Beyond Afro-pessimism and -optimism? A critical discourse analysis of the representation of Africa by alternative news media

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Abstract

Regarding the representation of Africa in western media, academic criticism often refers to the presence of Afro-pessimistic discourses, and more recently to a seemingly emerging Afro-optimistic discourse. However, Scott (2015, 1) points out that a systematic study of Africa's representation is still missing as most research only includes mainstream media, news genres and formats and thus forms 'an insufficient basis for reaching any firm, generalisable conclusions'. To address this, we explore the representation of Africa in MO* Magazine, a Belgian alternative news magazine that focuses on the Global South, including an extensive coverage of Africa. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis, we examined all articles covering Africa in 2015 and 2016 in addition to in-depth interviews with editorial staff. The study investigates how MO* constructs its alternative identity in the context of African news coverage. We argue that a mere empirical focus on features and narratives generally attributed to mainstream media, such as the presence of Afro-pessimistic and -optimistic discourses, is not sufficient to reach conclusions about the alternative identity of a magazine. The alternative value of MO* is reflected in the overall focus on the Global South and its key issues, the geographic diversity, editorial approach, and context-richness of the articles.

Keywords

Africa, Afro-optimism, Afro-pessimism, alternative media, Critical Discourse Analysis, representation, MO* Magazine

Introduction

The representation of Africa in western mainstream media has been the object of scholarly inquiry for many years, leading to well-known critiques on the dominant Afro-pessimistic discourse and the discursive construction of Africa as an inferior dark continent (Mudimbe 1988; Nothias 2013; Scott 2015). In recent years, also the Afro-optimistic discourse gained academic attention as terms like 'rising', 'hopeful' and 'new' seem to be increasingly used to describe the continent in western news coverage (Bunce 2017; De Beukelaer 2015; Nothias 2014). Despite the bulk of academic research on Africa and its representation, the research on the image of Africa suffers several biases. Scott (2015) even states that a systematic study of the representation of Africa in western media has not been done so far and, therefore, generalizing conclusions cannot be made. First, Scott (2015) points out that most studies concern a selected number of African countries and events. He argues that particularly the 'developing countries' and negative events catch the attention of scholars. Second, there is a dominant

tendency to focus on mainstream media, news genres and formats although there exists a wide range of fora, blogs and magazines that work outside of the mainstream realm and have the goal to provide the (western) news consumer with a more comprehensive view on Africa and/or represent counterhegemonic voices out of Africa (Bunce, Franks and Paterson 2017; Kenix 2011; Scott 2015, 2). Therefore, if we as scholars truly want a more accurate view on how Africa is represented in the western media, then we have to take these alternative media outlets into account (Bunce, Franks and Paterson 2017; Duvall and Gruley 2012).

In order to address said biases in the academic literature, this article focuses on the representation of the *whole* African continent by an *alternative* news magazine, that is the Belgian MO* Magazine, a quarterly printed magazine that explicitly puts the emphasis on stories about the Global South and Africa. Acknowledging the diverse conceptualizations of alternative media and the broad scale of this particular type of media outlets, our focus on one case allows us to explore in-depth the discursive practices of alternative media in relation to news reports on Africa. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995), we examine the visual and textual representation of Africa in all articles over the period of one year (2015-2016) in addition to a series of in-depth interviews with the editorial staff of MO* Magazine in order to gain a broader understanding of the magazine's editorial policy. By doing so, we investigate how the magazine constructs its alternative identity in the context of African news coverage.

Hopeless or rising? Africa's image in western news media

In May of 2000, The Economist named Africa 'the hopeless continent' on its front page. Since then, this iconic cover has become the go-to example in the academic literature on the mediated representation of Africa as it aptly symbolizes the widespread presence of the Afro-pessimistic discourse in western news coverage (Nothias 2013, 57). De B'béri and Louw (2011) and Garret and Schmidt (2011) argue that western media homogenize Africa as a doomed place that is unable to govern itself. This manifests itself in selective and predictive media reports that display a constant and monotone focus on themes as disease, debt, death and disaster (Lugo-Ocando and Malaolu 2015, 85; Nothias 2013). To fully understand this pessimistic discourse on Africa, it is necessary to refer to Saïd's theory of Orientalism (1978) and Mudimbe's notion of Africanism (1988). Both authors have criticized the 'ideologies of Otherness' that were developed during the age of western imperialism and European colonization (Mazrui 2005, 68). Particularly, they demonstrated how western discourses on non-western parts of the world serve the West in maintaining its power by representing the distant 'Other' as inferior. According to Mudimbe (1988), Africa has since the 1800s been assessed by the dominant western 'pre-existing categories of thought' (Grinker, Lubkemann and Steiner 2010, 23), constructing a pessimistic view of Africa as '"passive" and "hopeless" people waiting for "us" (civilised western society) to bring modernity through intervention in the name of progress'(Lugo-Ocando and Malaolu 2015, 86). Likewise, Escobar (2011) refers to the development discourse which

is articulated through the narratives of progress in western media coverage with the implication of naturalizing the idea that Africa is believed to develop in similar ways as the western civilized societies did. In this respect, the neoliberal system functions as the key norm (Escobar 2011; Garret and Schmidt 2011, 432). Garret and Schmidt (2011) further state that the postcolonial domination of the West over Africa is reflected in these representations, giving way to a reinforcement of the broader socio-political hierarchy of the West versus the rest.

In recent years, it seemed as if an alternative for these pessimistic representations of Africa emerged in western media. More positive terms such as 'rising', 'hopeful' and 'new' were used to describe the continent, resulting in what Nothias (2014) identified as the Afro-optimistic discourse. Though it may testify to an emerging process of self-reflectivity and awareness from western journalists, according to Nothias (2014) and De Beukelaer (2015), it cannot be seen as the much-anticipated counter-discourse nor as the perfect alternative for the negatively distorted images of Africa in western media content. For one, Nothias (2014) states that instances of positive reporting on Africa mostly occur when it fits the Eurocentric frame of economic growth and development. Accordingly, narratives of progress remain very dominant in these more positive representations, indicating that the discourse of Afro-optimism basically applies the same ranking framework as Afro-pessimism does (Garret and Schmidt 2011, 432). In the same vein, Mohmoh (2003) adds that a real Afrocentric discourse is still lacking in western media as African voices are absent or treated with a misplaced tendency towards political correctness on behalf of the western journalists (Van Aelst and Votquenne 2003). From an academic meta-perspective, Bunce (2017) states that the shift in discourse on Africa has been thoroughly discussed in the media and in theoretical contributions, but more *empirical* research is still needed as it is not clear if positive stories are now commonplace or if they are still an exception. In addition, Scott (2017) warns scholars to be careful in creating a single narrative about what previous literature has shown us about the representation of Africa. His scoping review of the field demonstrated that 'we know remarkably little (and far less than is often assumed) about how most of Africa is covered […] much of the time' (206), hence implying that we cannot talk confidently about a single or dominant (western) representation of the continent. Moreover, the consensual nature of the academic debate has ideological implications as well, given it sustains the geopolitical status quo and serves the hegemony of neoliberal standards (Nothias 2016, Scott 2017).

To fully understand the discussion on discourses of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism, we need to take a look at journalistic practices of sourcing and selection as well. In our empirical study of MO* Magazine, both will be explored through a combination of discourse analysis and in-depth interviews with the editorial staff. Here, we follow Sontag (2003) who stated that the key to understanding biases and distortions in the news representation of reality lies in critically exploring the process of news selection and its outcome. Furthermore, we can refer to the seminal work by Galtung and Ruge (1965) who identified a list of twelve news factors that journalists tend to use to select news

events. Restricting ourselves to the foreign news coverage of Africa, two criteria stand out: bad news and (cultural) relevance.

Sontag (2003, 70) eloquently summarizes the first as '[i]f it bleeds, it leads', pointing at the excessive selection of negative and dramatic events. 'Western journalists are motivated only by the pursuit of the sensational - "coups, corruption, chaotic economies, crocodile attacks and quaint tribal riter"' according to Edlin (1987, 29). However, Nothias (2016) urges scholars to be critical when categorizing events as negative, as ''negativity' is a fairly subjective criterion' (6).

A second significant news factor in covering African events is relevance and cultural affinity, or the tendency to select events that fit the cultural framework of the domestic audience (Galtung and Ruge 1965). For instance, Belgian media tend to focus on events happening in one of its former colonies Congo, Rwanda or Burundi due to the shared colonial history (Joye 2017; Van Aelst and Votquenne 2003). Even when important things occur in a distant or non-western country, journalists lean towards focusing on the link with the national or the local, for instance by inserting eyewitness accounts of compatriots who are present at the scene. This journalistic practice of domestication appears to thrive in contemporary news reporting (Chang et al 2012; Joye 2017), but is nothing new. In 1979, Peterson already stated that '[t]he majority of foreign news is domestic news about foreign countries, not international news' (120). A typical example of this idea and likewise a clear manifestation of the significant role of the colonial past in the context of African news coverage is found in the work of Franks (2010) who describes how in 1977, when Mobutu's government risked to fall and potentially starting a crisis in newly independent Congo, Belgian press' attention was only attracted after Mobutu (falsely) declared that the Belgians in Congo were in danger.

Representing Africa: is there an alternative?

Given the widespread criticism on dominant discourses and journalistic practices in relation to the representation of Africa in western news media, one could wonder to what extent there is an alternative? As scholars, it appears as if this is largely un(der)examined. We have already referred to Bunce, Franks and Paterson (2017) and Scott (2015; 2017) who pointed out how research on African news coverage tends to neglect the representation of Africa in alternative media and non-mainstream genres. Nevertheless, there is an important strand of research on African community media and local alternative forms of communication as counter-hegemonic tools of subversion by authors such as Moyo (2007) and Akinfemisoye (2013). In addition, there is a more established and rich tradition of research on alternative news media and journalism in general from which we can distil several elements that are of interest to the present study and our central research question.

According to Kenix (2011, 59), one of the main features and objectives of alternative media is to challenge hegemony, that is 'the domination of subordinate classes' or 'subalterns' through the constant reconfirming of the dominant ideology and thus re-enforcement of the status quo in society. Kenix (2011) sees an important role for alternative media to change this hegemony over time while

Harindranath (2006, 53) calls this 'a struggle over representation'. Alternative media have an explicit goal to represent the world differently as the neoliberal and consumerist ideology prevails in mainstream media (Harcup 2003; McChesney 2000), hence resulting in a marginalization of certain issues such as racism, human rights or development issues and in denying a voice to the so-called 'subalterns' such as people from the Global South who are additionally represented as disintegrated and dependent on the West (cf. supra) (Harindranath 2006). Giffard (1983) adds that alternative news actors encourage the representation of a diversity of voices, themes and countries that are often being marginalized. In sum, they add to a media system's level of pluralism by disseminating alternative stories, analyses and visions that are generally neglected by the mainstream media in their (international) news reporting (Downing 2010; Joye 2009).

However, alternative media are more than just a manifestation of the well-known critiques on mainstream media's content, as we do not believe in a simple binary contrast between mainstream and alternative news outlets. Related to our object of study, this implies that we step away from the straightforward yet un-nuanced assumption that mainstream media report on African events in a radically different way as alternative media do. Indeed, several scholars and critics (Bunce 2017; Gathara 2014 cited in Bunce, Franks and Paterson 2017; Ogunyemi 2017; Ojo 2014) have emphasized the diversity in western mainstream news outlets' reporting as increasingly characterized by a mixture of positive and negative representations of Africa while laying bare how other media (diasporic, indigenous or alternative) also display traits of what academic literature believes to be the consensual, dominant way of representing Africa (cf. supra). In other words, this raises the question of what defines 'the alternative' but also the need to acknowledge the inherent complexity of journalistic practice in a way that 'representations of Africa are entangled in complex structures of production, where competing, even conflicting, values interact to shape sometimes reductive representations, but also more empowering ones' (Nothias 2016, 4) whereby the former would generally have been attributed to mainstream media's coverage of Africa and the latter to alternative media. Following Kenix (2011), we thus regard alternative and mainstream media as operating on a continuum from which the borders cannot be strictly construed or interpreted. This also means that alternative media are more than just 'an alternative' to the mainstream. They embody a different ideology and way of working, organizational structure and model of income (Kenix 2011). Atton (2005, 22) refers to their non-hierarchic or horizontal organizational structure and bottom-up activity, which means that, for example, non-elite news sources are just as much consulted as the so-called elite sources such as politicians or experts. He further stresses the importance of such instances of self-representation by otherwise marginalized groups, as this reduces the risk of Othering. Regarding the model of income, alternative media often steer away from the consumer-driven model - which sells the public to advertisers - in favour of the supply-model (Kenix 2011, 22), foregrounding social and democratic values. In reality, this unfortunately results in serving niche audiences and in financial insecurity or dependence on various donors (Coyer and Dowmunt 2011).

Methodology

To explore whether alternative news media are providing a different representation of Africa that goes beyond the known discourses of Afro-optimism and -pessimism, we analysed the news coverage of Africa in MO* Magazine, a quarterly Belgian news magazine that focuses on news from the Global South with a special interest in Africa, a focus that is unique in Belgium. Mainstream news media pay minimal attention to Africa: the continent accounts for a small share of the total amount of international news on Belgian television and in newspapers, ranging from respectively 2,2% to 7,6% - of which almost 75% concerns politics, crime and conflicts (Biltereyst and Joye 2005; Joye 2010). MO* Magazine further adheres to the typical features of an alternative news medium as described above in terms of scope, goal and operational organization.[1] For one, it defines its objectives as to inform the general public - on a permanent basis - on the developments in the Global South; to create a platform for understanding the complex relations between western and southern countries; and to provide an in-depth discussion of all themes that are related to the process of globalization. Its editorial policy is best characterized by a form of investigative journalism where journalists get time to explore a case in depth and with attention to the broader context and complex backgrounds. Although the magazine is also published online, we opted for an in-depth analysis of the quarterly printed version, which was first printed in 2002 and forms the core business of the publisher. In 2015, the magazine had an average circulation of 93.705 editions and reached 316.300 readers. The average reader of MO* is 45 years old or older, highly educated and lives in Flanders, the Northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, which is rather logical as the magazine only appears in Dutch. Important to keep in mind when analysing the news output of this magazine is the fact that Belgium holds a troubled colonial past with Africa which is part of the country's collective memory and hence regularly evoked in news reports (Joye 2017).

On a methodological level, we follow Pantti (2009, 89-90) in her suggestion to regard news narratives as means of understanding the social world, in addition to Chouliaraki's (2010, 104) conceptualization of representations as symbolic power that 'coexists with and reproduces, but may also change, dominant relationships of power (economic, political, and cultural).' News media in particular are believed to reflect 'the social, economic and political structures within which they operate' (Ploughman 1997, 119). Therefore, a critical approach to the coverage of Africa by an alternative news outlet should move these processes of construction and power relations into the foreground of the analysis. In this article, we apply Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (1995) which allows us to analyse MO*'s news output by exploring linguistic strategies in addition to the social practices surrounding the text. For the first, textual, dimension we further draw on Machin and Mayr's (2012) categories or discursive devices to analyse the concrete linguistic, grammatical and visual choices made by the journalists and their ideological implications. When investigating the news sample, we followed Bunce's (2017, 18) observation that 'it is no longer

possible - if it ever was - to speak of "the representation of Africa". Even within one publication, content can range from texts and images that are reductive and stereotypical through those that are challenging, self-reflective, and critical.' Our explorative analysis covers a one year period from the summer of 2015 until the spring of 2016, comprising four printed editions of MO* and resulting in 39 out of 122 articles that focused on the African continent. To avoid a confirmation bias (Scott 2017, 194) and similar to Nothias (2016), our research design and sample were not informed by pre-established ideas about the coverage of Africa and therefore did not focus on a specific set of countries or topics. Our sole sampling criterion was a geographical focus on Africa, resulting in 18 articles that focused completely on the African continent or particular countries, and 22 articles where the attention is shared with other parts of the world. Regarding the diversity of countries, it is important to mention that all parts of Africa, and more specifically 33 different African countries were covered, mostly as the article's main focus. Although this already illustrates the broad scope of the magazine and underwrites its objective to provide the reader a diversified and context-rich perspective on Africa, we still need to remark that somewhat 20 African countries are still missing in the observed coverage of MO*.

Another key characteristic of CDA is to analyse text in its context whereby news is the outcome of a broad range of professional and institutional practices which limit the choices of journalists (Fairclough 1995). In order to get a profound understanding of this social context, one of the authors also conducted three semi-structured in-depth interviews with selected members of the editorial staff of MO* Magazine, being the chief editor and the two journalists who generally write about Africa. The topic-list addressed a number of issues that were derived from the literature review as well as dealt with broader reflections on the representation of Africa and the issue of alternative news media. All conversations were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. On average, the face-to-face interviews lasted about sixty minutes, and the transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis techniques in line with the method of thematic coding whereby the coding was informed by the literature review and the data (Jensen 2002; Wester and Peters 2004).

Beyond Afro-pessimism in MO*?[2]

In order to trace articulations of an Afro-pessimistic discourse on a textual and visual level, we first focus on the representation of actors, that is African people and countries, by using the different discursive devices as defined by Machin and Mayr (2012).

First, Machin and Mayr (2012) state that the technique of collectivization whereby social actors are described as part of a group or collectivity is an important discursive device in this context, as it easily leads to homogenization. Regarding the coverage of Africa in MO*, we found evidence of *indirect* representations of Africa as one country or entity. In an article on the 2015 elections in Burundi, Obama was cited, out of his speech in 2009 on the American Africa-politics: 'Africa does not need strong men but strong institutions.' (Rugero 2015, 10). In another case, the Belgian philosopher

Braeckman is being interviewed: 'When a child in Africa is being labelled as a witch, it risks to be killed' (Vandaele 2015, 58). Examples of a *direct* collectivization of African people and countries by MO* journalists were mainly found in relation to two specific themes, being news items on the recent refugee flow from Africa to Europe and news articles on certain ethnic tribes. For example, journalists referred to 'illegal immigrants' (Anrys 2015, 54), 'victims' (Danckaers 2015, 30) or 'displaced people' (Lambrechts 2015, 8). This trend was also present in the accompanying pictures, where we see groups of African migrants photographed from a distance, which evokes a feeling of detachment with the audience (Hansen and Machin 2013). Only a handful of articles were found where refugees or tribes are being individualized which, if applied, could generate feelings of empathy with the audience (Machin and Mayr 2012). In the case of the ethnic tribes, there was only one relevant picture of the Gumuz tribe which actually featured both strategies of individualization and collectivization. On the foreground, we see a woman with her child, which raises empathy, and on the background we see other Gumuz members, which makes clear that they are a group.

A second category concerns the homogenization or generalization of African actors. African countries are being referred to in rather broad and general terms: as 'Third World countries' (Goris 2015, 17), 'poor countries' (Vandaele 2015, 44), or 'weak states' (Goris 2015, 3). Likewise, Burundi, Ethiopia and Cameroon are represented by highlighting one particular characteristic, that is poverty. Exemplar for this narrative trope is the rather persistent labelling of Ethiopia as 'one of the world's poorest countries' (Anrys 2015, 17). During the interviews, a MO* journalist confirms this dominant tendency to think about the country in mainly (negative) economic terms as is evident in the following extract:

> People often state that Ethiopia has grown with 11%, that is a double digit. It is the first thing that I checked while I was in the country, not to be pessimistic but because I am against an one-sided image. I have noticed that 7% is a more realistic number, plus in a country where more than 90 million people live and the GDP is 50 billion dollar, this still is not a big growth and somehow justifies my journalistic prepossession regarding Ethiopia.

Although such generalizations could lead to important conclusions regarding the presence of an Afro-pessimism discourse, we need to qualify this as MO* also pays substantial attention to specific African countries and even particular cities, like the Tanzanian city of Mererani (Develtere 2015). In several articles on development aid, the refugee crisis and terrorism, we further notice what Hansen and Machin (2013) call cultural categorizing, where representations are made to fit the cultural frames of the anticipated audience. Examples are women and men in traditional clothing or the portrayal of poverty, where people have dirty clothes and are sitting in front of dilapidated huts. This discursive strategy to generalize African people or countries can stress their 'Otherness' and may point at implicit racism according to Machin and Mayr (2012). The most clear examples are the description of Africans as 'the dark skinned Gumuz' or phrases such as 'her face is as black as charcoal' or 'the black maids'

(Anrys 2015, 21). We can identify this as manifestations of over-lexicalization as these descriptions based on skin colour have no significant added value.

Third, Machin and Mayr (2012) point at a sociocultural polarisation between 'us' and 'them' in western news coverage, echoing Saïd's notion of Orientalism and articulating an underlying hierarchy of power. In the case of MO*, some journalists hint at the significant distinction in terms of income. In an article of Vandaele (2015, 61) on development aid and cooperation, he writes about 'a new ratio since 1950: rich, western, parts of the world that help the development of poor countries, like Rwanda and Congo'. By explicitly naming a country as 'poor', the journalist attributes inferiority and in this case passivity and dependence. Other examples are the already discussed articles on the building of a dam in Ethiopia, as the GDP of Ethiopia is being directly compared with the one of Belgium, which is a country that is nine times smaller than Ethiopia but has a GDP ten times as big. A similar comparison is made in another article of Vandaele (2015, 56 - emphasis added) on development aid between Belgium and Burundi where he writes: 'Burundi may have *our* size, it is *another* world. It is one of the world's poorest countries with an income of hundred euro per head.' By using the words 'our' and 'another' in addition to the characterization of Burundi as poor, the language use and underlying comparison in this sentence make Burundi coming across as the inferior Other in relation to Belgium.

Still, western countries are by no means always portrayed in the superior position. Underwriting the alternative nature of the news magazine, the data point towards important qualifications of the Afro-pessimism discourse as well. In representing African actors, some articles on the refugee crisis provide a more critical perspective by diverging from the established hierarchy of power. For instance, the African actors are given agency by inserting direct quotes while Europe is portrayed in a negative manner as exemplified by the following extract: '"Here, in Europe, we do not have to worry about violence, but nobody cares about us. We only have to wait on filthy water and food. Europe has forgotten hospitality" says an Algerian refugee' (Danckaers 2015, 40). Development aid and cooperation between Africa and the West is also being critically approached, as proven in a foreword by the editor in chief where he pleas for more agency and a stronger voice for the South.

Beyond Afro-optimism in MO*?

According to Nothias (2014), the Afro-optimistic discourse - next to the articulation of a positive view - seems to pop up in articles with a Eurocentric focus on the economic growth of Africa. To some extent, this applies to MO* as well. Following our analysis of the texts, MO* journalists tend to support the idea that economic progress is crucial in Africa's general development. This is illustrated by the following quote on development cooperation between Belgium and Burundi: 'Burundi's quality of education increased, but nevertheless their economy stagnates' (Vandaele 2015, 56), which actually implies that Burundi's educational progress is inseparably linked to its economic development. Another manifestation of this discourse are the positive assessments of African countries if they

display economic progress and strength, as demonstrated in the article of Anrys (2015, 16) on the dam in Ethiopia which, remarkably, simultaneously articulates the Afro-pessimistic discourse as well: 'Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, builds the biggest dam of Africa with its own money.' Strongly embedded in the economic narrative is, however, the idea that African development is not possible without (predominantly western) foreign assistance. In this sense, the Afro-optimism discourse is inherently linked to the notion of Orientalism and the discursive articulation of imbalanced power relations. An example is a quote by the Belgian minister for development aid, who states that 'Development is only possible with a strong economic structure. With *our* efforts in development aid and cooperation, we can sustain and improve social protection for [African] entrepreneurs', in an article of Goris (2015, 18 - emphasis added) on the economic deficit in the South.

Similar to our analysis of the presence of Afro-pessimism in MO*'s news output, we again found evidence that the alternative magazine diverges from most mainstream media in their reporting. For one, MO* also pays considerable attention to the role of non-western countries in the economic development of the African continent and generally adopts a critical perspective in its coverage of western countries and their (economic) ties to Africa. For example, in an article on corruption in Nigeria there is a critical discussion of the role of the US, which is several times being associated with tax evasion practices as it made Nigeria miss out on 150 billion dollar. In his article on the dam in Ethiopia, Anrys (2015, 16) refers to the British colonial empire in Africa and how all economic and political power of Ethiopia was being deprived. However, China is the main focus of the articles dealing with economic news and developments in Africa. On the one hand, the economic importance of China for African countries is widely acknowledged in our sample while on the other hand MO* journalists are not ignoring the negative side-effects of it. One article of Vandaele (2015, 44) on the Chinese industrial expansion, highlights the vital role of Chinese companies which 'form the basis of the building and renovation of (inter)national railways in Africa, that can boost the trade in the continent.'. The same article continues with critically mentioning the so-called Angola model, which refers to the payment for Chinese investments with the exploitation of African raw resources. Vandaele (2015, 44) writes: 'The most important question is how this model will function in the future, as the African raw materials are losing its value.'

These examples demonstrate that MO* does adhere to the Afro-optimism discourse, but does so in combination with a critical stance. During the interviews, one of the journalists explicitly addressed this nuanced position towards the idea of Afro-optimism by mentioning the following:

> Of course, the poverty rates in Africa are different than here, and there is underdevelopment. You cannot deny this. What I want to do, however, is to fight against a *particular* representation of the African continent. When journalists write "Africa is rising" and all problems seem to be resolved, I want to adjust that too optimistic image as it is flawed.

Alternative practices of MO*

In addition to the representation of Africa, our analysis further examined the journalistic practices of MO* magazine as part of the broader question whether MO* provides an alternative to the more stereotypical forms of news that are generally associated in academic literature with mainstream western journalism on Africa (cf. supra). In what follows, we focus on the selection and sourcing practices of the magazine.

One of the main critiques of Galtung and Ruge (1965) on western mainstream media was the dominant selection of western elite countries and of events that fit the cultural framework of the domestic audience. As stated above, alternative media such as MO* focus on a more diversified number of countries from the Global South. Drawing on our sample, MO* for instance pays attention to 33 different countries (cf. supra), adding to the diversified coverage of Africa. The magazine covers all parts of Africa by doing so, although we notice a slight dominance of Eastern and Northern African countries. Nevertheless, in terms of relevance, proximity and domestication, one of the MO* journalists is very clear in the magazine's approach to covering Africa:

> Of course, people will not be interested in the Mal Puesto when there is a bomb threat in Wetteren [small town in Belgium]. I want to attract readers and understand it is important to insert some kind of domestic relevance, but at the same time I want to uncover stereotypes about Africa and try to change the general image of and opinion on the continent.

In other words, MO* applies the domestication practice - in similar ways as mainstream media - as a necessary means to raise awareness and interest in more complex and 'distant' themes such as development aid, migration and religion which are some of the key focal points of MO*'s editorial policy. Another example is the coverage of the migration flows from Africa towards Europe, as mostly Belgian politicians are being asked for their opinion.

Galtung and Ruge (1965) further point towards bad news as an important news value and selection factor in the process of international news reporting. Although there is no exclusive focus on so-called bad news events in MO*'s reporting on Africa, events which commentators argue to be negative in nature are quite dominant in the analysed news output, hence confirming our prior finding of the presence of an Afro-pessimism discourse. Four main themes prevail from our sample. First, we notice six political stories on corruption, dictatorship and overall weak governance. These topics are especially related to Eastern African countries such as Burundi, Tanzania, Eritrea and Ethiopia, which is for example portrayed as 'a country where disagreeing is not being accepted' (Anrys 2015, 17). However, as negative news can be a 'subjective criterion', some themes can equally be interpreted as positive (Nothias 2016, 6). An example here is the latter article on Ethiopia which reports on the building of an important dam. Secondly, seven articles tend to focus on traditionally negative items that are dealing with violence, disasters, war, terrorism and the violation of human rights. In contrast to mainstream news media, MO*, however, prefers to cover long-term events arising from complicated and structural geo-political, ethnic or religious conflicts such as the terrorist attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria or the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the climate wars in

Sudan or the violence against homosexual people in South-Africa.. Again, the negative nature is to be qualified as the item on the Muslim Brotherhood also stresses the non-violent history of the group. A third important theme that emerged from our data concerns the European refugee crisis, which was the focus of six articles, with particular attention for the root causes of the crisis. For example, the changing climate problem and the population growth are identified as explanations for the refugee flow from countries such as Zimbabwe, Madagascar, Congo and Mozambique. Likewise, MO* journalists point towards the ruthless and undemocratic African regimes of Eritrea - which is being called 'the African North-Korea' (Lambrechts 2015, 9) - or Burundi. Lastly, ten articles mainly focused on the theme of poverty (cf. supra).

With regard to the sourcing practices, our study reveals a broad range of (quoted) sources as well as a rather unique editorial policy. Regarding the latter, feature articles are almost never visibly based on press agency copy. In the interviews, all journalists stated to shun away from using the major international press agencies as a source of information. They mostly rely on local African newspapers and blogs or on specialized international media outlets such as the British magazine 'Africa Confidential'. Remarkably, the exact opposite is true for the use of pictures as the dominant western agencies Reuters, Reporters and Magnum Photos are the most used ones. The editor in chief qualifies this apparent paradox: 'I indeed get my pictures from the major western photo agencies, but I do invest in searching that one picture that speaks differently; that is strong and not posed or miserable.' Other journalists added that they often take pictures themselves while being on location or that they are joined by a professional photographer during those assignments.

At first sight, our data further suggest that MO* adheres to common sourcing practices as they generally rely on so-called elite sources, being politicians, diplomats, academics, journalists and spokesmen from international organizations and NGOs. What sets MO* apart from mainstream news media is that they (successfully) strive to offer a more diverse and wider range of voices than merely these usual suspects. For instance, most experts are western but in twelve articles local African experts are being interviewed. Second, one of the interviewees aptly summarized a central objective of MO* when she claimed that '[y]ou can never listen to just one person. Different people have different interests'. In the case of MO*, this is achieved by explicitly searching for non-elite sources such as local citizens, a process that is frequently facilitated by the NGOs with whom MO* has organizational and financial ties. The editor in chief elaborated on this during the interview:

> Yes, we are funded by NGOs and it is our task to create support and understanding of the local development issues in which they are involved. […] That is what gives us the advantage; our local contacts as well as the fact that we read and know a lot about what is going on in the field, allowing us to get information from people that are never heard otherwise.

This quote brings us to the third key feature of MO*'s sourcing practices, the way they represent their sources in the articles. Most respondents are personalized, which raises public empathy (Machin and Mayr 2012). This is mostly the case for the average African citizens who are being

interviewed. The experts are also being personalized, although they were mostly linked to the institution they work for, which gives their statements greater weight.

In general, the unique editorial policy regarding the diversified use of sources adds to the context-richness of the overall news output. Different perspectives and voices largely ignored by mainstream media are incorporated while the magazine is not afraid to publish long articles, up to four or five pages, allowing its journalists to sketch the broader context and to provide a thorough analysis of the topics covered. This approach is part of the magazine's alternative DNA as is illustrated by the following quote from the interviews:

> Our mission is different than that of mainstream channels. We are interested in the bigger picture, there has to be a social value to it and a depth to our stories. This is the only way we as journalists can create awareness.

Conclusion

Addressing a gap in the academic literature on the representation of Africa in western news media, we investigated the coverage of Africa by alternative news magazine MO*. While mainstream media are generally criticized for portraying the African continent as inferior to the hegemonic West, our study displays the alternative potential of MO*. Despite prior assumptions, this alternative angle is not particularly reflected in the absence of an Afro-pessimism or -optimism discourse - as MO* still articulates these discourses - but mainly in the particular editorial approach and context-richness of the articles.

Looking at the representation of Africa in MO* magazine, we cannot deny the presence of an Afro-pessimistic discourse. On the one hand, MO* selects mainly negative events such as the refugee crisis or terrorism. On the other hand, and arguably more important, there is evidence of an Orientalist discourse in western media content that can construct Africa as an inferior dark continent (Mudimbe 1988; Saïd 1978). The study shows that Africa is frequently represented as an inferior Other, as people are being unnecessary described by their colour of skin, children are being portrayed with filthy rags, or African countries are being represented as passive and dependent on the West. Still, this has to be qualified as the journalists of MO* do report on these issues in a critical way, for example by also giving a voice to African refugees who are seeing Europe as inhospitable or by pleading for more agency for Southern countries in the field of development aid. The same nuances apply to the articulation of an Afro-optimistic discourse, which is related to, among others, the positive assessment of several African countries and particularly to the stress on economic progress and development in Africa. Again, nuances and critical instances are equally present in the analysed news output, leading us to the conclusion that there is no single narrative on or representation of Africa, but more importantly that a mere focus on discourses of Afro-pessimism and -optimism and their criticisms is not sufficient to identify a news medium as alternative or not. The findings rather suggest to take the editorial approach and the level of context-richness as more appropriate indicators for this. In the case

of MO*, we can briefly refer to their focus on a broad range of 33 different African countries - which denies the critique of essentializing Africa - and the applied sourcing practices in a sense of selecting a wide diversity of sources, including local citizens and NGOs.

Drawing on the specific case of alternative Belgian news magazine MO*, this explorative study provides us with a number of insights in the way western alternative media represent the African continent. Additionally, the findings do support the relevance of and need for further research on non-mainstream news coverage of Africa. For this particular study, we mainly drew on general criticisms on what is believed to be the consensual representation of Africa in mainstream media as identified by previous research. Future studies should complement this with comparative empirical analyses between alternative and mainstream news, perhaps in combination with a study of alternative news media's audiences which is also underdeveloped in the academic research on Africa's representation in western media. Another important avenue for future research is to no longer exclusively look at western representations, but taking into account African representations of Africa, and/or cross-national comparative analyses.

To conclude, our study raises the important question on what it actually means to assume the mantle of an alternative outlet in the context of international news coverage and how this alternative nature manifests itself in the produced output. The findings suggest that media who describe and market themselves as alternative media - such as MO* - are largely sharing the same playing field as mainstream media and hence operate within the confines of what we could identify as mainstream practices of sourcing and representation. To a large extent, both do draw on the same set of sources and tropes of representation, further supporting the idea that alternative and mainstream media are to be situated on a continuum (Kenix 2011) as well as scrutinizing the homogenous conceptualizations of both. Nevertheless, notable differences are to be found in the editorial approach and overarching perspective. In other words, alternative outlets can indeed cover the most newsworthy events and countries, draw on established elite sources and adhere to the dominant discourses as mainstream media, but they do not stop there. They also look for stories in the margins of the news feed, for those who are underrepresented and for the critical outlook. Perhaps the true value of these outlets lies in the *additional* rather than in the alternative.

Notes

[1] Like many other alternative media outlets, MO* depends on various financial donors. First, they are a part of Wereldmediahuis vzw, together with eleven other NGOs from the broad field of global development and fair trade. Second, they are subsidized by the Belgian government and thirdly, they receive income from subscriptions, advertisings, and lectures organized by MO* staff.

[2] All extracts from the news articles and quotes from the interviews have been translated by the authors from Dutch.

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