



## New Media in Global Politics: the Role of Media in the Image Construction of African Region

Phoebe Inggrid Angeline Romauli<sup>1</sup>, Nathanael Jusac Lie<sup>2</sup>, Rizqa Aliefiarahma<sup>3</sup>, Aurelia Syafina Luthfi<sup>4</sup>, Glen Matthew<sup>5</sup>, Said Rivaldi Assagaf<sup>6</sup>  
<sup>123456</sup>Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

Correspondent: [phoebe.inggrid@gmail.com](mailto:phoebe.inggrid@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** New media is one of the rapid development of technology that makes the exchange of information happen more quickly. Communication patterns in this information technology era are convergent. This is due to the current technological capabilities that enable existing information to be disseminated widely and swiftly. The convergence characteristics of this information technology era lead to the transformation of conventional media into new digital forms. The massive amount of information that can be disseminated through the media makes it one of the big power holders to shape an image. The greater the influence in new media, the greater the tendency for the information to be known and understood. The dissemination of information using digital media is practiced by the African Region to construct its own image for the purpose of changing the international public's view of the region. In this study, a qualitative method with a case study approach is implemented. The research findings revealed that the African Region has utilized digital diplomacy, public diplomacy and the concept of multi-track diplomacy to improve its image. However, there is a need for a better coordination from governments in African countries to develop a positive image.

**Keywords:** Africa, Construction, Image, New Media.



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## INTRODUCTION

Currently the world community has adapted and adjusted to the changing situation and conditions of the world. The shifts began from pre-agricultural, agricultural, industrial, to the emergence of what so called the information society ([Ariyanto et al., 2022](#)). Society is basically a group of people with similar life goals, and connected to each other through the process of exchanging information ([Priatna, 2018](#)). The rapid development of technology leads to the rapid exchange of information. Technology has become the major means of production and distribution of information in society. Information society itself can be defined as a situation where the social and economic activities of society are centered on the circulation of information which is considered as part of capital or commodity ([Cho & Yi, 2022](#); [Wuryanta, 2004](#)).

The pattern of communication in this era of information technology is convergence ([Wuryanta, 2004](#)). This is due to the development of technological capabilities which allows information to be disseminated widely and swiftly. Convergence can be defined as the integration of mass media, technology, and industries that affect the way people communicate and the content contained therein ([Flew & Smith, 2014](#)). Today, the technology to disseminate information is no longer limited, but a wide range of features can be accessed from just one device. Take a mobile phone for instance. The earlier functions were to make a call and to send short messages. As technology is progressing, the rapid transformation has taken place in which people now have a better and more sophisticated mobile phones with additional features, be it to communicate using various platforms, to get myriad of information on the internet, to access digital books and newspaper, and so forth.

The convergence feature of the information technology era triggers the transformation of conventional media into a new digital form termed as new media. The most significant difference is in its scope. The new media could reach a large number of people and present more interactive mode of communication that involves participants to come together ([Flew & Smith, 2014](#); [Kolawole, 2013](#)). Interactive media provides a space for users to interact with each other. The most common example is the existence of social media pages, such as Facebook and Tweeter, where users disseminate information to the public and allow others to comment.

The massive amount of information disseminated through the new media makes it more powerful to create an image. New media can be utilized to promote a certain image or idea, particularly by those having the access. The greater the influence of the new media, the easier the information is recognized and understood. Nevertheless, not all pieces of information disseminated are true ([Priatna, 2018](#)). Information can be reviewed through framing analysis, which is one way to see the differences or contradictions between the media coverage and the existing facts ([Muzakkir, 2017](#)).

## METHOD

To analyze how media can influence an image of a country, a qualitative method with a case study is used. The independent variables such as new media and information society and the dependent variable concerning how the perception of a region influenced by the media is covered, will be discussed further. Moreover, the investigation on the relationship between the framing done by the media for a region or country and the construction of the image will also be investigated. As for the data collection technique, online literature that includes journal articles, electronic books and official websites are taken as the secondary data. Finally for the data analyses, descriptive method is implemented.

A case study on the role of the media in the construction of the image of the African region will undergo a number of research stages. Firstly, how media framed the African region, secondly how the framing affects the construction of the current image of the African region, next how to investigate whether or not the information framed is in line with the real facts, finally how to

amend the existing image of the African region from the new media framing if it is contrary to the fact.

A qualitative method with a case study is selected, with the assumptions that it can eliminate bias due to the breadth of perspectives and the analysis obtained. In addition, such method encompasses a more thorough discussion. The theory of postmodernism highlights phenomena with emotions, feelings, intuition, speculation, tradition, sentiment, and others ([Ilham, 2018](#)), thus, it serves as the basis for the discussion.

Nowadays, with the emergence of new media and information society, the paradigm changes from the rational world paradigm to the narrative paradigm. Therefore, the question whether or not media coverage can affect the image of a region, particularly Africa should be investigated. Additionally, the relevance between the facts and the media coverage concerning the image construction will be described.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Media Construction on the Image of the African Continent in Colonial and Post-Colonial Period**

The African continent is one of the continents that has a long history in acquiring its sovereignty. Basically, the history of the formation of countries in Africa is divided into four main phases, namely the period of colonialism and imperialism, the period of World War I and World War II, the Cold War period, and post-Cold War to date. The colonialism period was a period when African people suffered greatly. This period occurred at the end of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, in which Western European countries, especially France and Great Britain, expanded their territory to countries outside the European Continent, and one of the destinations was Africa. ([Zuberi, 2010](#)) states that this exploration of Western countries aims to spread European civilization which is considered more advanced than other civilizations.

As a result of the endless colonization by Great Britain and France, African people experienced prolonged suffering. People were enslaved by the white colonials occupying the region. In fact, the world's stigma of Africa according to ([Korasick, 2005](#)) is an area of exploitation by the white community, a place where diseases, viruses, cannibals and idolaters does exist. This stigma was raised by the West, to illustrate that Africa is an underdeveloped nation with primitive civilization. The oppression on African people continued, and the heating tension gradually triggered World War II.

Nevertheless, World War II brought good news for Africa. Having won the war, the United States and Russia asked Britain and France to decolonize the regions, including the continent that makes up one-fifth of the world's land mass. The year 1960 is also known as "The Year of Africa", where more than 23 countries in Africa proclaimed their independence and joined the United Nations. The Africans believed that the end of World War II and the independence of African countries symbolized the termination of both colonization and slavery in Africa by Westerners. However, the Cold War began to take over the world stability with its ideological wars.

The suffering of the African people is no longer triggered by the colonization and the slavery, but by a proxy war between the US and the Soviet Union. The war aims to influence the balance of power of the superpowers in conflicts that occur outside their territory. The US and USSR through their proxies intervened in the UN operation against the Angolan Civil War in 1975, to pursue their national interests ([Rueedi, 2015](#); [Tafotie & Idahosa, 2016](#); [Wainer, 2019](#)). Since 1980, there have been more than 28 recorded conflicts in Sub-Saharan countries ([Obasi et al., 2021](#); [Odine, 2013](#)). This dynamic continues after the Cold War, especially with the emergence of the Trade War between the US and China.

As a consequence, the stability and sustainability of the African continent as a sovereign nation is threatened. In fact, there are other countries that are struggling in their efforts to control the territory. One of the obstacles is the prolonged period of colonialism in Africa, in which the world view that Africa is a continent that cannot be separated from the influence or the control of the surrounding superpowers. Subconsciously, African colonialism instilled an understanding that Africa is an 'uncivilized' continent. The stigma is intensified by the media, that consider Africa a nation of persistent poverty and underdeveloped civilization.

### **The Influence of Media Construction on the Image of the African Continent**

What has been perceived for so long by the media about poor, dependent, unstable and barren Africa is an unavoidable matter. The perception has been addressed to the continent since the days of colonialism. Even though Africa has undergone changes in its level of development and economy, the negative stigma persists. It is likely that this dominance of African representations in the media tends to ignore the reality of successful social and economic endeavors taking place on the continent ([Jarosz, 1992](#)). According to ([Rothmyer, 2011](#)), incomplete reporting of the African continent - presenting only one side of the negative portrayal of Africa - affects not only readers who access such information, but also the government with their policy.

The result of the media's reporting of the entire continent, which tends to emphasize negative news related to instability, poverty, political instability, and so forth. Without considering the other side of the story of the continent's successful economic and social development, a variety of problems for the continent, including in the economic scope is more emphasized. ([Stein, 1975](#)) states that the model of economic reports is an opera, with oversimplification and dramatization. Moreover, there is a tendency to focus on presenting only the negative news. ([Meer et al., 2019](#)) stated that problematic attitudes in the media are still a current problem. Therefore the oversimplification in regards to the media tendency which focus the dissemination of information on a negative context affects the potentials of African continent to realize its economic development.

Media plays an important role in economy functions. There is a relationship between what is reported to public, how it is perceived, and what the real condition is. Whereas on the social side, the report on economy has an influence on people's attitudes, as news about unemployment, inflation, bankruptcy, are continuously highlighted thus negative news - can have consequences on economic perspectives and therefore the economy in general. [Davis \(2006\)](#) suggests that elites in the financial sector use economic news as a medium for informing decisions, which is consistent with the revelation that changes in the stock market are linked to the structural impact social media. A proposal from Ball-Rokeach and ([Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976](#)) presents the idea of Media

Dependency Theory or MDT, MDT predicts that the impact of media is related to how dependent a society is on the media. The higher the dependency on the media the more likely a person's feelings and actions gets affected. The dependence can be traced by a lack of experience or clues to the conditions in the real world.

### **The True facts about the Africa Region**

In reality, the African region is not as inferior as what the mainstream media has reported. Amadou Sy, an advisor to the Africa Growth Initiative (AGI) at Brookings, points out that in recent decades, the media has had the tendency to present Africa in black and white terminologies. This narrative gives impacts on Africa's progress, ignoring the facts that the region has its own challenges and progress ([Sy, 2017a](#)).

In another article, Sy provides a concrete example of the black-and-white sentiment of media coverage of Africa. In 2014, the Ebola outbreak shook Africa. At the same time, there was a meeting among heads of state from various countries in the African region with President Obama. This meeting resulted in a big deal, with a \$33 billion dollar of public and private investment agreement in the African region. Nevertheless, AGI's findings revealed that in the United States (US) the news about Ebola far outweighed the news about this meeting ([Sy, 2017b](#)).

There are many other cases where positive news about the African region is often overshadowed by negative news. Understanding the challenges and progress faced by countries in the African region should be fostered to avoid negative tendencies. Take for instance, the tourism sector in Africa, it must be understood that this region has a wealth of potential, with its own challenges and progress. These include infrastructure readiness, security, environmental resilience, and the availability of the development funds. In practice, some of them have managed to show progress, even to the point of attracting the attention to foreign investors ([Nthiga et al., 2015](#); [Signé, 2018](#); [Tseane-Gumbi et al., 2019](#)).

Furthermore, the major hotel chains such as Hilton, Radisson Blu, Marriott, and Fairmont, top the list in enlivening the growth of the tourism sector in the African region. From the data taken in 2018, there was a 66% growth in the number of rooms compared to the previous year as recorded by Fairmont ([Signé, 2018](#)). This figure was indeed collected before the COVID-19 pandemic attacked the world, but the author sees that before this prolonged pandemic occurred, foreign investors (a number of which are from the Western regions), had optimism about the future of the African region. In addition, the author emphasized that the readiness is not only to take advantage of the available opportunities, but also to face the future challenges.

Unfortunately, the optimism is rarely echoed by the mainstream media, even in Sy's findings on various mainstream media, especially in the US media, where a tendency to use headlines that cause negative sentiment towards Africa-related information in almost all available media he accessed was detected. From the abstract or the opening part of the article, the negative sentiment regarding the news on Africa news tend to increase ([Sy, 2017a](#)).

Furthermore, the sentiment to the news coverage is also detected not only in the mass media, but also in other types of visual media such as movies and advertisements. Movies starred by African actors and even advertisements about Africa, worsen the image about Africa itself. In fact, this emphasis on negativity often comes at the expense of building a positive image. Unfortunately,



significant changes in media coverage and portrayal have not been realized yet ([Poncian, 2015](#)). Therefore, strenuous efforts to change the image of the African continent must continue, especially in the new media era.

### The Efforts to Change the Image of the African Continent in the New Media Era

Technology advancement also brings changes to mass media and information flows. Sophisticated technologies such as internet networks and digital devices have led to digitization in various fields, especially media and information. With the emergence of digital technology, it has the potential to cause radical changes in who controls information, experience and resources ([Shapiro, 1999](#)). The changes that occur in media and information are known as the concept of new media, as opposed to old media. In the new media era, ([Popoola, 2014](#)) revealed that the evolution of the universal connection between voice, video, electronic communication texts has led to the blurring of the distinction between mass and interpersonal communication and between public and private communication. Therefore, it can be seen how media and information flows are increasingly freer and broader in the new media era.

The development of new media has occurred in various parts of the world, one of which is in Africa. As discussed in the previous section, the image of Africa is often perceived as an underdeveloped region, full of conflict, poverty, and other negative stigmas. This image is often constructed by the western world with certain aims and objectives. In reality, the framing by the West is not entirely true and seems to only highlight the negative side. From his presentation in a webinar, Hery Saripudin's stated an in-depth information about Africa, pinpointing a number of facts about the African region. He emphasized that in 2018, 6 out of 10 countries with the largest economic growth took place in Africa it is undergoing a rapid population growth with a projection of 2.4 billion by 2050 ([Saripudin, 2021](#)). In addition, Africa is also experiencing an increase in digital access and industrialization. This proved that Africa is not always identical with poverty and backwardness.

In the new media era, supported by the potential demographic bonus and the increased access to digital technology, there should be efforts Africa can focus on to improve its image (re-branding Africa's image) at the world level. The nation can utilize instruments such as digital diplomacy and public diplomacy to change the image. With the increasing access to digital technology and the internet by the younger generation in African countries, digital diplomacy serves as an effective tool to build a new image of Africa. It is obvious that the growing use of the internet, social media, and communication technology has made the world more interconnected, so diplomacy can now be carried out more thoroughly ([Adesina, 2017](#)). A proof that digital diplomacy has been carried out by countries in Africa, is an effort by South Sudan to gain international recognition by utilizing social media and digital technology, thus diplomatic support from regional countries and the international community is given ([Roba & Maluki, 2020](#)). The current pandemic conditions have increased the use of digital diplomacy in African countries. Thus, it is possible that digital diplomacy be manifested by African countries to change their image. It is also vital that the leaders of African countries unite and work together to improve the world image on the regions.

In addition to utilizing digital diplomacy, another step the new media era can be used is by maximizing public diplomacy. With the availability of abundant resources, public diplomacy known as the soft power fuels governments to communicate, to persuade, and to influence people

from other countries in a bid to gain a better perception towards the image of Africa. Moreover, there is now the concept of multi-track diplomacy, where the practice of diplomacy is no longer carried out only by the government, but also by non-governmental society and individuals (people to people contact) (Firdaus, 2020). Through this concept, diplomacy now involves various parties, from the highest to the grassroots level. With multi-track diplomacy, public diplomacy has changed in terms of targets and actors, where the targets include non-official groups, organizations, and individuals and the actors involve the private sector, INGOs, media, and individuals. The implementation of public diplomacy that can be carried out by countries in Africa is by promoting culture through social media or exhibitions, providing student exchange programs to create people to people contact, utilizing diasporas in various countries, and other supporting steps with the aim of changing Africa's image to a more global perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

For years, the natural resources in Africa have been exploited by other parties in pursuit of self-interests. The oppression on Africa by superpower nations triggers prolonged hunger and poverty among the majority of indigenous Africans. Thus, it is likely that the presence of foreign representatives is required to administer the government. This stigma has fueled a long debate about what actually happen in Africa, compared to what the media portray.

The black and white narrative of Africa has attracted the attention of academics and African studies. However, the tendency of media to put sentiment towards Africa still prevails. Ultimately, most people identify Africa from negative perspectives such as poverty, famine and chaos. In other words, the world citizens tend to overlook Africa's growth and potential.

The negative image of Africa portrayed by the media has a direct impact on Africa's development planning. The excessive focus on negative news and reports on Africa, without taking into account its triumphs and progress has made it difficult for African countries to implement national development. It is obvious that the global and financial community rely on news and media as a basis for decisions, and without an improvement in the image of the African continent, investment and economic development efforts will remain an issue.

In the era of new media, African countries can utilize the media to change the negative stigma attached to the image of the region. With the intensifying access to the digital world and the demographic bonus in the next few years, the image of the African region previously framed negatively by the west can be transformed to a better portray through a continual digital and public diplomacy. In addition, with the emergence of the multi-track diplomacy concept, not only by the state but also by the grassroots levels can diplomacy be conducted. Moreover, with abundant resources that Africa has, the good image of the region supports a strong diplomacy. Lastly, the willingness to collaborate between the governments and the society of the countries help build the true image of Africa.

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