Chapter 10
Positionality and Commercialization of Political Content in US, UK Media Coverage of African Elections

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ABSTRACT

Democracy, as the argument goes, has assumed a media character in the midst of mediatization of global politics. This has become more glaring in media coverage of politics vis-a-vis elections. In a way, it has fundamentally ignited the debate on media imagery and projection of power. Overall, the coverage to a large extent is particularistic in a sense as western media re-enacts the social realities of the global south to western audience. This chapter therefore argues that at the very core of this pattern of western media coverage of the global south, specifically, African elections, lies the positionality of issues and the commercialization of political contents. A recurring decimal of this coverage of African elections is the dominance of commercial contents over political journalism, mediatization, democratization, and political contents. The chapter also extrapolates the degree to which western media position African elections in a commercialized way and the implications of such media construction on political communication.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly three decades, the role of international communication continues to elicit divergent opinions about the extent foreign news media influence society, mostly western audience. Scholars in a broad spectrum of research have tended to argue that this pattern of media influence on audience is more pervasive in western democracies, (Bahador, 2015; Robinson, 1997; Robinson, 2005; Zingarelli, 2012). For example, the argument that such media coverage has a corresponding influence on policy chain in western societies is not an abstract perception that is merely theorized but an observable news media
phenomenon that have been proven over time. Within the context of power and how media and communications shape public opinion and decision-making processes in public affairs, the focus is not just news media ability to churn out news stories, sound bites and images, but the evolving impact that is occasioned by a compelling action or decision taken by the state or those with the levers of power to act in consonance with the news reported.

Though, the effect of international news became more eminent during US intervention in the Cold War, a basic aspect of the theoretical framework of the concept is that western media, mostly, United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) news organizations are at the center of such influence. This effect through the act of beaming events from the global south to American and British audience in furtherance of their foreign policy agenda initiates some ideological bend in the reordering of global politics and policy. At its best, the characterization of the impact of international news lies squarely on the capacity of the media to shape and control (Cohen, 1994; Robinson, 2005) the public and audiences through the manufacturing of consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) of events and ideologies.

Critically, a study of new dynamics in international communication and their implications in media and political communication studies obviously reaches a significant point. Scholars further argued that the importance of studying global media framing of issues and politics is hinged on the international spread of such news and how they reconfigure power relations, initiate purposive social actions and enact symbolic power, (Flew, 2007; Foucault, 1988; Strange, 1988; Thompson, 1995). Thompson (1995) again contended that through symbolic power, the media is trusted to shape and control beliefs, values and ideologies of citizens.

For instance, CNN reporter Nima Elbagir’s report on the sale of US weapons to Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) ending up with rebels in Yemen has now become a national issue in the US, with many lawmakers in Capitol Hill calling for an investigation. More substantially, commendations from US Senate Democrat, Chris Murphy commending CNN and Elbagir and calling for an investigation on that report “because the US military did not know” that such illicit-deal connecting US weapons with rebels in Yemen is a glaring example of the impact of international news. The argument is that beyond this effect, a new approach and concentration of western media in covering the global south, Africa and elections in particular have engrained other new approaches and focus.

Added to that, the ability of western media to re-enact a different conceptual framework beyond the CNN effect (Bahador, 2015; Livingston, 1995; Robinson, 2005; Zingarelli, 2012) in the coverage of African elections outside the purview of mediatization, democratization and politicization provides a new dimension in media and international communication studies. It is therefore imperative to establish that the agenda-setting principle of the media to control and determine policies and public opinion has now been expanded by new cases of effects and impacts that revolve outside the territory of influence of international and foreign news or policy determinant. In the same token, Street (2011:12) further maintained that in understanding the effect of media influence, power and control, it is “not every piece of news that has the same effect.”

Instructively, the current effects projected by western media coverage of African elections go beyond the influence of the international order by the west to new approaches that have not been previously tested or extensively calibrated. This obsessive impact of western media on decision-making in order to spur western nations, specifically, the US and UK to act in line with the foreign news coverage of events has of recent been advanced to other variables beside the need to influence foreign policy decisions. This paper, therefore stipulate that the new approaches to western media coverage of African elections is deep rooted on projecting (1) a market logic and the African continent as investment outpost for market forces