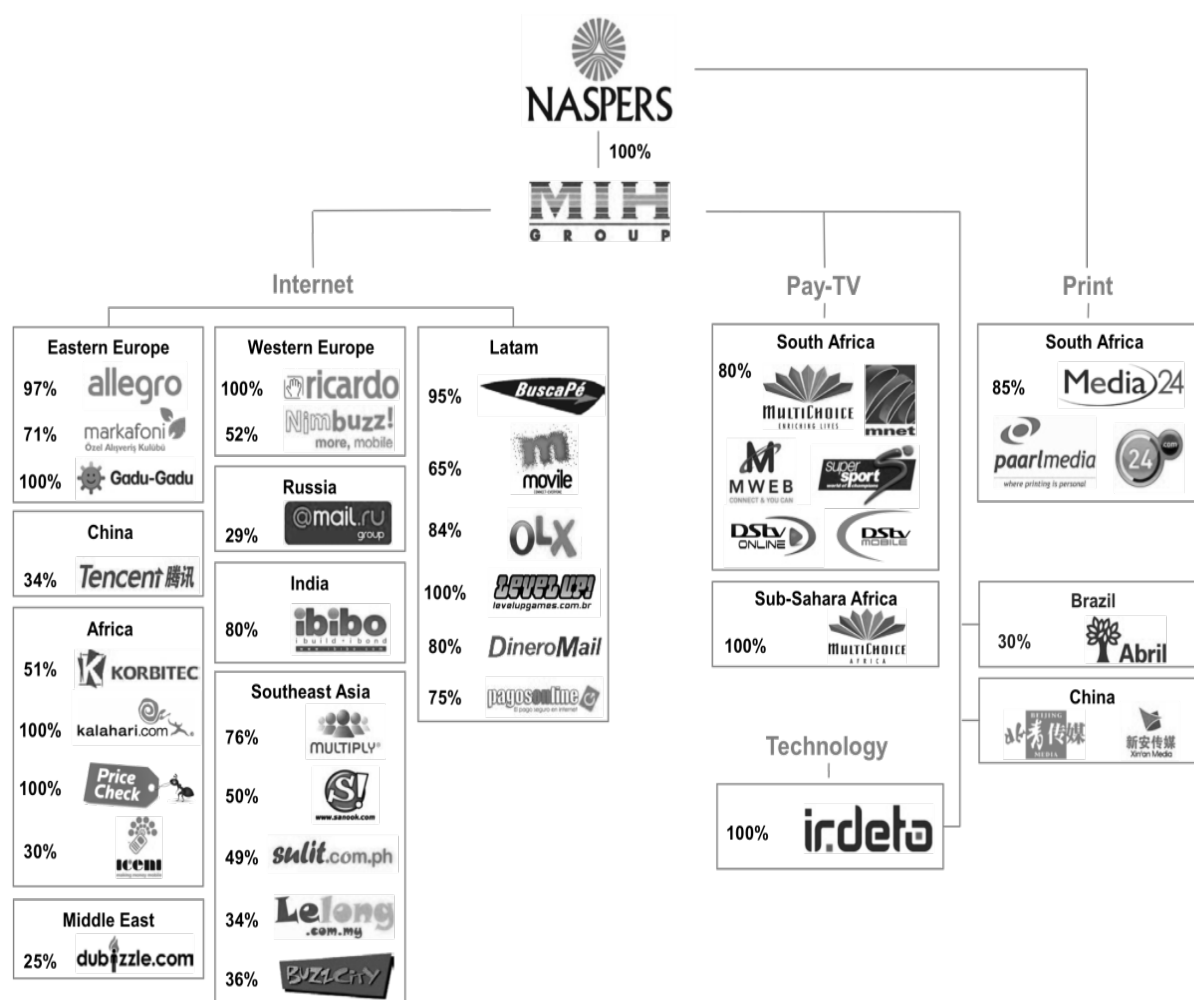
within the continent, were increasingly sourced from the major international news agencies. The only 'local' touch was the introduction of voiceovers by SABC journalists on agency footage.

There were fundamental problems with SABC's approach to its African news project, failures which the relative success of the Naspers-owned Multichoice Limited puts into sharp perspective.

Rather than venture into the cut-throat market of 'spot news', Multichoice went for more general content creation and delivery. Multichoice grew out of M-Net, South Africa's first private TV channel. M-Net began as a joint venture of four newspaper publishers, which included Naspers, Republican Press, Allied Publishing and Times Media Limited aimed at breaking SABC's broadcasting monopoly in the country (Tee-Tomaselli *et al*, 2007: 155-6). It first introduced an analogue service distributed to more than 20 African countries in 1992. However, its subscriber division was later launched as Multichoice Limited (MCL) in 1993. In 1998 Naspers acquired control of the company, which was now Multichoice Investment Holdings (MIH), MCL having been separated from M-Net. Having bought MIH from the other press groups, the MIH conglomerate which now comprised Multichoice, M-Net and M-Web became a wholly owned subsidiary of Naspers in 2001 (Tee-Tomaselli *et al*, 2007).

Fundamentally, Multichoice looked at Africa not necessarily as an ideological and political construct but as a market. Its 'products' were targeted at consumers – not Africans – mainly the burgeoning middle-class within the continent but also beyond it, expanding into the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. But the success of this company can also be explained by the advantages brought about by the vertical and horizontal integration within the subsidiary itself and its parent company Naspers. Multichoice became a broadcaster, publisher and subscription manager exploiting the

economies of scale availed by its various products and parent company. It now owns operations ranging from entertainment to interactive and e-commerce services across more than 50 countries in Africa, the Mediterranean, Asia, Europe and Latin America. By owning the content delivery and distribution platforms, Multichoice has been able to create narrowcasted channels which it uses to promote ‘products’ marketed as ‘African’. These include, the Africa Magic Channel and Africa Magic Plus among others. The organogram below shows Naspers’ various business interests and the integration that has taken place both vertically and horizontally from which companies such as Multichoice derive significant advantages.



Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Source: [www.naspers.com](http://www.naspers.com)

In part, PANA and SABC-Africa's struggles point to their failed attempts to construct a centralised undifferentiated image of Africa, one whose various textures and contradictions were deleted from its rendering. It was an Africa divorced from the realities of multiculturalism, hybridisation and fluidity – an incomplete Africa.

### **Invisible Borders: Barriers to World News Market Entry**

However, there are other reasons why it has been so difficult for pan-African news agencies to become established and viable. The debate on Africa's misrepresentation in global news has focused attention on the need to create continental news organisations, fronted in many cases by nationalist politicians and policy-makers as seen in some of the examples above. But little attention has focused on the international communication infrastructure which remains critical in understanding the production and distribution of the uneven world news flows. It is important to recognise that the real powers behind world news coverage are not necessarily the Anglo-American news organisations but the transnational news agencies (TNAs), themselves owned by much bigger corporate concerns.

World news is generally defined, produced and distributed by TNAs, the most dominant of which are principally based in New York, London and Paris. As noted above, in the 1970s and 1980s, debates on NWICO revolved mainly around anxieties over the world news agenda being defined by a cartel of news makers seen to represent the interests of the developed world and only responsive to the needs of Western markets (Samarajiva, 1984: 119).



The TNAs operate mainly as business concerns interested in maximising returns on their product – news, protecting their markets and creating new ones. TNAs do not operate as news organisations but as ‘firms that mobilise resources for the production and distribution of a commodity in economic markets’ (Samarajiwa, 1984: 120). Samarajiwa argues that ‘considerations of profit-seeking and market control are held to be as relevant to the analysis of TNAs as they are to other business firms’ (Ibid). Indeed, on its website, AFP describes its users as ‘clients’ (www.AFP.com). The TNAs have over the years created an impregnable wall in the business particularly involving the production and distribution of international ‘spot news’. In an illuminating discussion on how these TNAs operate, Samarajiwa teases out three key issues, which act as entry barriers to similar agencies from the developing world. These include what he describes as the ‘economies of replication’, pricing policies, market control and diversification (1984: 130).

World news flows, Samarajiwa explains, comprise three levels, with the first and most important being ‘spot news’. These refer to the immediate reports of an event happening. The second level refers to the more detailed reports that follow and expand on ‘spot news’ while within the third level are the ‘finished products’. Level one is considered the most important as it is at this stage that news is framed (Ibid: 121). The first to ‘break’ the news thus very often becomes the one who defines the news narrative.

TNAs dominate the production of ‘spot news’ hence their inordinate influence in constructing the international news agenda. This is mainly because while news organisations may have reporters or correspondents around the world, they are too thinly spread to be everywhere at all times. TNAs on the other hand have extensive worldwide networks capable of producing and distributing news at the speed in which the news is needed by news organisations and other ‘clients’. For example, AP has over 240 bureaus

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

around the world while AFP produces more than 5,000 stories every day in English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese (www.AFP.com).

Samarajiwa argues that one of the biggest barriers to entering coverage of 'spot news' and therefore the world news market is the 'first copy costs'. These refer to what is involved in 'delivering a complete news report with the required promptness and accuracy to a hypothetical first buyer – that is, the costs of the worldwide news production network, transmission, correspondent etc' (1984: 130). Setting up the necessary infrastructure to deliver world news efficiently and promptly is extremely expensive. Further, the recurring expenditures are even more expensive and could be double or treble the capital costs (Ibid).

Since replication costs are usually low as the producer retains exclusive control over the product, TNAs practice what is known in economics as 'price discrimination'. The costs of subscription are not the same across the world. It is important to note that TNAs also act as domestic news agencies in their countries of origin where they charge premium amounts for their products. This is also their most valuable market. The price paid by a US newspaper for AP news reports is substantially higher than what a European newspaper pays for the same report. Sales to developing countries are generally regarded as spin-offs and are therefore much cheaper. A number of news organisations in the developing world are therefore able to purchase these products at far lower rates than would possibly be charged by their own local news agencies. The implication is that these Western TNAs are therefore able to shut out potential competitors from the developing world. But since the domestic media in the West are the TNA's main clients, it is their interests that are of primary importance to the TNAs.

The American and European TNAs also have very privileged positions in their home markets, which cannot be easily accessed by foreign TNAs. Examples of the difficult

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

experiences of IPS-Interlink and Al-Jazeera in the US are cases in point. IPS-Interlink, for instance, was almost hounded out of the US market while Al-Jazeera was frustrated at various levels including being barred from reporting from the New York Stock Exchange because of its perceived negative representation of the United States (Sakr, 2007). Furthermore, the TNAs are almost without exception part of much larger corporate organisations, which also own the domestic news organisations which buy their news. The news organisations must therefore source their news from the TNAs as they are in most cases part of the same corporate families. For example, AP is owned by its buyer news organisations in the US including various newspapers, radio and TV organisations. Reuters is owned by Thomson Reuters, a corporate organisation with interests in the global equities market, health, information solutions and only sold its education subsidiary Thomson Learning in 2007. Likewise, AFP is part of a larger integrated media enterprise which includes subsidiaries such as AFP-GMBH, its German language service which produces graphics, text and internet products, SID, the German language sports service and Citizenside, a site where ‘thousands of amateurs and professionals sell newsworthy videos and photos’ ([www.AFP.com](http://www.AFP.com)).

TNAs thus have unparalleled leverage in the production and distribution of news, one that is unlikely to be threatened by any new pan-African media news agency or media organisation and particularly those aimed at the production and distribution of ‘spot news’.

### **Can the Empire strike back? The case against an ‘African Al-Jazeera’**

What then are the chances of a successful pan-African media enterprise? Is such a medium feasible? More importantly, is it even necessary? These questions no doubt

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

invite varied responses. The relative success of the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera has prompted some to talk about the possibility of setting up an 'African Al-Jazeera'. Thabo Mbeki once noted that there was no reason why an 'African Al-Jazeera' cannot succeed (cited in Gouveia, 2005: 4). Philip Fiske de Gouveia of the London-based Foreign Policy Centre, a European think-tank, also proposed to the UK Foreign Office to establish a Pan-African media project along the same lines as Al-Jazeera (Ibid).

There is little doubt that Al-Jazeera's growth since its establishment in 1996 has been phenomenal. Indeed, in 2005, an industry website conducting a poll involving nearly 2,000 advertising executives in 75 countries identified Al-Jazeera as the world's fifth most recognised brand (Clark, 2005 cited in Sakr, 2007: 116). But how does one assess Al-Jazeera's 'success'? Can the model be a blueprint for a similar venture in Africa?

Al-Jazeera was founded by seed money provided by the Emir of Qatar with an initial five-year grant of nearly US\$137 million. But the station has also had to rely on regular supplementary grants from Qatar. The station's International Division, now Al-Jazeera English, has increased its world profile but with considerable financial implications. The station's financial independence remains elusive as it has found it difficult to generate the requisite advertising revenue. It is also significant to note that while the organisation focuses on 'spot news' and therefore generates much of its own content, it also significantly uses footage provided by the Anglo-American TNAs. This only serves to demonstrate just how difficult it is to challenge the dominance of the TNAs in the production of international news even for well-funded news organisations.

Lauded as an organisation 'striking back at the empire', Al-Jazeera's alleged success has also been subject to much debate. To what extent, for example, has the organisation actually managed to challenge the monopoly of the Anglo-American TNAs over the discursive practices in international news? Note for example that senior editorial

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

managers have continued to come from the established Western news media organisations. For instance, the English division was first headed by Nigel Parson who had been a director at APTN. He came with a cast of seasoned journalists from major news organisations in north America and Europe including the BBC, ABC, ITN, CNN, SKY and CBC. The effect of such editorial dominance by journalists and managers from Europe and north America cannot be ignored even if their precise 'effect' may only be conjectural.

Al-Jazeera thus continues to polarise opinion. Indeed, Sakr observes that as world opinion shifted following 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, the station's messages continued to elicit contradictory responses with both the West and the Arab world castigating it. She notes that being allied to the Qatar government, the station was put on the defensive in a way that seems to have altered the nature of the 'Al-Jazeera project'. The station announced it was going 'to build a communication bridge between the East and the West' and much later, to 'promote certain values' (2007, 127). The decision does raise important points for discussion. Sakr asks whether 'by self-consciously articulating a rationale for its own existence based on building bridges, the station moved from being a transparent media outlet to becoming a political actor in its own right' (Ibid: 127). Has it or will it go the way of IPS, which, as Thussu once observed, 'by putting developmental concerns on the UN agenda...soon morphed from news agency to pressure group' (Thussu, 2000: 252). Al-Jazeera's ownership profile, editorial direction and business model make it highly improbable to be used as blue-print for a successful pan-African media project.

Al-Jazeera has been a political actor in an historical epoch of immense political import in the Arab world. It is a period when the assertion of a particular identity and the self-creation of that image are of critical importance. Pan-Arabism has been central to the

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

politics of Al Jazeera's self-positioning as an alternative to the dominant Western international press. Arab journalism has taken up the role of 'border guards of an imagined Arab *Watan* [nation]' (Pintak, 2009:193). It is a journalism that 'reflects a worldview that largely transcends borders, a sense of self-identity that sets region above nation and religion above passport ...' (Ibid.) As I argue in a separate discussion of Arab media, 'fuelled by feelings of Otherness in the face of perceived international, mainly Western anti-Arab sentiment, Arab journalists seek to forge a shared consciousness of pan-Arabism' (Ogola, 2014: 300). But this image of an Arab *Watan* also does mean that the internal contradictions, the complicated textures that inform Arabness are ignored. As a consequence, we have seen the emergence of a number of radical TV stations in the region such as Al-Majid and Al-Manar that violently unsettle the Al-Jazeera narrative. Similarly, that narrative of the Arab *Watan* has also been dominated by organised and powerful political outfits such as the Muslim Brotherhood who style it in their own image. An 'African Al Jazeera' would therefore most likely falter as it would be yet another attempt to centralise the production of an image of a *thing* too diverse to be solely defined as one, coherent and homogeneous.

### **Searching for a Third Way? Nollywood, the 'identity economy' and the making of a new pan-African consciousness**

The key to a successful pan-African media project seems to me to lie in the recognition of the complex relationships within the various 'scapes' that constitute and shape media texts and the various structures that enable their international mediation. It must also acknowledge the relationship between producers and observers as active participants in image creation. Fundamentally, there is an immediate need to reconceptualise our understanding of the *pan-African consciousness* in the *pan-African* media. That consciousness

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

is a child of many worlds – history, culture, economics, politics and other. There are important lessons to be learnt from the Nigerian Nollywood film industry in relation to this consciousness. How does Nollywood construct a pan-African narrative which is now capable of negotiating its own space in the global cultural arena?

PANA, SABC-Africa, and even the much talked about but unrealised ‘African Al-Jazeera’ have all tended to gesture towards a nationalism with roots in much older pan-Africanist movements such as Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Negritude. These movements ‘shared a concern with transcending self-conceptions based either on localised tribal identities or national boundaries imposed through colonisation’ (McCall, 2007: 97). But McCall observes that although historical experiences can evoke a sense of unity, what many pan-Africanists have longed for is to ‘discover and cultivate a common cultural core – a poetics that could ring as true in a Congo village as on the streets of Johannesburg’ (Ibid: 92). It is this poetics that has been elusive.

McCall describes the ‘rise of Nollywood with its prolific output, its spectacular popularity and its unprecedented ability to reach remote and non-elite audiences’ as ‘the most radical development to date in the history of African media’ (Ibid: 94). While it has gained from a better communications infrastructure enabled in part by the growth of ICTs in the continent, the liberalisation of the region’s media sector and therefore expansion of private media, and the growth of the African diasporas in Western metropolises, there are other equally significant explanatory factors. The growth of Nollywood cannot be explained as driven by a pan-Africanist agenda invented by a government or a group of elite pan-Africanists. It is not as McCall avers, ‘concerned with advancing a developmental agenda or political movement... instead it gives voice to a broad spectrum of cultural views – Christian, Muslim, traditional, folkloric...’ (Ibid: 94) and has remained relatively immune to exploitation by powerful Nigerian kleptocrats.

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Instead ‘every time a governor or lascivious clergyman is exposed, the scandal is dramatised and folklorised as a Nollywood drama’ (Ibid). It acknowledges its audiences’ everyday experiences and fluid identities, which necessarily evade capture.

As is common with popular cultural productions, views on Nollywood remain mixed. Its critics have complained that it fetishises wealth and violence, emphasises glamour over substance, it is sexist and that it lacks a specific ideological orientation capable of making it effect political and social transformation (Okwori, 2003; Adesanya, 2000; Garritano, 2000; Lawuvi 1997). Yet its critics, McCall observes, are also its most voracious consumers. As such, he suggests, indeed as many other scholars of popular culture have done, we need to ‘rethink what constitutes the political in Africa’ (2007: 94). Nollywood does not provide a coherent philosophy or worldview that might be called ‘pan-African’ but it is a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse in perhaps what it might mean to be African. Its audience in Africa and beyond is huge and growing and it is beginning to crack world film markets on its own terms – a *Naijanica* morphing into an *Africana* unendorsed by an African elite keen to cultivate a specific ‘African culture’. McCall further argues that what ‘positions Nollywood as a catalyst for a pan-African discourse is precisely [that] it has no particular view, no specific agenda and certainly no discernible coherent ideology’, describing it instead as ‘a sprawling marketplace of representations’ (Ibid: 96).

The example of Nollywood reminds us of Comaroff and Comaroff’s idea of ‘ethno-futures’, a concept they use to explain how the ‘identity economy’ functions. In their book *Ethnicity Inc*, they argue that ‘the sum of “our ethno-episteme”’, ‘appears to be morphing into exactly the opposite of what social sciences would once have had us believe’ (2009: 1). While ethnicity ‘remains the stuff of existential passion, of the self-conscious fashioning of meaningful, morally anchored selfhood, it is also becoming more



Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

corporate, more commodified, more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday lives' (Ibid). In other words, ethnicities or the differences pan-Africanists are so keen to deny, index belonging and increasingly, these differences are being acknowledged as they are corporatised and made capable of competing in the global marketplace. More importantly, they assert their legitimacy through a process that invokes difference, not sameness.

Comaroff and Comaroff cite several illustrative examples including the corporatisation of the Catalan identity in Spain, the Shipibo in Peru and the metamorphosis of Kenya's Gema (Gikuyu, Embu, Meru Association) into a venture capital called Mega. Culture, they argue, is now also 'intellectual property, displaced from the museum and the anthropological gaze no longer naked or available to just anyone pro bono' (Ibid: 30). Could it be, they ask, that 'contra to much social science orthodoxy, one possible future – perhaps the future of ethnicity – lies, metaphorically and materially alike in ethno-futures, in taking it into the market place? In hitching it, overtly, to the world of franchising and finance capital? In vesting it in an identity economy' (Ibid: 8). The commercialisation of identity, as is seen with Nollywood and the broader notion of the 'identity economy', the focus on difference instead of sameness, is a project in need of more critical engagement.

Nollywood contests attempts to centralize our meanings about what is Africa and what it means to be African. Instead, it elaborates on the elusiveness of that identity. It captures its hybridity, its ability to appropriate and to cannibalise. It is aware that audiences bring to bear their experiences in their consumption of the Nollywood. These experiences are both personal and communal and it is in their negotiation that meaning is derived. Its weaknesses notwithstanding, Nollywood does not celebrate a non-existent *Africana*. It doesn't even strive to create one. Instead, Africa and what it means to be African

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

emerges from its various stories and the many ways in which they are consumed. Africa as both the *thing* and the idea emerges from this diversity. As a result, around the continent and beyond, Nollywood has become the African movie industry. From Guangzhou, China to London in the UK, the Nollywood videos are now being sold and consumed as 'African'.

## **Conclusion**

Pan-African media initiatives have faced many challenges, both ideological and practical. The challenges raise key questions: What does the emerging or emergent pan-African(ism) mean? What is 'African news'? How do we reconcile the politics of image production and news production particularly within existing international communication structures? As Carlsson observes, 'contemporary society is far too complex... and discourages the thought of 'a new international order' of the sort envisaged in the 1970s' (2005: 213). The kind of pan-African discourse that attended the NWICO debates was the product of a specific historical juncture. That history and those arguments may still have some purchase but we now face radically different challenges. For example, we cannot ignore the fact that we now live in an 'era of multilevel governance of the media system' an era of 'different actors, public and private, on multiple levels, from the local to the global' (Carlsson, 2005: 213). To use the words of Appadurai, the media and its texts, one would argue, are now structured by a complex overlapping disjunctive order, one constituted by a number of 'scapes' that cannot only be interpreted territorially – the ethnoscape, technoscape, the infoscape, financescape, all interconnected and overlapping' (1990: 296).

Discursively, there is need to rethink the propensity to homogenise Africa when the basis

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

of these interventions very often is predicated on the need to confront totalising narratives that essentialise the continent and its people. I have argued that the internal imagination of a homogenous Africa actually legitimises its essentialisation as an undifferentiated space and culture. Pan-African media initiatives must therefore begin by first acknowledging the continent's diversity, even incoherence. The deletion of internal differences undermines the very attempts to develop counternarratives capable of telling 'African' stories. Difference within must therefore be rehabilitated. Media policies and debates on the pan-African media agenda must be located within a broader and more complex matrix that transgresses current populist imaginations of the continent. The relative success of Multichoice Limited and Nollywood demonstrate two ways through which this project might be pursued. It is clear that the market, the affective experience of the consumer, too, plays a critical role in the construction or the shaping of image – of Africa as of anything else. That role cannot be ignored by a pan-African media enterprise. The pan-African consciousness does indeed exist, but it does not necessarily reside in an imagined sameness, it could very well exist in difference, the kind manifested in Nollywood's 'sprawling marketplace of representations' that McCall (2007) talks about.

## **Bibliography**

Adesanya, A. (2000), 'From Film to Video', in J. Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian VideoFilms*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Centre for International Studies.

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso

Appadurai, A. (1990). 'Disjunctures and difference in the global economy', *Theory, Culture*

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

*and Society*, Vol 7 (2): 295-310

Archetti, C. 2010, 'Comparing International Coverage of 9/11: Towards an Interdisciplinary Explanation of the Construction of News', *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 11(5): 567-588.

Carlsson, U. (2005). 'The Macbride Report in the rear-view mirror', *Quaderns del CAC* Issue 21 (January-April) 59-63

Cavanagh, K. (1989). 'Freeing the Pan-African News Agency', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. Vol 27 (2): 353-365

Comaroff, J and Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins- of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Ebron, P. (2002). *Performing Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Garritano, C.(2000), 'Women, Melodrama, and Feminist Critique: A Feminist Reading of Hostages, Dust-to-Dust, and True Confessions', in J. Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian VideoFilms*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Gouveia, P. (2005). *An African Al-Jazeera? Mass Media and the African Renaissance* London: Foreign Policy Centre

Gurevitch, M. Levy, M.R and Roeh, I (1991) 'The Global Newsroom: Convergences and Diversities in the Globalization of Television News', in P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks (eds) *Communication and Citizenship*. London: Routledge.

Kavoori, A. (2007). 'Thinking through contra flows: perspectives from postcolonial and

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

transnational cultural studies' in Thussu, D. (ed). *Media on the move: global flow and contra flow*. London: Routledge

Kavoori, A and Malek, A (eds.).(2000). *The global dynamics of news: studies in international news coverage and news agenda*. Stamford, Conn: Ablex Pub

Lawuyi, O. (1997): 'The Political Economy of Video Marketing in Ogbomoso, Nigeria', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 67(3): 476–90

Samarajiwa, R. (1984). 'Third-World entry into the world market in news: Problems and possible solutions', *Media, Culture and Society*. Vol 6 (92): 119-136

McCall, J. (2007). 'The Pan-Africanism we have: Nollywood's invention of Africa', *Film International*. Vol 5 (2): 92-97

McKinnon, R. (2008). 'Blogs and China correspondence: lessons about global information flows', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 1(2) online version, <http://www.rconversion.blogs.com/about.html>

Mohanty, C. (1987). 'Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *Feminist Review*. 30: 61-88

Mudimbe, V Y. (1994). *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: James Currey.

Mudimbe, V. Y. (1990). *The Invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy and the order of knowledge (African Systems)*. London: James Carrey

Nyamjoh, F. (2005). *Africa's media, democracy and the politics of belonging*. London: Zed Books

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Ogola, G. (2014). (Re-)framing the 'quality' debate: The Arab media and its future journalism', in Anderson, P, Ogola, G and Williams, M. *The Future of Quality News Journalism: A Cross- Continental Study*. New York: Routledge

Ogude, J . (2012): 'Whose Africa? Whose Culture? Reflections on agency, Travelling theory and cultural studies in Africa', *Kunapipi*, 34(1): 12-27

Okwori, J. Z. (2003), 'A Dramatized Society: Representing Rituals of Human Sacrifice as Efficacious Action in Nigerian Home-Video Movies', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 16 (1): 7–23.

Pandurang, M . (2001). 'Cross-cultural texts and diasporic identities', *Jowert* 6

Pintak, L. (2009). "Border Guards of the "Imagined" Watan: Arab journalists and the New Arab Consciousness", *The Middle East Journal* 63(2): 191-212.

Shoemaker, P and Cohen, A. (2005). *News Around the World: Content, Practitioners and the Public*. London: Routledge

Sreberny-Mohammadi, A., Winseck, D., McKenna, J., and Boyd-Barrett, O. (1997) *Media in Global Context*. London: Arnold.

Sakr, N. (2007). *Arab media and political renewal: community legitimacy and public life*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Thussu, D. (2007). *Media on the move: global flow and contra flow*. London: Routledge

TeerTomaselli, R (2007) 'South Africa as a regional media power' in Thussu, D. (ed). *Media on the move: global flow and contra flow*. London: Routledge

Van Ginneken, J. (1998). *Understanding global news: a critical introduction*. London: Sage

Wainaina, B. (2005). 'How to write about Africa'. *Granta*, 92

Published in Gallagher, Julia (ed). 2015. *Images of Africa: Creation, Negotiation and Subversion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Williams, K. (2011). *International Journalism*. London: Sage

Xie, S. 2000. 'Rethinking the Identity of Cultural Otherness: The discourse of difference as an unfinished project' in McGillis, R (ed.). *Voices of the Other: Children's literature and the post-colonial context*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

### **Online sources:**

Bailey, C. 2009. 'SABC closes foreign bureaus'. Available at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/sabc-closes-foreign-offices-1.439704> Accessed 27/11/2011.

Mbeki, T. 2007. 'Address by President Mbeki at the launch of SABC International'. Available at <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4295>. Accessed 27/11/2011

Mlambo-Ngcuka, P. 2007. 'Address by Deputy President of the Republic Of South Africa Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) East Africa Bureau launch, Nairobi'. Available at <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-mlambongcuka-sabc-east-africa-bureau-launch-07072007-2007-07-07>. Accessed 27/11/2011.

<http://www.naspers.com/company-structure.php>. Accessed 27/11/2011

[www.AFP.com](http://www.AFP.com)