

On The Coloniality of News Mobilities and How the World Knows About What Happens in Black Francophone Africa

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Abstract

The coloniality of the global news industry and its centrality in knowledge production about the Global South remains under-examined. This is especially true in the case of news production about Black Francophone Africa (by which I refer to sub-Saharan Francophone countries formerly colonised by France), which continues to receive limited attention in the academic study of politics in Africa. By posing the question, 'How do we know about what happens in Francophone Africa?' this paper sheds light on the coloniality of production and circulation of news deemed credible about Francophone Africa. It interrogates the implications for knowledge production about this space in African Studies and International Politics.

Keywords: Coloniality, Western News Agencies, News Mobilities, Credibility, Black Francophone Africa, French (neo)colonialism

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Résumé

La colonialité de l'industrie mondiale de l'actualité et son rôle central dans la production des savoirs sur les pays du Sud reste sous-examiné. Ce constat est particulièrement vrai en ce qui concerne la production de l'actualité au sujet de l'Afrique Noire francophone (c'est-à-dire les pays sub-Sahariens anciennement colonisés par la France), sujet qui demeure peu étudié dans les études politiques africaines. En examinant la question "Comment sait-on ce qui se passe en Afrique francophone?", cet article fait lumière sur la colonialité de la production et de la circulation des informations et de l'actualité jugées crédibles au sujet de l'Afrique francophone. Il s'interroge sur les implications de la production des savoirs au sujet de cet espace dans les études africaines et la politique internationale.

Mots Clés: Colonialité, Agences de presse occidentales, les Mobilités de l'actualité, la Crédibilité, L'Afrique noire francophone, Neo-colonialisme français

Introduction

In July 2022, during what was an emotionally difficult visit to the Rwanda Genocide Memorial, I was perplexed by the wall-mounted Agence France Presse (AFP) and Reuters photographic material chronicling what happened during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The photographs were deeply troubling. They told about loss, atrocity, the inadequate response from the former Organisation of African Unity and the woefully aloof wider international community. But in addition to this, I felt the enlarged photographs told a troubling story of another kind. This other story is about the coloniality

of international Western news giants' unrivalled positioning as authoritative and credible producers of news and knowledge about the Majority World. The authority and credibility they enjoy as prominent news agencies are entrenched as they produce and circulate news, but also, crucially, over time, through the news archives they generate. Thus, not only are these news agencies able to produce news about the Majority World through a sustained production on scales that are difficult to rival by less well-endowed and far less politically connected news agencies. They also further entrench their prominence and centrality, over time, in the knowability of past events in the Majority World through the archives they generate. Given the significance of this archiving of news for academic research, these news agencies further consolidate their significance and prominence into the future.

Through the important material that these archives hold for researchers, these news outlets end up being further centred in and central to the knowability of the non-West, especially countries formerly colonised by European powers. Thus, while AFP's and Reuters's presence and prominence in the telling of the Rwandan genocide was jarring to me, more striking was the way that the access they have had to the non-Western world historically, and the archival material they produce and hold, continue to give them pride of place in knowledge production and circulation about armed violence in the Majority World. In the case of the genocide in Rwanda, the conspicuous presence of AFP and Reuters through the archived photographs displayed at the said Memorial was illustrative of this enduring prominence through the archives. Not only do these sizeable international news outlets have the capacity to deploy their operations widely and report news from across much of the world, but crucially, in so doing, they accrue increasing archival significance. This increased significance results from these news agencies having been

able to produce and archive news consistently over decades of operations, thereby becoming well-endowed, even unrivalled repositories housing unique material unlikely (comparably) available in the parts of the Majority World about which they would have produced news.

It is not fortuitous that international Western news agencies like the British Reuters, the American Associated Press (AP), and the French Agence France Presse (AFP) have been able to grow their operations worldwide on the scale they have, often selling news about the non-West to other, smaller and less prominent, news agencies. Western colonial conquest and imperial expansion have actively aided the growth of their global presence and credibility. From the decades during which these outlets became established, mainly in the 19th and 20th centuries, to the contemporary moment in which I write this article, these outlets have been symbolic of, as well as ploys for, a Western-dominated production and circulation of news about what happens around the world. But even as this has been the case, Daya Kishan Thussu explains that, curiously, the “colonial roots of the global news system have received relatively limited academic scrutiny, especially from a global South perspective” (Thussu, 2022, p.1578). Indeed, Thussu’s 2022 paper, which offers a critical discussion of the “US-UK ‘news duopoly’” marked by the presence of news agencies like Reuters and Associated Press (AP), is one of the few English-language academic treatments of what remains an under-examined dominance of the West in global news production about the Majority World (*ibid.*). It is crucial to interrogate how these outlets continue to centre themselves as key shapers of the knowability of the political colonial and post-independence pasts in the Majority World formerly colonised by Western powers. One of the ways they centre themselves is through a sustained generation of

news archives¹ about political events in these regions. But if it is true that these two news giants, Reuters and AP, did significantly shape global international news production about many parts of the world, focusing on these two Anglophone news giants leaves out the colonially derived global significance of French international news outlets.

For instance, examining the colonial origins of large French international news agencies like AFP, the French counterpart to Reuters and AP is critical for appreciating how these French outlets have constructed their prominence in the world. This prominence has roots in French colonialism and is sustained by a continued vested interest in dominating news production about, and circulation in Black Francophone Africa². As evidenced by the contested presence of French news agencies in the Sahel following the military *coups d'état*,

¹ I should begin by thanking the three anonymous reviewers for carefully reading the piece and for their thorough, generous and much-appreciated feedback. One of the reviewers indicated that it would be helpful to know how large the archives I allude to are. They also indicated the importance of the processes of news production and circulation that I discuss for French language policies. While paying attention to the size of the archives that are being generated by these agencies warrants an in-depth discussion, it would require a separate paper. Furthermore, though French-language international news production and circulation in and about Francophone Africa has been historically relevant for France's language policies in the region, it is not directly relevant to my intervention and overall argument. Further still, Ananya Ravishankar's important paper *Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language* offers a thorough treatment of language and (neo)colonialism worth consulting (2020). Mine is an intervention focussed on showing that it matters that the production and circulation of news about Black Francophone Africa be examined more closely than it has been in academic research (especially English-language scholarship), particularly in the context of renewed conversations about decolonisation in the African region.

² By Black Francophone Africa, I refer to those countries formerly part of France's colonial power in what was then called *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) and *Afrique Équatoriale Française* (AEF).

understanding the place and politics of international news agencies in Black Francophone Africa is crucial for future research about the region's international politics. Thus, by posing and exploring the question, 'How does the world know about what happens in Black Francophone Africa?', this article critically examines how what happens in Black Francophone Africa is made known authoritatively worldwide. Moreover, it explores the implications for (academic) knowledge production about Black Francophone Africa. Questioning how the world knows about what happens in Black Francophone Africa is about gauging how the coloniality of global news production might continue to structure what it means to access authoritatively credible information about Black Francophone Africa. This question invites reflections about the persistent colonial tropes shaping framings of the continent generally and about the continued dominance of Western news outlets in international news production about the continent at the point of initial news production and through sustained archival production. Coloniality helps account for the continued workings of colonial power through structures no longer formerly upheld by formal colonialism but still shaped by it (e.g. Quijano, 2007). In Black Francophone Africa, the domination of French news outlets is especially revealing of French colonial practice historically and of continuously strong neocolonial overtones in its foreign policy towards its former colonies in Africa. Indeed, French news agencies have long been connected to France's colonial project.

Cameroonian anti/de-colonial intellectual and activist Mongo Béti wrote in the mid-1980s, "[i]n truth, the entire French press is obsessed with Africa" (this author's translation)³ (Béti, 1985, p.19). Today still, French news is connected to France's cultural project in the Francophone

³ 'En vérité la presse française tout entière est malade de l'Afrique'

world, in which Africa looms largest. Writing about France's neocolonial foreign policy and violence towards Cameroon, Bédi critiqued French news agencies' complicity. For him, they had, together with Cameroon's first president at independence, silenced the horrific violence by which the French colonial state had repressed anti-colonial resistance, especially in the Cameroonian grassfields. This (neo)colonial violence included the assassination of the anti-colonial political party *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC)⁴ leaders, including Ruben Um Nyobé, Ernest Ouandié, Félix Roland Moumié and Osendé Afana (see the editor's note in Bédi, 2009, p.17). Discussing the use of violence under former President Ahmadou Ahidjo that was unmistakably colonial, Bédi explained that

Under colonisation itself, which spared no effort in supplying reasons for keeping Africans on the margins, Cameroonians were never so methodically and so deliberately denied information. Under Ahidjo's leadership, things were shamefully and pettily concealed; a detail that might have highlighted the determination of national popular struggles in a particular region of Asia or Africa, for instance, was withheld. For example, Martin Luther King's imprisonment would be announced, but without any precise mention of his race or the reasons for his struggle (2009, pp.77–78).

Speaking further on matters of the French international press' obsession with Africa, Bédi went on to indicate that the

Radio bulletins were silent on major events; newspapers were banned or seized until the publisher

⁴ The Union of the Peoples of Cameroon was a Cameroonian political party founded in 1948

gave up, and foreign newspapers were confiscated on arrival if they contained an article deemed subversive ... This phenomenon became more pronounced around 1964 when some French newspapers that seemed usually abreast of events suddenly began to systematically sweep under the carpet all information that did not corroborate the image of Cameroon that the regime wanted to give to the outside world. In addition to dismayed Cameroonian consumers of this news who had become accustomed to learning from the French newspapers at least a small part of what was being hidden from them, it must be admitted that abroad, too, the conspiratorial silence of major news outlets on the UPC's liberation struggle helped the gradual forgetting of this struggle against a tyrant installed by Western powers (*ibid.*).

The patterns observed and decried by Béti did not just describe Cameroon in the 1960s but have continued to manifest throughout the decades since. Indeed, international news production, generally, as Thussu discusses, and French-dominated news production and circulation specifically about, and in, Black Francophone Africa still reveal the coloniality of news production and circulation. This transpires not just in the way that dominant Western international news outlets rose to prominence by working with and benefitting from European colonial imperialism. It also does in the ways these outlets are able to centre themselves long-term using the uniquely rich repositories they have been able to generate through decades of archiving news material produced through unparalleled and sustained access to vast areas of the Majority World and their histories. In the case of Black Francophone Africa, this access has been enabled and

buttressed by *Françafrique* politics, structures and practices that have enabled the broad access and domination of the news-making spaces of large French news agencies in Black Francophone Africa. Unfortunately, what these patterns imply for knowledge production about Black Francophone Africa remains under-discussed in the academic literature, particularly in the context of the recent decolonial turn in critical African(ist) scholarship. Even as concerns about how Africa is (mis)represented in Western media warrant further research, the experiences of various parts of the continent grappling with (neo)colonial journalistic practices and their political implications require more attention than they currently receive. Indeed, while the many challenges with news production about Africa generally need to continue to receive attention, equally important is understanding how these challenges are informed by the colonial past and play out in the context of (post)colonial specificities.

As already indicated, the domination of French news agencies has been contested in the Sahel as military governments have been consolidating their power. Following the coups d'état that brought them to power, the military leaders of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso expelled prominent French news outlets, including *France Médias Monde's* news outlets Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France24. On their website, France24 indicate that in Niger, "in 2022, 1.9 million listeners tuned in to the radio each week in the country (18% of the population), and RFI was the top international radio among opinion leaders. Additionally, the channel was followed by a quarter of the Nigerien population each week in 2022" (*RFI and FRANCE24*, 2023). While the banning of these news outlets does infringe on journalists' right to free speech and to the freedom of the press, they do highlight yet again the all too frequent neocolonial politics that French international news agencies participate in when reporting about Black

Francophone Africa. Between them, AFP, France24 and RFI (both owned by *France Médias Monde*), TV5Monde (including its TV5Afrique programme) and the Paris-based Jeune Afrique⁵, founded by French-Tunisian Béchir Ben Yamed, provide the bulk of news production about Francophone Africa in the African region and the rest of the world. However, although this is the case, academic literature in both French and English does not pay sufficient attention to the workings of French-dominated international news production about Black Francophone Africa. What is more, what this dominance implies for what academics draw on in their work on Black Francophone Africa remains under-addressed.

I should caveat my intervention by indicating three things. First, my intervention is neither an exhaustive treatment of the presence and dominance of French international news agencies in the production and circulation of news in and about Black Francophone Africa. Instead, I focus my discussion on some of the most prominent French outlets that are most readily and iconically concerned with Africa. In so doing, I draw on and build on the works of African scholars who have done significant work to critique the coloniality of news production and circulation about Black (Francophone) Africa. These include, for example, Mongo Béti, whose work I draw and build on in this article, and Alexie Tcheuyap's and Daniel Mengara's work on the media and news production in and about Black Francophone Africa (e.g. Mengara, 2001; Tcheuyap, 2024; Tcheuyap & Eboussi-Boulaga, 2014). Second, the challenges with news production about Black Francophone Africa that I focus on in this article overlap significantly with the challenges faced by the rest of the continent (e.g. F. B. Nyamnjoh, 2016, pp.52–55).

⁵ Which is part of Jeune Afrique Media Group which also publishes The Africa Report and The Africa CEO Forum

In their discussion of media representations of armed conflict in Africa, Zubairu Wai, Jacques Depelchin, Tim Allen, and Jean Seaton have challenged the problematics of how Western news agencies distort events and foreground blinkered visions of armed conflicts and their politics in Africa (Allen & Seaton, 1999; Depelchin, 2005; Wai, 2012). Furthermore, these and other authors have challenged the routine and convenient erasure of what is, in fact, a very real and historically enduring, often military, presence and involvement of Western countries, particularly the USA, Britain and France in Africa. However, this presence is frequently downplayed and under-reported in Western international news outlets' representations of Africa. Instead, these countries have often been presented in international news media as benevolent peace-committed interveners seeking to rescue African countries from endemic violence and poverty. In these and other ways, Western media has been involved in continually producing and entrenching misleading tropes about Africa, all the while absolving Western powers of their heavy, neither quite benign nor entirely just benevolent, presence.

Finally, this article's intervention is in no way a means of discounting the fundamental and essential, often critical, work that African journalists have done. The African scholars mentioned above have done significant work on alternative news and media venues through which knowledge about Black Francophone Africa has been produced (e.g. Nyabola, 2016, pp.132 – 134). However, the question of credibility and pre-eminence brings into stark relief the disparities between the large and established French news agencies under discussion and other smaller initiatives that these large outlets dwarf and crowd out. Occasionally, critical journalists working for Western international news agencies, such as French Cameroonian (former RFI) journalist Alain Foka, have challenged Western interventionism. However, they remain few

and far between. Furthermore, the work of more radical (African) journalists has not yet resulted in a sustained and serious reckoning with these outlets' colonial histories and continued dominance as the primary sources of news about Black Francophone Africa deemed internationally reputable and authoritatively credible.

**On the coloniality of French news production about
Black Francophone Africa:
RFI, AFP, France24, TV5Monde, and Jeune Afrique**

As with their rival European colonial states, such as Britain, the French colonial project imagined and used some French news outlets, such as RFI's precursor, *Le Poste Colonial*, as part and parcel of their colonial enterprise. Founded in 1931, *Le Poste Colonial* began to operate fully as a "civilising" and nationalistic tool in French colonies (Tchouaffe, 2008). Its target audience was French expatriate colonisers and a few natives, termed *évolués*, who had been trained to speak French and engaged in low-status labour, such as nursing, postal clerking, and the infantry' (Tchouaffe, 2012). In 1975, RFI was founded to replace *Le Poste Colonial* and was geared resolutely towards African audiences. Having inherited *Le Poste Colonial*'s colonially-acquired access, "RFI [has continued to occupy] a prominent position as the media outreach of the former French colonial power" (Fiedler & Frère, 2016). This radio quickly became an icon of credible news in (Black) Francophone Africa, particularly among the French-speaking elite. Promoting French interests and helping stir Francophile dispositions among (African) listeners did not just mean that RFI would remain a French-language-only news outfit. It meant that RFI would seek to work with African journalists and broadcast its programmes in languages other than French. This diversification and increased representation

of African voices, journalists, and experts on RFI have helped the news agency remain popular, especially with the elites, across Black Francophone Africa (Frère, 2021).

Of course, RFI's presence and dominance are not uncontested, as evidenced in the context of the coups d'état in the Sahel. Writing about the Congo, Marie-Soleil Frère has shown that the extent to which RFI is listened to in (Black) Francophone Africa depends on the extent to which local radios are perceived as credible in their newsmaking (2021). Furthermore, Alain Foka, who formerly worked for RFI, is known to be one of the foremost African journalists who is critical of the role French news agencies play in perpetuating French neocolonialism in Africa. These things notwithstanding, RFI remains an essential outlet in producing and circulating news in and about Black Francophone Africa, with popularity levels matched only by other Western news outlets. Because of this, the ways the agency continues to make itself palatable to Black African Francophone audiences deserve critical attention. This means critically reviewing news production as well as the news archives that are generated and that become pivotal for historicising past events on the continent.

An example was RFI's *Mémoire d'un Continent*, hosted by Congolese historian Elikia M'Bokolo (2016). In a commentary on RFI's interest in producing *Mémoire d'un Continent*, Frère suggested that RFI has multiple identities and pursues an overarching Francophile project through multiple languages where needed. While RFI's popularity is not necessarily neocolonial, it raises questions about what it means for RFI to continue to enjoy its prominence, particularly when examined against the backdrop of its colonial history. Furthermore, RFI is not entirely uncontested. This situation notwithstanding, RFI enjoys access and credibility that remains difficult to rival and outdo. Moreover, because RFI is able to continue to centre itself on the knowability of what

happens in Black Francophone Africa by generating news archives, engaging critically with what this access implies remains imperative. A striking example of this is the RFI and *L'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel*⁶ (INA) 2002 joint release of audio archives through the *Afrique: une histoire sonore (1960–2000)* project presented by Congolese historian Élikia M'Bokolo and Philippe Sainteny journalist and former RFI chief editor. The programme *Afrique: une histoire sonore (1960–2000)* brought into the public domain segments of the rich archive that RFI and INA have about Africa generally and Black Francophone Africa specifically. It is hardly surprising that RFI and INA could do this remarkable work. Given what they have been privy to over decades, it is not surprising that they could embark on such a project. While *Afrique: une histoire sonore* is an important project which helps academics and the wider public access material that would otherwise not be available to them, the wider issues of ownership are not necessarily addressed. A project about news archives like this one raises questions about what it means for RFI, INA and other Western news (and media) agencies to loom as large as they do in the production and ownership of sources about (Black Francophone) Africa.

Posing such questions about RFI is crucial given not just what this outlet represents in the French media space historically but also because RFI is dominant in news production about Black Francophone Africa. This is despite the rise of alternative production through online media and social media. These alternatives notwithstanding, the power, weight, currency, credibility and ownership of a rich, even unparalleled, audio archive about Black Francophone Africa that the RFI generates and owns puts it in a league of its own regarding media production about the region. Indeed, even as

⁶ The French National Audiovisual Institute

news dissemination through online platforms in the African diaspora is noteworthy, these outlets do not enjoy the breadth of production and access, together with the sorts of archival material produced through RFI programming over decades of operation. Furthermore, despite how diasporic formations have presented new possibilities for online newsmaking and circulation, as Thomas Guignard notes, they are not contenders on par with the more traditional media outlets (2007). Indeed, news agencies like RFI continue to dominate the production and circulation of the news about Black Francophone Africa.

If RFI has historically contributed directly to French neocolonial politics in Black Francophone Africa, other French news outlets have operated under colonial auspices, benefiting from the reach French colonialism facilitated for them. This is the case with AFP, which emerged as an offshoot of Havas, its parent and oldest international media corporation in the Western world. Havas first operated in the newly independent state of Brazil in the 19th century. Later, the corporation expanded operations in the Latin American region alongside the British giant Reuters (Desbordes-Vela, 2013; Rozeaux, 2019). In the context of WW2, under the pro-Nazi French government, de Vichy, Havas shifted its focus and limited its operations to publicity. As Havas continued its operations in subservience to the de Vichy government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain, the breakaway agency, Agence France Indépendante (AFI), was set up in London to counter the government-controlled Office Français d'Information (French Office of Information) in 1940. The AFI later changed its name to Agence France Presse (AFP) and moved its headquarters to Paris, where the agency first worked closely with the state. In 1957, AFP was privatised. Havas gradually shifted its focus from South America to the Asian and African continents and the colonial world. This became even more so the case with

the rise of AFP. AFP was closely tied to French political elites and received the needed government support and backing. But another essential part of the news agency's strategy to assert itself in the French and international media space was what working through France's colonial empire would deliver for it. In this way, it operated in a colonial political context, similar to how Reuters could operate under British colonial imperialism (Palmer, 2019). Writing about the *Agence France Presse* in the Algerian War, Barbara Vignaux indicates that until 1957, the AFP "closely follow[ed] the official version. The wording of its publications follows government instructions: nationalist fighters are 'outlaws' or 'rebels' who 'slaughter' cattle and 'murder' women and children" (this author's translation)⁷ (Vignaux, 2004). The AFP was thus "a key element of French influence in the world" (this author's translation)⁸, according to Vignaux, and relied heavily on government funding. In 1954, for instance, about 61% of its funding came from the state (*ibid.*). AFP continued to be heavily funded by the state in 1960. This proximity to the state through funding and the role of various political actors that have had, at multiple points in time, a significant influence over who headed the news agency has meant that the agency enjoys a degree of credibility. For instance, the news agency had considerable access to official documents.

It is not only French international news outlets founded before independence in French colonial Africa like the ones discussed that have continued to participate in the (neo)colonial project. The popular periodical *Jeune Afrique*,

⁷ épouse étroitement la version officielle. Le vocabulaire suit les consignes gouvernementales: les combattants nationalistes sont des "hors-la-loi" ou des "rebelles" qui "abattent" le bétail et "assassinent" les femmes et les enfants

⁸ un des éléments de l'influence française dans le monde

too, inherited and bears this colonial heritage. In the 1970s, Mongo Béti decried the establishment of Jeune Afrique. Béti challenged the ways that from the start, Jeune Afrique was poised to be an essential player in news production about Black Francophone Africa by being subservient to enduring French (neo)colonialism. Béti explained that “Jeune Afrique virtually monopolises news production, at least as far as news from the Francophone countries of Black Africa is concerned. This is by no means coincidental. It is the reward for unrelenting zeal in the service of Francophile dictators and their successive masters at the Elysée Palace” (this author’s translation)⁹ (Béti, 1985, p.19). For Mongo Béti, the periodical’s success and its founder’s, Béchir Ben Yahmed, being in the good graces of French foreign policy was owed to the formation of neocolonial *Françafrique* links between Paris and subservient African leaders in Black Francophone Africa. In this way, Jeune Afrique was only one of several other outlets evidencing what Béti remarked about the French press, namely its feverish desire to continue to latch onto Africa. Although Béti’s discussion concerned Jeune Afrique primarily, he weighed in on how Jeune Afrique is symptomatic of the challenges with French news domination in reporting about Black Francophone Africa. Worse, for Béti, Jeune Afrique’s popularity was perniciously misleading because it passed and still claims to be a Pan-Africanist outfit when it connives with and participates in French neocolonial interests. Béti’s comments about the periodical Jeune Afrique echo his aforementioned intervention about news production and circulation in and about Cameroon and, more broadly, across

⁹ Jeune Afrique se trouvant donc, au moins en ce qui concerne l’information des pays francophones de l’Afrique noire, en position de quasi monopole, ce n’est nullement un hasard. C’est le salaire d’un zèle jamais démenti au service des dictateurs francophiles et de leurs maîtres successifs de l’Elysée

France's former colonial empire in Black Africa, as indicated earlier.

In addition to the work of the three news agencies mentioned, namely RFI, AFP and Jeune Afrique, there are still other news agencies, including France24 and TV5Monde/TV5Afrique, that reveal more about French media presence in making Africa known. Together with RFI, France24 is a part of the France Médias Monde group, the third part of which is Monte Carlo Doualiya. The news agency's website indicates on its About page: "France Médias Monde is the parent company of CFI, the French media cooperation agency, and one of the general-interest French-language channel TV5Monde"¹⁰ (*France Médias Monde*, n.d.) shareholders. These close links between various parts of French news media are critical in Black Francophone Africa in particular because they constitute a quasi-monopoly over international news circulation in Black Francophone Africa and news production about Black Francophone Africa to the world. In addition, they maintain strong ties with the French government and are important in its foreign policy towards Black Francophone Africa. To this end, francophile cultural campaigning is central to their programming in Black Francophone Africa. This informs TV5Monde's programming, for instance. The news agency's core objective is to make the French language and culture continually appealing across the Francophone world. In the words of Marie-Christine Saragosse¹¹, "TV5Monde is not just a TV channel, it's a whole cultural project" (this author's

¹⁰ France Médias Monde est la société mère de CFI, l'agence Française de Coopération médias, et l'un des actionnaires de la chaîne francophone généraliste TV5Monde

¹¹ Marie-Christine Saragosse is the President-Director of France Médias Monde at the time of writing

translation)¹² (Saragosse, 2010 interview by Gérard Bonos, 2016). France24 is similarly beholden to similar cultural politics as evidenced by its motto *Liberté, Égalité, Actualité* (Liberty, Equality, News), which is a play on the French motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). Further still, having inherited le Poste Colonial's colonial roots, RFI has followed suit, targeting audiences in former French colonies in Africa and contributing significantly to maintaining Francophile ties between the former metropole and Black Francophone Africans.

However, the political implications of the dominance of French news agencies that are of interest in this article are not so much what influence the French state might exert through these news outlets and how they report about Black Francophone Africa. Tracking this is important and warrants further research, but it is not my present focus. Instead, the political implications of concern are these outlets' dominating presence in credible news production about Black Francophone Africa. It is pretty interesting, for example, that *Audiovisuel Extérieur de la France* (AEF) had the same acronym as *Afrique Équatoriale Française*, something that Marie-Christine Saragosse confessed to being uneasy about, hence why it seemed more appropriate to her for the name to be changed to *France Médias*. This would make the group “the third national broadcasting company” (this author's translation)¹³ (2016). What did not change, however, was that one of the primary places where the group operated, and because of which it would gain international significance on the scale it has, would be Black Francophone Africa.

What Mongo Béti wrote in the 1970s still holds—French news outlets obsess over France's former colonies in Black

¹² TV5Monde, ce n'est pas seulement une chaîne de TV, c'est tout un projet culturel

¹³ la troisième société nationale de programme

Francophone Africa. The above-discussed outlets have hardly moved on from their original and early colonial outlooks. Their colonial origins and foundational outlooks remain largely unchallenged, and the enduring colonial logic that premised and animated their operations continues today. The said colonial logic transpires in the lack of reckoning with the past but also, significantly, through their continued domination of news production as authoritatively credible mouthpieces for what happens in Black Francophone Africa. In addition, they continue to centre themselves over time through the news archives they generate and hold, which are consequential to the knowability of what has happened in Black Francophone Africa.

On the credibility to(mis)represent

One of the critical things that marks international French news outlets' relation to Black Francophone Africa, as evidenced in the preceding discussion of their rise and operations, is their unparalleled colonially-derived credibility and authoritativeness in broadcasting about Black Francophone Africa. As shown in the previous section, these outlets dominate news production and circulation in Black Francophone Africa and continue to seek to keep this prominent position. Their position rides on the monopolisation of what it means to be credibly authoritative in reporting and broadcasting about Black Francophone Africa to the world. Furthermore, it reveals, I suggest, two related things--namely what I call the positional and operational workings of the credibility to represent and to misrepresent. The credibility to represent and to misrepresent is about the power to frame oneself and one's subject. It is about wielding the power to define oneself as authoritative and trustworthy, particularly concerning one's subject. It is also about wielding the power

to trivialise and discredit whatever knowledge one's subject might produce about oneself and discredit one's subject as an authoritative knower.

By positional credibility, I refer to the colonial and racial underpinnings of these Western and, specifically, French news agencies' prominence. Having historically participated in the colonial enterprise, these news giants occupy space as *de facto* authoritative and trustworthy entities by default. This position they enjoy is rooted in colonial politics and endures in the context of French neocolonial foreign policy towards Black Francophone Africa. This is the case for AFP, for instance, which replaced Havas. These colonial political conditions enabled the rise of Le Poste Colonial in former French colonies, which RFI replaced. Similar politics continue today through Francophile cultural projects pursued by French news agencies, evidenced by TV5Monde's programming. As outlined in the preceding section, these news outlets have historically benefited from, participated in, and been propped up by the French colonial enterprise. These are the grounds upon which these outlets have come to enjoy a monopolistic form of credibility that makes them central to information generation and circulation about the Francophone world.

In addition to positional credibility, international French news production about Black Francophone Africa operates based on what I call operational credibility. This has got to do with what these outlets produce. They had access to colonial infrastructure because they served the colonial interests. They have recently helped serve the cultural (neo)colonial project concerned with maintaining a Francophile bond with the former metropole in the world's largest Francophone region. They have been able to scaffold news-making infrastructure atop colonial infrastructure. Then, over time, the sheer volume of exclusive material produced put them in a league of their own. Their archives thus become a treasure

trove, an enviable repository for researchers. Over time, these unimpeachable, unavoidable, rich repositories hold importance, perhaps even growing importance. The position and operations that feed into these outlets' credibility to (mis)represent are tied together in those about whom news is produced and those to whom the news is relayed. These positional and operational grounds upon which supposedly authoritative and credible news is produced by French international news outlets are politically and materially productive, albeit problematically. This has meant that they become ubiquitously present in the former colonies and become central information brokers about what happens in Black Francophone Africa to audiences in the former metropole and in the rest of the world. This position has both enabled and fuelled their operations. As already indicated, the power these news giants enjoy to represent themselves and their subjects credibly has colonial roots. The power to be credible is first anchored in the colonial production of the invented and assumed impossibility of those about whom news is produced to know authoritatively. Second, the power to produce authoritatively about the African "other" is derived from a colonially produced impossibility for the colonial power to be anything other than universal and credibly authoritative. As news outlets tethered to and enablers of French (neo)colonial power, they benefit from this standing. Accordingly, what is at stake here is less "good" journalism, and more so conversations about what these news agencies and their practices might reveal about the politics of access and credibility to (mis)represent. Focusing on the latter helps bring into focus, for instance, the ways that fake news construed primarily as inadequate or "bad" journalism fails to appreciate the politics of (mis)representation, which the Majority World has long experienced at the hands of Western news outlets.

Furthermore, some of the implications of this credibility to (mis)represent enjoyed by Western news giants imply, in the context of the African region, the continued “invention” of Africa, as Valentin Mudimbe has discussed (1988). This “invention” of Africa, even if a process that is really about the West centring itself on Africa through a process of othering, dispossessing and obsessing over the region, is neither materially, imaginarily, and epistemically inconsequential nor finished. The credibility that Western news agencies wield to (mis)represent themselves and Africa, particularly Black Francophone Africa, is ongoing and has long afterlives through the news archives they continue to produce on an unparalleled scale. Together with this continuous “invention” of Africa, this dominance enables a continued (re)invention of *Françafrique* whereby knowing about Black Francophone Africa becomes inextricably linked to the former metropole’s news industry, even while the centrality of Black Francophone Africa to French news production continues to be downplayed. It perpetuates the idea that the authoritative insertion of Africa, and in the case of what is under discussion here, Black Francophone Africa, in what is global, is mediated through outlets that have neither reckoned with nor deviated substantively from their former (colonial) purposes. Such media representation of the continent is not limited to news representations but to how Africa has long been represented generally and then (against this backdrop) in particular regard to specific kinds of events, usually armed conflict.

Furthermore, to wield the power to credibly (mis)represent Black Francophone Africa to the world is about being able to access and even pander to an assortment of audiences. Western news giants do not just relay or pitch information to audiences in the West, even if they may be their primary target audience. As evidenced in the case of RFI, the purpose was to relay news about events to French

colonialists and make association with RFI a hallmark of what is supposedly civilisational progress. Le Poste Colonial's and, subsequently, RFI's operations in Africa targeted not only (White) French expatriates in Black Francophone Africa but, notably, earmark the *évolués* as the frontier audience to captivate and wed to the consumption of French-produced news. Framing RFI as the marker of progress and of "good" or even "successful" assimilation would not only serve the purpose of growing RFI's presence but also, at the same time, of concealing that RFI's importance and credibility depended upon growing consumption in the former colonies. In colonial (Black) Francophone Africa, the primary target audience was the so-called "*évolués*"; post-colonially, the target audience became as large a cross-section of African French speakers as possible in countries that were formerly part of the French colonial empire. This is abundantly clear in the concerns expressed about the most significant proportion of the global French-speaking population being in Africa. This global distribution of French speakers has implications for which national contexts the French language matters and shaping cultural consumption patterns in line with promoting and upholding Francophile cultural dispositions and tastes. RFI's objectives towards Black Francophone audiences have been comfortably lodged within the broader neocolonial project. The purpose was to raise African audiences in the former colonies who would deem themselves to be "*évolués*" through their consumption of French media. But while this assimilationist colonialist approach enabled French news corporations to make headway into Black Francophone Africa, they also became brokers of news about these sub-regions to other audiences, African and otherwise. In this way, they play into a broader situation brought about by and sustained through the dominance of Western news corporations. Given that the largest proportion of the global French-speaking population is

in Africa, Black Francophone audiences continue to be especially important for these French news agencies' operations.

The dependence of many African news outlets on Western ones to provide coverage for what happens elsewhere on the continent is further evidence of the dominance of Western news agencies in the making and circulation of the news about Africa within and beyond the continent. A survey of where Ghanaian news outlets source news from around the African region, found that most Ghanaian outlets relied on Western news outlets (Serwornoo, 2021). This dependence of African news agencies on Western outlets to access international news suggests that the accretion of credibility on the part of these Western news outlets is not just ubiquitous on the continent but also fluid across the borders. While their presence and work are fluid across national borders, news production by African states neither rivals their Western counterparts' credibility and logistical capacity nor enjoys the level and ease of movement across borders.

Furthermore, the prominence of French news outlets in Black Francophone Africa and among audiences seeking credible sources covering most of Black Francophone Africa makes them appealing to Black Francophone (political) elites. They often turn to these outlets and even invest in these outlets to produce news and material that might give them access to wider audiences and enable them to tap into some of the credibility that these outlets enjoy. This was the case, for instance, with Charles Blé Goudé and former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo, despite having been taunted by France24 journalists in 2011, gave the very same news outlet exclusive interviews upon their final return to Côte d'Ivoire. Furthermore, two Ivorian businessmen very close to President Ouattara are investors in Jeune Afrique. It is an open secret

that Jeune Afrique courts and is courted by Black Francophone African presidents for generous spreads about them, sometimes even with their faces plastered on some of the periodical's issues' cover pages. However, the fact that some Black Francophone African presidents seek to increase their visibility with Jeune Afrique's audiences does not indicate that the playing field is levelled. While the agency of these leaders cannot be discounted, questions can be asked about the role of African news outlets and African elites in legitimating the news outlets. Further questions can be posed about the underpinnings of the credibility economy that feeds on African presence on their channels¹⁴.

Priviness to Black Francophone Africa is something that the other Western news giants tacitly grant French news outlets. It is, therefore, not unusual for other Western outlets to (re)publish images or news about Black Francophone Africa acquired from AFP. At the heart of this is the work of French news outlets as go-in-betweeners, remaining relevant and continuing to invent Black Francophone Africa while continuously centring themselves as pivotal brokers of the knowability of what happens in the region. This invention is, in

¹⁴ It is sometimes assumed that more than fifty years after official independence, the state of political leadership in (Black Francophone) Africa should be accounted for by looking to the agency of African leaders and not the colonial past. Such an assessment does not pay sufficient attention to the broad political context within which the agency of African leaders, particularly in African countries formerly colonised by France has been exercised. The structures of statehood inherited at independence in countries formerly in the French West and Central African colonial empire remained colonial. The mere passage of time did not change the structures but enabled their entrenchment. The enduring colonial currency in use in most of West and Central Africa today is but one example. It is crucial to remember the systematic physical and political assassination of radical, anti-colonial leaders in Black Francophone Africa to prevent the dismantling of these neocolonial structures.

Zubairu Wai's words as he revisited Mudimbe's work, a concept that "denotes the immense body of texts and systems of representation that for centuries has functioned to produce Africa as a paradigm of difference and alterity" (2015, p.263).

Strategic news mobilities or the power to accelerate and decelerate news towards credibility

As I have suggested and discussed in the preceding section, the credibility to (mis)represent operates positionally through enduring colonial and racial structures and operationally through the continued generation of material that accrues importance and centrality over time. Through these workings of credibility, sustained news production generates extensive news archives over time. These archives become critical for academic research mainly because of their unrivalled regional and temporal breadth of news coverage. Thus, at the point of news production and through the archives generated, French news outlets continue to render themselves central to the knowability of what happens in Black Francophone Africa and the timing of that knowability. Through their dominance in news production about Black Francophone Africa, French news outlets heavily influence the timing of what is known about the region.

Furthermore, through their news archives, they wield a significant level of power over what is revisited about what has happened in Black Francophone Africa as well as the timing of this review. In this way, news production about Black Francophone Africa reveals not just what Valentin Mudimbe tell us about what he calls the "colonial library"¹⁵ and archives as the artefacts of the colonial past but also as processes of colonial archival production in the present. Not only do these

¹⁵ See his text *African Gnosis Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Mudimbe, 1985)

French news outlets thrive upon premises of credibility, as already discussed in the preceding section, but it is also that this production continues to entrench structures of production that feed into determining what credible news-making about Black Francophone Africa entails. In addition to enabling impressive volumes and breadth of production, the seat of authority and credibility that French news outlets occupy means they can significantly accelerate and decelerate what becomes deemed authoritative news about Black Francophone Africa.

I propose strategic news mobilities to account for the politics and temporalities of news mobilities that French media production about Black Francophone Africa reveals and the sort of news archives and archival politics these mobilities generate. Strategic news mobility implies that French-led authoritative framings of events about specific Black Francophone African states can move swiftly across the region and be written about authoritatively in a controlled fashion. This happens alongside a simultaneous slowing down of alternative news production about Black Francophone Africa, usually by Afro-Francophones, outside of French international news production's control to accede credible authoritativeness. Thus, strategic news mobility describes, on the one hand, the acceleration of French foreign policy in Africa-aligned news mobility, which is oriented towards buttressing credibility and authoritative production. On the other, it describes the deceleration of news production and circulation that might be working its way in the direction of credibility. This (acceleration of what is French-produced and) deceleration of information moving towards credibility does not mean that alternative information is prevented from circulation; this would be near-impossible in the age of social media and its importance in news generation and circulation. It is more so that there is a deceleration towards credibility and

authoritativeness. Thus, while unable to immobilise news production that challenges the status quo or the dominant narrative, it can and does work on speeding up colonially enabled access to credibility and authority while decelerating counter-representations that might even challenge (neo)colonial tropes and French news outlets' prominence, to credibility and authority.

For instance, the role of French news outlets in Côte d'Ivoire in 2011 illustrates this acceleration and deceleration. In the face of the political deadlock between the incumbent Gbagbo and now President Ouattara, resulting from contested election results, French news agencies played a central role in not only portraying President Ouattara in a positive light but also announcing to the world that he had won the elections and that the then incumbent had to go. This media framing of electoral politics in Côte d'Ivoire aligned with France's interests and foreign policy towards Côte d'Ivoire during President Sazrkozy's term in office. The role of French news agencies such as France24 and RFI in peddling an official Western-backed narrative about the outcome of the elections enabled an acceleration of this particular news at the expense of what was going on in Côte d'Ivoire, which was circulating via other news channels but decelerated as regarded its status of authority and credibility. As a result, Ivorian journalists and activists who challenged the narratives peddled by French international news outlets and echoed in other international outlets were deemed pro-Gbagbo and thus partisan and not credible. The idea that international news outlets would all be misleading appeared unrealistic and unbelievable. Despite the protests of various Ivorian scholars and journalists that the political situation was not only more complex but also misleadingly covered by French international media, these interventions were marginalised and discredited. French news agencies framed the dire political situation in the country in a

reductive and simplistic Manichean Gbagbo vs Ouattara framing, which was bought into by Western Ivorianists and other Africanists who signed a petition indignant about Gbagbo's refusal to step down (Le Monde, 2011). Their petition was published by Le Monde, who never responded to a collective of Ivorian academics who tried to counter and nuance the dominant narrative about the 2010 elections (Balou Bi & Dédy, 2013; Le Monde, 2011).

Another instance of such acceleration and deceleration towards credibility is French President Macron's official visit to Burkina Faso in 2017, during which he announced that there would be an official state-led engagement with museums and a (French) state-led repatriation of stolen African artefacts (Macron, 2017). This intervention, which led to the 2019 Sarr and Savoy report, sparked a renewed engagement with repatriation debates in academic, artistic, and activist circles. In English-speaking academic (Africanist) circles, this intervention on the part of the French state around repatriation and reparations brought the role of prominent and well-endowed universities into sharp focus, especially following the fallist movements on South African university campuses beginning most strikingly in 2015 and spreading elsewhere around the world (Nyamnjoh, 2016; Sarr & Savoy, 2018). While the conversation has been going strong with several inquiries into the presence of colonial loot at various institutions, including universities, and the establishment of a museum in Dakar, the anti-FCFA protest led by the (Francophone) African diaspora in Chamalière in France in 2019 outside the Bank of France, printing facility where the enduring colonial currency is printed did not receive any attention in French international media outlets. What was accelerated into the limelight instead, besides the Sarr and Savoy report and ensuing conversations, was the public-facing hurried bilateral hijacking of the Eco currency negotiations

between Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire by the Quai d'Orsay¹⁶ and the Ivorian presidency in a media-aided performative burial of the colonial currency. The performative reform of the CFA currency through the appropriation of the Eco currency project was really about diffusing what the racist and xenophobic comments by the Italian deputy prime minister in 2019 might have incited (Dodman, 2019; Gautheret, 2019). The changes to the CFA were largely superficial, and France's neocolonial financial and economic hold on the currency remains unperturbed.

In the case of the narrative about the CFA, there is a deceleration of news production about it. International French news outlets engaged with the Italian minister's comments insofar as it helped steer the conversation away from the CFA francs. French news agencies were quick to provide an overview of the currency, obscure its history, downplay its significance in Africa and critically examine the unfavourable economic conditions it helps maintain in a quarter of countries in the region. They certainly did not cover the protests in Chamalières at all. While news production about the CFA by French news agencies became decelerated, there was an acceleration of news about repatriation as a willingness to engage in decolonial politics. Through this play on what accedes credibility through the dominance of French news production about Black Francophone Africa, representations of the discourse about decoloniality as concerns Black Francophone Africa recentred both France's central role in the region and that of French news outlets. There is an accelerating of news production that steers the conversation in ways that also help decelerate news production about these other ways that decoloniality has been explored, mainly where Francophone Africans have primarily led them. This control

¹⁶ The Quai d'Orsay refers to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs

enables these news agencies to determine when an issue's time has come and how they would decide to address it. The sort of news production machine that operates in terms of both producing credibility and the mobilities that affirm authoritativeness as lying primarily with French international news outlets intervenes in the present with implications for future access to news archives past and in the making. Ultimately, this enables the continued centring of these outlets as essential repositories in the contemporary moment with prospects for continued significance into the future. The sheer volume of production that is disproportionately produced through French media about Black Francophone Africa provides the grounds for future research, which, if critical, would be slowed down by needing to plough through and disentangle the news production and the French neocolonial politics of that production. Recognising the processes outlined in this section is critical for future research about Black Francophone Africa that would rely on primary sources produced by French news agencies. Knowing the politics of French news production about Black Francophone Africa is particularly critical to determining how to engage critically with these news archives.

Conclusion

What is deemed authoritatively credible news production about Black Francophone Africa has historically been dominated by international French news outlets and deserves more attention than has been the case thus far in academic circles. While Western news and broader media representations of Africa have been discussed for the sorts of ideas about Africa

they peddle and have been critically engaged in the academic literature, questions about who is at the forefront of this production have received less attention. Examining news production about Black Francophone Africa is illuminating credibility politics at work in the production of news and knowledge about the region. Furthermore, I have shown that paying attention to credibility politics through examples from Black Francophone Africa is essential for the sorts of futures that can be envisioned for knowledge production. I am particularly interested in the wide-ranging contributions of journalistic production to scholarly work and the implications for the politics of the states in this region. Thus, posing the question of how the world knows about what happens in Black Francophone Africa is not just limited to the role of news production and circulation in informing people but also matters for examining critically the body of sources available from which to draw for academic research. This is critical in a renewed engagement with decolonial thought and knowledge production (e.g. Ndlovu–Gatsheni, 2018; A.–N. Nyamnjoh, 2023). Thinking through and theorising what this sort of dominant production means and does matters for the kind of work that is to be done.

Furthermore, examining the dimensions of news production about Africa outlined in this paper is essential for future research on French foreign policy in Africa and Black Francophone Africa in international politics. Finally, acknowledging the politics of this dominance of French news production about Black Francophone Africa matters for thinking about the readily available archives that have also borne the stamp of credibility in addition to being ubiquitous. Importantly, my argument, even caution, is not aimed at encouraging divestment from said archives but rather to engage with the mechanisms of coloniality undergirding international French news production about Black

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Francophone Africa over time. In this vein, this article calls attention to what these archives and their modes of production might enable academic research to achieve, on the one hand, but also what they can obscure.

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