INTERNATIONAL NEWS COVERAGE OF INSECURITY AND HUMAN SUFFERING IN AFRICA’S GREAT LAKES REGION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines news coverage of insecurity and human suffering in Africa’s Great Lakes region. Drawing on news reports collected through LexisNexis, it discusses how international news reports use place differences to give prominence to certain events in the region, making them key referents of human insecurity and suffering. The discussion is guided by the assumption that, “images are, on the one hand, reproductions, but they have a second meaning as well: a mental picture of something not real or present” (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 374). To highlight how stereotypical images of Africa still dominate international news reports, with hard-line opinions and “frame-fit” inscriptions, the article focuses on image representations and conveyed meanings rather than factual inferences. Overall, the events discussed should be read as part of the broader narratives feeding into the stereotypical image of Africa as an insecure place, marred by trauma and horror.

Keywords: Human insecurity, human suffering, news coverage, East Africa, Africa’s Great Lakes region.

INTRODUCTION

Africa’s Great Lakes region, comprised of Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, has been characterized by high levels of insecurity. For the most part, the drivers of such insecurity are explained in terms of interethnic differentiation, colonial legacy, elite mobilization of grievances, and competition over resources (Khadiagala, 2006; Leewen, 2008; Onguny, 2012). Although the region is prone to protracted violence, the most noticeable cases of human insecurity and suffering have been exemplified by Rwanda’s genocide in the 1990s, intermittent wars in northern Uganda, and endemic wars in the Congo. Recent incidents have added to the challenges of insecurity in the region. These include

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Kenya’s post-election violence that followed the highly disputed elections in 2007, and the horrific scenes of terrorist carnage linked to the insurgency of Somalia’s al-Shabaab.

Throughout this chaos, the international news media have taken an active role in giving meaning and prominence to such manifestations, some of which have become referents of human insecurity and suffering in the region. While acknowledging the worrying trends of such threats, there is an inclination towards the use of reductionist frames to replicate “familiar images” of Africa. Such frames appear to be driven by populist public discourses that continue to cast Africa as “dark continent”, a historical construct that “others” the people of Africa within Euro-American discourse. Such practices have been criticized by scholars such as Hawk (1992). Despite the severity of some threats to human security, such events receive almost no media attention while others are awarded special coverage. This principle of selectivity raises profound questions with regard to the representation of Africa in international news: What makes some issues of human insecurity and suffering more newsworthy than others? Does the degree of importance associated with some threats explain the variance in response to some sufferings? Do the processes of mediatization and politicization of security threats such as the narratives of “war on terror” have any bearing on how imminent risks are handled in the region?

This article aims to discuss how the international news coverage of some events have increasingly rendered them referents and/or symbols of human insecurity and suffering in Africa’s Great Lakes region. To do this, three key terms were used to generate news reports from LexisNexis: insecurity in Africa’s Great Lakes region, terror in sub-Saharan Africa, and human suffering in Africa. This produced 438 results from “major world publications” source type. News reports were then selected purposefully to examine the portrayal of insecurity and human suffering in the region, with particular emphasis put on British, American, French, and Canadian newspapers and news transcripts. Further refining of the reports was done by scanning through fifteen reports out of the thirty-two retained news reports, most of which were produced between 2012 and 2015. Building on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to denaturalize news coverage of Africa, the analyses focused primarily on image representations and conveyed meanings rather than factual inferences of the selected news reports. This is guided by the assumption that, “images are, on the one hand, reproductions, but they have a second meaning as well: a mental picture of something not real or present” (Gamson et al., 1992, 374). In essence, CDA allows for the unveiling of discursive strategies, such as semiotic and non-semiotic elements in a text, and structures used by social actors to give meaning to different occurrences (Fairclough, 2010). Since news reports are forms of public discourse, CDA helped unravel the discourses enshrined in major news reports to characterize the issues of insecurity and human suffering in Africa’s Great Lakes region.

Although the article focuses on specific events and how they are articulated in international news reports, this should not suggest that other causes of human insecurity and suffering such as poverty, famine, disease, corruption, and human trafficking are ignored. Such analyses are extensively addressed in the works of Fair
(1993) and Franks (2013). The events discussed should therefore be read as part of the broader narratives feeding into the stereotypical image of Africa as an insecure place, often marred by trauma and human suffering (Drumbl, 2012; Kakamba, 2010; Nothias, 2014; Vicente, 2013). In fact, these events serve to demonstrate that the perceived insecurity and human suffering in the region is complex and stretch beyond simplistic news coverage.

Since the notion of security is itself a disputed concept (Ferreira and Henk, 2009), the term security is broadly conceived here to underscore “the absence of social, political and economic threats, [and] the enjoyment of social and economic justice that aims at making human fulfilment possible” (Nuruzzaman, 2006, p. 298). Thus, whether perceived as a subjective or objective phenomenon (Chung and Mau, 2014), the concept of insecurity underscores the risks of human suffering and deaths (Murdie and Webeck, 2015).

SITUATING MEDIA IMAGES OF INSECURITY AND HUMAN SUFFERING

Research into the representation of human suffering and death has produced interesting perspectives on the intricate relationship between media images and the varying appeals they create. Four broad streams of research on mediated experience of suffering can be identified.

The first cluster focuses on how proximity and distance influence the manner in which images of human suffering and/or death are constructed and construed in varying contexts of trauma. This kind of analysis has found particular appeal in humanitarian communication discourse, with notions such as cosmopolitan spectator, clicktivism, and distant suffering gaining much attention with the works of Boltanski (1999), Chouliaraki (2006), Kyle (1998) and Scott (2013). For the most part, they argue that, while media representations of suffering have the potential to invoke fear and despair, they equally call upon audiences’ conscience to act in solidarity with the supposed sufferers. That is, such representations create a moralistic rhetoric around human suffering, which, symbolically, give rise to simultaneous feelings of closeness and distance with respect to the victims (Orgad and Seu, 2014; Zelizer, 2010).

Scholars such as Sontag (2003: 6) argue that “photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They create the illusion of consensus”. In other words, photography has the capacity to invoke a sense of shared experience. Konstantinidou (2008: 144) furthers this claim by suggesting that “photographic image has the moral capacity to arouse compassion and build bonds of mutual responsibility and solidarity that unite all people, regardless of their social characteristics and attributes”. On the other hand, Kyle (1998) remarks that, “the death of humans usually constitutes a spectacle, a disturbing sight which is awful in both senses of word, an eerie yet intriguing phenomenon demanding acknowledgement and attention” (p. 1). Kyle goes on to write: “when confronted, as it must be, death makes us to come to terms, individually and collectively, with our powers and our limitations – with our humanity and our morality” (p. 1). However,
there are studies that warn against such universalist approaches to morality. While acknowledging that in order “to arose pity, suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in such a way as to effect the sensibility of those more fortunate”, Boltanski (1999: 11) argues that is difficult to determine where the acclaimed moral responsibility lies. According to Boltanski, several other factors such as shared conscientiousness, urgency, autonomy, and material possibility influence one’s ability and/or willingness to respond.

The second broad stream of research on mediated experience of suffering builds on and challenges the propositions above. The central claim is that, whilst media representations create an appeal for sympathy and pity with the presumed sufferers, the articulation of such narratives within the public discourse may not necessarily culminate into act of solidarity. Thus, it is believed that the emerging forms of sensibilities emphasize reflexive particularism and replace emotion-laden messages with short-term agency (Chouliaraki 2013). On the other hand, other studies indicate that some representations of human suffering may not move viewers to take any form of action (Joseph, 2014). Consistent with this thought, Hawkins (2011) reminds us that unchecked death tolls and selective media coverage often leave the deadliest conflicts unreported. Thus, media audiences’ actions may be restricted by lack of coverage. These countertrends raise further questions: How graphically and distastefully should the media display human suffering to create an appeal for solidarity? What makes the coverage of some sufferings less excruciating than others? To some extent, these questions are addressed in the works of Karniel, Lavie-Dinur and Azran (2015) and Cohen (2011), which examined the coverage of Muammar Gaddafi’s brutal death and visual representations of his final days. As Karniel, Lavie-Dinur and Azran (2015) observe, while “broadcasting of such images may compromise the privacy and dignity of the dead and harm national moral and support for the conflict, […] not showing such images may understate the human cost of war” (p. 173).

Equally gaining attention are the studies focusing on how place differences influence the frames adopted by the media to give meaning and prominence to certain stories, particularly African stories (Ibelema, 2014; Kakamba, 2012). Most of the writings here focus on the contradictions between media representations as a form of accompanied experience, and signifying practices used to underline the reality on the ground. At the core of these studies are the questions about what is and what should be perceived as collective values, given the variation in meanings of rights and wrongs. Some studies therefore examine how public culture, dominant values, and the symbolic order of language influence mediated experiences of suffering (Altheide, 2007; Mellor, 2009). Others, such as Ibelema (2014) and Hawk (1992) focus on the coverage of Africa. Ibelema (2014), for instance, believes that the coverage of African news is imbued with primordial tendencies of ethnic rivalries: what he calls “tribal fixation”. Hawk (1992) on the other hand asserts that the consumer culture drives the foreign media to adopt simplistic, sensational, and metaphoric language when covering Africa. For instance, Hawk argues that, “most Americans have never visited Africa and will never visit Africa, yet there is an image of Africa in the American mind” (p. 3). Hawk believes that Western audiences uphold peculiar, inaccurate, and illusionary
images of Africa. Indeed, recent studies on media images of Africa corroborate this assumption (Gould, 2014; Ibelema, 2014; Von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2014). Thus, no matter how fallacious or tenuous media representations of Africa might be, dominant attributes and/or characteristics of the continent give a *prima facie* condition for the mediated experiences of suffering.

Finally, there is a panoply of attempts seeking to understand how and why some sufferings are awarded special attention to become what Kellner (2003) coined as “media spectacles”, while others receive almost no media attention. In its broadest sense, “media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution” (Kellner, 2003: 2). At the centre of these debates is the belief that our political and social lives are a function of media representations. Thus, some scholars suggest that, from a normative perspective, media should “offer places to all different kinds of positions, to implement neutrality, objectivity, independence, and unbiased framing in their coverage” (Gerth and Siegert, 2012: 280).

However, this is not always the case. Other research shows that the effectiveness of media images hinges not only on its representational aptitude, but also on the relationship between image selection and image inference (Cambell, 2004; Figenschou, 2011; Griffin, 2010). Studies on mediatization ascribe to this logic. Mediatization describes a situation “where political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions” (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999: 247). Research on mediatization indicates that the intermediary role of the media (serving as a bridge between the communicator and the audience) has a bearing on the prevalence given to some news content.

REFERENTS OF INSECURITY AND HUMAN SUFFERING IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION

There are several events that have become symbols of insecurity and human suffering in the Great Lakes. For the purpose of this article, I focus of five referents: display of Rwandan genocide as a point of reference when giving meaning to potential threats to human security; representations of conflicts in northern Uganda and Congo as indications of war sustainability in the region; portrayal of Kenya’s 2007-08 post-election violence as a success story; and increased coverage of al-Shabaab insurgency in the region.

Rwanda’s Genocide and African “Savagism”

Probably one of the most cited incidents of human suffering in the Great Lakes is the Rwandan genocide, which cost nearly 800,000 lives (Autesserre, 2010; Frère, 2009). Whereas the wars started in early 1990s, with spillover effect in Sudan and the Congo (Thompson, 2007), international audiences were only apprised of the conflicts in 1994 when it became a spectacle, with horrifying images of death circulated by
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different news outlets. As Myers, Klak and Koehl (1996) notes, this attention also came with special place tags:

Despite the horrible bloodshed in both conflicts, the media are more willing to describe Rwanda’s war as ‘bloodthirsty’ or ‘savage’, with ‘gangs’ engaged in an ‘orgy’ of ‘terror’. In Bosnia, the press is more likely to describe the ‘tactics’ and “strategies” of warfare, thereby suggesting that the conflict is more civilized. Moreover, the press has given Rwanda punctuated and fleeting bursts of attention, while Bosnian stories have been a regular daily feature (Myers, Klak and Koehl, 1996: 22).

These conclusions were the result of a comparative analysis between the 1990s civil wars in Rwanda and Bosnia. According to Myers, Klak and Koehl (1996), Rwanda’s genocide was framed in terms of African savagism, rather than a political war. For critics of Africa media coverage, such practices serve to replicate “familiar images” of Africa to meet consumer interests of the West (Gould, 2014; Kakamba, 2012; Ibelema, 2014). As a result, there have been emerging countertrends seeking to refute the savagism claim. Other scholars such as Frère (2009) perceive Rwanda’s genocide partly as a function of complex politicization and mediatization of intergroup relations. The creation and organization of imagery around certain themes such as land grievance are believed to influence audiences’ political consciousness around such issues. Frère (2009: 327) writes: “Radio télévision mille collines (RTLM) in Rwanda became the first of those described as ‘death media’, preparing minds for genocide and helping in its implementation”.

Nonetheless, despite the emerging countertrends, Rwanda’s genocide still remains the primary point of reference of insecurity in the region. It is often evoked as a yardstick to measure other potential threats to human security, notwithstanding that issues of subjectivity such as ethno-linguistic particularities of Rwanda may possibly explain the severity of the killings in the 1990s.

“Rebels” and “Tribal Warfare” in the Congo

Enduring wars in the Congo have also been given prominence as symbols of insecurity in the Great Lakes region. For the most part, civil wars in the Congo have been represented as a conflict between rebels and the government of Congo. In essence, the crisis in Congo has been reduced to “tribal warfare”. For instance, in a 2013 report by USA Today, the author wrote:

The deadliest war in modern African history is entering a new phase. For two decades, at least 20 armed groups have been fighting in this stunning landscape of jungle, volcanoes and rolling farms producing coffee, sugar cane and maize in a massive country about the size of the Eastern USA. Millions of people have died, most from starvation and disease brought on by relentless combat that has stymied intervention by the United Nations and forced millions of people to plod from village to village in search of safety. [...] The violence is a never-ending horror for the people in eastern Congo, who have had their lives ruled by warfare since the Rwandan genocide in 1994”.
This kind of reporting is problematic for several reasons. First, by using metaphoric language such as the “stunning landscape of jungle”, readers are invited to create mental pictures of primitiveness, with implicatures of “law of the jungle” as the force behind Congolese wars. The proposition that the people of Congo and those living in the neighbouring countries are governed by warfare, rather than legitimate governments, is fallacious and leaves much to desire. Using Rwandan genocide as grounds and/or warrants for such claims also creates the perception of hopelessness around war victims in Congo. Furthermore, using disease and hunger to qualify Congo as a deplorable place suggest that viewers should ignore contexts of war to rely on what they “know” about Africa as a place.

According to Kenney (1994), such images may probably be explained by the fact that a conglomerate of mainstream media functions “as extensions of powerful interests in society” such as economic considerations. Scholars such as Kakamba (2010) and Hawkins (2011) also agree that the imbalances in the coverage of wars are the result of conscious selective processes drawing on commercial considerations, and on what editors regarded newsworthy. Subsequently, the deadliest conflicts such as the wars in Congo are virtually uncovered.

Austesserre (2010) on the other hand believes that the international neglect of the wars in Congo stretch beyond commercial and editorial interests of the West. Austesserre (2010: 17) argues that, whereas there is little evidence to support “Western actors’ stake in the continuation of violence [in Congo]”, the low coverage of Congolese crisis is partly influenced by the complicity of Western (and a handful of African) multinationals exploiting Congo’s rich national resources.

**The “Invisible Children” and Uganda’s Lord Resistance Army (LRA)**

Civil wars and forced migration in northern Uganda have also taken centre stage as images of Great Lakes insecurity. The conflicts are often reported as a tussle between the government of Uganda and the Lord Resistance Army (LRA), the rebel group allegedly led by Joseph Kony (Majtenyi, 1998). Although LRA’s insurgency has been a major threat to regional security for decades, the situation caught the world’s attention through Kony 2012, an experimental campaign by the Invisible Children, a US-based NGO. The NGO sought to determine whether an online video had the potential to “make an obscure war criminal famous”, just like a Hollywood celebrity.

The Invisible Children’s Kony 2012 campaign became one of the biggest web sensations, with over a hundred million views on YouTube six days following its launch (Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson, 2015). The objective of the campaign was to create global awareness around war atrocities in northern Uganda and to bring Joseph Kony to justice (Gould, 2014; Kligler-Vilenchik and Thorson, 2015). The impact of the Kony 2012 was twofold. On one hand, the media campaign instilled a sense of sympathy and empathy with regard to the victims of wars while, on the other hand, calling upon audiences to act in order to bring Joseph Kony to justice. In essence, the mediatization
of Kony 2012 made LRA’s horrific acts an unprecedented media spectacle, drawing global attention to one of the perceived stressors of Great Lakes security.

Whereas some may argue that the campaign raised money and global attention to human suffering in northern Uganda, Kony 2012 is primarily based on stereotypic images of Africa, using a deplorable civil war to inaccurately represent Uganda (Gould, 2014; Hardin, 2012; Von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2014). The backlash of Kony 2012 in Uganda and some African countries is a clear indication of how “cosmopolitan humanism can become tragically disconnected from how it plays out locally” (Gould 2014). That is, the display of “familiar images” of Africa did not appear to be so familiar to the place and people represented in the campaign. This may be the result of what some scholars call “clicktivism” – reducing activism to “cheap participation” without a clear grasp of the underlying issues addressed (Chouliaraki, 2013; Drumbl, 2012), “commodity activism” – using the images of human suffering for funding purposes (Kennedy, 2009), and “American sentimentalism” – seeking to produce global citizens and emotional experiences that confirm privilege (Kligler-Vilenchik and Kjerstin, 2015; Krabill, 2012).

Post-election Violence in Kenya and the “Miracles” of the 2013 Elections

Although Kenya had experienced sporadic election violence in the past, the deadly aftermath of the 2007-08 conflicts remains Kenya’s worst post-election violence to date. It is believed that “in less than two months 1,133 Kenyans were killed and over 600,000 driven from their homes while more than 110,000 private properties were destroyed” during violence. This crisis has also become an image of insecurity in the Great Lakes region. Several factors may explain the high coverage of this particular violence.

First, prior to the outburst of violence in 2007-08, Kenya had been a relatively peaceful country within the turbulent Great Lakes region. This made it a suitable and strategic location from which many Western countries extended their missions to parts of Africa. As such, ignoring the conflicts was not an option for the international community. Second, increased international coverage may be attributed to the fact that the African Union (AU) failed to bring the warring parties to a consensus, allowing the UN-led mediation team to take over the negotiations. In other words, there was much anxiety about Kenya falling apart. This was further highlighted by the precedence of Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General, as the chief bargainer.

In the process, different news media took an active role in explaining what had and what was happening. Annan knew the stakes were high and much was expected of him. For this reason, the media also became a crucial component of the negotiations. In his memoir, Annan recounts how critical it was to ensure that journalists took photographs of the handshake between the two party leaders who had not been seen in public despite the killings. According to Annan, this “was a confidence-building measure to send message that leaders were negotiating and on track toward a solution” (p. 192). While the display of this symbol of hope aimed at countering sensationalist narratives, several news media maintained their simplistic versions of the
crisis, with parallels drawn between Kenya’s case and other incidences of mass massacre such as the wars in Congo and Rwanda’s genocide. For example, the New York Times ran stories with highlights such as “tribal rivalry boils over after Kenyan election”\textsuperscript{vi} and “vengeance reignites Kenyan city”\textsuperscript{vi}.

In the run-up to the 2013 elections, just like the 2007-08 elections, several news media predicted an eruption of violence, discounting the reports by the Commonwealth Observer Group that applauded the peaceful manner in which the 2013 election campaigns were held. This is the case of Reuters (a news agency), which claimed that, “Kenyan city fears violence re-run ahead of tight vote”\textsuperscript{vii}. To the surprise of some of the Western media that had anticipated a repeat of the 2007-08 post-election carnage, violence was virtually non-existent during the 2013 elections. The elections were peaceful even though the official results of the 2013 elections were contested in the Supreme Court. Subsequently, a cohort of Western media was quick to change their initial accounts. The Guardian, for example, published an article explaining “how the West was wrong”\textsuperscript{viii}, while the Washington Post reported on how “Kenyans mock foreign media coverage on Twitter”\textsuperscript{x}. Kenya appeared to have “defied the odds” by maintaining peaceful elections.

Nonetheless, several other Western news media were unsettled with how things turned out. Since the ICC had filed criminal charges against certain candidates whose party won the elections, the New York Times lamented that, “Kenyan accused by Rights Court is leading vote”\textsuperscript{x} and ran a commentary explaining “why Kenyan democracy is a fragile proposition”\textsuperscript{xi}. The French newspaper, Le Monde Diplomatique, published an article casting the AU as a “dictators’ club” presumably because it supported Kenya’s unsuccessful bid to defer the ICC processes. The Guardian also claimed that, “Kenyatta victory promises trouble for Kenya”\textsuperscript{xii}. These views seem to indicate that the relative peace that Kenyans enjoyed prior to and after the elections was essentially a ticking time bomb. Such perspectives have the potential to taint audiences’ image of political processes in Africa. For example, the absence of violence is explained in terms of “miracles” rather than normalcy, and bloodshed is seen as an expectation rather than unnatural occurrence. This may explain why, in his acceptance speech, President Kenyatta dispelled the cynicism that surrounded the 2013 elections, emphasizing that, “despite the misgivings of many in the world, we demonstrated a level of political maturity that surpassed expectations”\textsuperscript{xiii}.

**Al-Shaabab Insurgency and the “Failing” African States**

In recent years, Great Lakes region has been the scene of numerous terrorist attacks, with Somalia’s al-Shabaab claiming responsibility for most of the attacks. Although the region had experienced irregular attacks in the past, the 1998 “twin” bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam was a grim reminder of the looming security threat in the region. According to a report published by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), “the explosion [in Nairobi] killed 213 people, of whom 44 were embassy employees” and injured 4000\textsuperscript{iv}. The same report
notes that Tanzanian attack killed 12 people and injured 85. Since the 1998 bombings, the most noticeable “acts of terror” in the region have been the killings of Ugandan soccer fans during the screening of the 2010 World Cup finals in Kampala, the 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, and the deadly massacre at Kenya’s Garissa University in 2015.

The Garissa University attack, which left 147 dead, mostly students, is reportedly the deadliest single terror-linked assault in the region since the 1998 bombings. It was therefore not surprising that the incident would attract media attention. For the most part, the news media, both local and international, dwelled on the presumed lapses in security apparatus and response. For example, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) emphasized the negligence by the Kenyan government to act on the warnings following travel advisories by the British and Australian authorities days before the carnage at Garissa University\textsuperscript{v}. These frames built on a story initially published by Kenya’s Daily Nation alluding to a diplomatic tussle between Kenya and Britain, which, according to the newspaper, may have influenced the dismissal of the warnings by Kenya’s president\textsuperscript{vi}. Following the rampage, the same daily ran another story questioning whether or not Kenyatta’s government and European countries, particularly Britain, shared intelligence.

In fact, the narratives that accompanied the coverage of the Garissa University attack appeared to draw on the criticisms of the Kenyan government and how it responded to Nairobi’s Westgate Mall attack that left 67 dead in September 2013. For example, CNN ran a story on how “Kenya mall attackers prayed, talked on cell phone between shootings”\textsuperscript{vii}. The Guardian, on the other hand, wrote on “how Kenya’s vibrant media exposed the army’s botched response”\textsuperscript{viii}. Canada’s National Post, also alleged that the “NYPD report on Kenya mall massacre finds no evidence any terrorists died in siege”\textsuperscript{ix}. The French news network, France24, on the other hand, asserted that “Kenyan government and army chief were warned of plans to carry out a major attack on the country” ahead of the attacks\textsuperscript{x}. Interestingly enough, when Western casualties are recounted among the victims, some of the Western media such as the Daily Mail was quick to shift their narratives from “hopeless” victims of terror to “heroic” figures who offered or gave their lives to save others during the massacre\textsuperscript{xi}. The Westgate attack became the yardstick to measure the level of negligence and incompetency supposedly displayed by the Kenyan security apparatus in handling the attack at Garissa University. Moreover, with US President Obama’s planned (at the time of this writing) visit to Kenya in July 2015, some international news reports are already generating fear around the president’s security, with Fox News claiming that “terror attack, threats of more violence raise security questions for Obama’s Kenya visit”\textsuperscript{xii}.

While it is undeniable that al-Shabaab’s insurgency is worrying, the reports highlighted above create the impression that the criteria of performance by African governments need to be in sync with those of superpowers. Whenever certain standards are supposedly unmet, labels such as “failed states” are embodied as explanations of increased insecurity. Reductionist labels such as “militiamen” are also used to characterize the image of the African forces, which are suggestive of their implied incapacitation by terrorist threats. Such descriptions give the impression that
African states should be evaluated against Western criteria, notwithstanding that the vast majority of African states do not have the same military might or resources to fight such wars. In fact, the “war on terror” has never been an African war in the first place. It ascribes to the erroneous logic of “global crises” extensively discussed by Cottle (2011), underpinning social constructions aiming to deepen people’s sense of globality. This should not suggest, however, that it is warrantable for any government to play politics when the lives of its citizens are endangered; rather, the premise advanced is that the politicization and mediatization of the “wars on terror” summons and spreads fear.

Indeed, following the controversies that surrounded the 1991 Gulf war and US-led offensive against Iraq in 2003, Freedman and Thussu (2012) speak powerfully on the quality of war reporting: “just as deception characterizes war operations, deception moved from the battleground to the media ground and drove its information” (p. 310). To some extent, the same could be said about the ongoing media hysteria over terrorist activities. Scholars such as Law (2015: 435), for example, point out that “terrorist organizations are ineluctably linked to media coverage and the use of ICTs to achieve their political goals; however, states – often the primary targets of terrorist activities – are also the key players in the mediatization of terror”. What Law (2015) suggests is that the manipulation of terror threats is doing more harm than good in terms of containing imminent risks. This probably explains why Kenya’s president, Uhuru Kenyatta, dismissed travel advisories issued by the British and Australian authorities to their citizens days before the deadly massacre at Garissa University College.

**CONCLUSION**

Although some may argue that there has been a shift from Afro-pessimism to Afro-optimism in the coverage of Africa (Nothias, 2014; Vicente, 2013), stereotypic images of the continent dominate the coverage of insecurity and human suffering in the Great Lakes region. For the most part, hard-line editorial opinions and “frame-fit” characterize the image of Africa in Western media, with place labels used to legitimize information credibility. Such reductionist and insensitive coverage provide skewed understanding of the region, including the potential threats to human security. When the absence of violence becomes a “miracle”, political violence a “tribal warfare”, intergroup conflicts an indication of “savagism”, and terrorist assaults equated with negligence and incompetency, the actual conditions under which imminent threats emerge subdue.

Paradoxically, African journalists have increasingly adopted the same stereotypic imageries when covering issues of human insecurity in the region. Such practices continue to reinforce peculiar images of the continent, particularly in Western media. In fact, a number of Western media rely on local news sources for their stories about Africa. This is particularly true when the safety of Western journalists is at stake. Thus, adopting simplistic frames that sensationalize and essentialize the problems of Africa
as a single entity only serves to desensitize African subjectivities – even though the whole notion of “Africanness” is itself negatively connoted (Chouliaraki, 2013; Nothias, 2014).

The analysis of visual languages used to underline insecurity and human suffering in the region reveals further biases. On one hand, the local/regional news media seem to use photographs of first responders and humanitarian workers to emphasize rescue missions. On the other hand, some of the Western media appear to highlight the images of victims and/or survivors and their horrifying experiences. Symbolically, these choices have varying appeals. It is clear that using photographs of rescuers is likely to provide a positive image with regard to the manner in which the concerned authorities are handing the situation on the ground. However, this might conceal the severity of the issue at hand. Conversely, focusing on the images of horror as recounted by survivors only serves to encourage more fear, while reaffirming the ugly side of human insecurity and suffering.
REFERENCES


NOTES


