Research Report

Images as Afro-positivist narratives and counter hegemonic strategy: A study of #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou

Floribert Patrick C. Endong

Department of Performing Arts and Cinematography (IBAF), University of Dschang, Cameroon
E. mail: floribertendong@yahoo.com

Abstract – To arrest the negative stereotypes of Africa in and outside the African continent, a number of civil society organizations and activists have launched various social media-assisted initiatives aimed at showcasing the positive facets of African cultures as well as the beautiful touristic attractions existing on the continent. One of such initiatives is the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement launched in 2015 to combat the negative and colonial stereotypes of Africa through the sharing of beautiful images and videos of Africa on Twitter. The movement encouraged Africans of all horizons to share attractive images of Africa, particularly the ones that are rarely or never shown on mainstream media. Six years after the project was launched, it is high time to evaluate its strength and know some of its merits and implications. In line with this aphorism, this paper uses secondary sources and a qualitative analysis of images and videos shared on Twitter to examine the contribution of the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement to the imperative of challenging colonial representations of Africa. It specifically discusses the genesis, trans-nationalization and promises of the project; and assesses the movement in the light of two philosophico-cultural currents/theories namely Afro-positivism and counter hegemony. The paper argues that the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement put to question the popular but problematic belief that Africa is all about negativisms. It started a visual-assisted conversation not only about the wonders found on African soil but also about some of the cultures which non-Africans have often viewed as problematic or controversial. Such a conversation is a proof that Afro-optimism is still much alive on the continent and that; Africans are conscious that the fight against colonial stereotypes is a perpetual battle which must be fought even with the help of new digital cultures such as digitalized image-based activism.

Keywords: Afro-Optimism, Afro-Pessimism, Counter Hegemony, Hashtag Activism, Representation, Social Networking Sites, Social Pan-Africanism, Twitter

Introduction

Scholars and critics of African extraction have, on various platforms, deplored the fact that the international media's representation of their continent is mostly very negative and too myopic (Chimamanda 2016; Mezzana 2018; Nworah 2015; Tapon 2017, *African Development Bank* 2014). These scholars and critics have most often advocated a deconstruction of foreign – particularly western – media's portrayals of their continent (Machira 2002; Magirosa 2017; Nkono 2018). Indeed, foreign media's portrayals of Africa have mainly focused on the negative aspects of life in the continent. Such portrayals downplay or overlook the other side (the positive facets) of life in the continent. Foreign media programs such as *CNN*'s "*Inside Africa*" and *China Global Television Network*'s documentary series "*Faces of Africa*", which reveal some of the many exceptional human and natural resources of the African continent have really been rare. The dominant trend has been that, only problematic African issues such as wars, epidemics, misguided religions, poverty and violations of human rights among other negativities attract the attention of the western media (Madrid-Morales & Gorkinkel 2018, Okon 2013).

Thus, foreign/western media's portrayals of Africa have, perpetually associated the continent with such hurtful phenomena as famine, hardship, recessions, backwardness, (extreme) primitivism, inter-religious and inter-ethnic wars, genocides, deadly pandemics, totalitarian regimes and corruption among other stereotypes which conform to the racist colonial era depictions of the continent. Such skewed and negative media representations of the African continent have partly been responsible for the persistence among foreign audiences of questionable myths. Some of these questionable beliefs relegate Africa exclusively to a land of disasters, catastrophes and internecine wars.

One actually finds it aberrant that, in the 21st century, many Westerners continue, partly due to their exposure to Western media contents, to perceive Africa as a country (and not as a continent) (Adichie 2016; Nworah 2015; OECDA & ACET 2020; Signe 2018). It is also hurtful for many people of African descent to see that many Westerners believe that Africans have in no way evolved from their primitive pre-

colonial socio-economic conditions. It is particularly troubling that many among these westerners believe that Black Africans still live mainly in huts or on the top of tall trees like animals, irrespective of the fact that we are in the 21st century. Authors such as Aina (2014), Randolph and DeMuller (2008), Adichie (2016), Nworah (2015) and Endong (2020) just to name a few, have in various scholarly research works or opinion articles lamented the fact that, in spite of Africa's status as the fastest developing continent and in spite of the fact that the continent is home to emerging economies such as South Africa, most Westerners continue to view Africa as an extremely underdeveloped region or a kind of Nazareth from which nothing good can come. Machira (2002) contends that this one-sided way of viewing the African continent been due to Westerners' ignorance. In line with Machira's contention, Aina (2014) has reviewed various cases of Westerners or west-based institutions who reject the possible existence of African metropolises and who persist in associating Sub-Saharan Africans and their continent exclusively with primitivism, backwardness, famine, extreme poverty and endemic corruption among others. A similar effort has been done by Randolph and DeMuller (2008) in their paper titled "I don't know there were cities in Africa".

In the same line of argument, authors such as Javawardane (2017), Adukwu (2020) and Serwornoo (2021) lament that international news agencies such as *Agence France Press*, *Reuters* and the *Associated Press* have for decades continuously contributed to naturalising the problematic views that simplify Africa into a repetitive trope. Javawardane (2017) in particular observes that the "Black continent" problematically continues to be seen by foreign audiences as a monolithic space of violence and poverty complicated by global politics and military action chiefly because "the images and narratives chosen by powerful news agencies and newspapers continue to speak to foundational myths that Europe (and white ex-colonists and plantation owners in America) manufactured about Africa, in order to better ease their conquest and exploitation of a regionally, politically and socially complex, dynamic continental shelf". In the same line of thought, Mark Eddo (cited in Nkono 2018) has criticized the tendency of the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) to essentially focus on the negative aspects of life in Africa, in its coverage of African news. Eddo notes that:

> The BBC did a story called 'Welcome to Lagos' […]. They went to a beach where prostitutes and drug addicts hang out. These are stories that should be told, but they are told again and again and again… That's what

you'll think about my city, and it's not true. The problems are there, but the opportunities are there as well and the picture should be more nuanced. (cited in Nkono 2018, p.16).

To arrest and reverse these negative stereotypes of Africa in and outside the African continent, a number of civil society organizations, activists, bloggers and African citizen journalists have launched social media-assisted initiatives aimed at showcasing the positive components and facets of African cultures as well as the beautiful places on the continent that tourists can visit. An egregious example of such initiatives aimed at challenging western perceptions of Africa is the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement which sprang up in 2015 to combat the negative stereotypes of Africa through the tweeting of beautiful images of Africa. The movement actually encouraged Africans of all horizons to share exceptionally attractive images of Africa particularly those that are rarely or never shown on mainstream media. Over six years after the project was launched, it is time to evaluate its strength and know some of its merits and implications for the image of Africa on the international scene as well as for Africans' frame of mind. Using a critical review of selected images shared in the context of the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement and relevant secondary sources, this paper assesses the above hashtag in the light of two theories namely Afro-positivism and counter hegemony.

The paper specifically focuses on the genesis, trans-nationalization and promises of the project. It equally assesses the movement in the light of two philosophico-cultural currents/theories namely Afro-positivism and counter hegemony. Following the above mentioned targets, the research paper is structured into four main parts. The first part provides the methodological and theoretical framework of the work. This framework is composed of Afro-positivism, Afro-optimism and counter hegemony. The second part of the paper explores the phenomenon of social media as excellent tools for laundering or (de)constructing the image of the African continent. The third part of the paper addresses the birth, management and logic of the #TheAfricaThatTheMediaNeverShowYou. While the last part focuses on an assessment of the hashtag movement according to the two socio-ideological currents of Afro-positivism and counter hegemony.

Methodological and theoretical framework

This paper is conceptual and descriptive in nature. It is based on two methods of data collection and analysis namely (1) a documentary analysis and (2) a qualitative analysis of randomly selected online contents related to the #TheAfricaThatTheMediaNeverShowYou movement. The documentary analysis consisted in collecting data by consulting secondary sources such as peer-reviewed articles, newspaper articles, relevant books and online contents. The qualitative analysis of online contents on the other hand consisted in analysing a random selection of images and online contents shared in the context of the #TheAfricaThatTheMediaNeverShowYou movement. The paper is also anchored in two theories namely Afro-positivism and counter hegemony.

Afro-positivism and Afro-optimism

Afro-positivism could be described as a current which is diametrically contrary to Afro-pessimism. The term "Afro-pessimism" was first used in 1990 by a Congolese author called Sony Tabou Tansi in an article published in *Jeune Afrique Economique*. The term was used by its genitor to mean a psychological bias which pushes most Africans to think that their continent's position "dooms [them] to construct and build garbage economies in the depths of the most cruel, unbearable, and human form of indignity that humans can swallow" (as cited and translated by Wilderson 2010, p.58). In tandem with this understanding, the term has over the years, been appropriated by many other African political ideologues and philosophers, notably Mbembe (2010), Wilderson (2010) and Wilderson & Burell (2008) among others to generally refer to a critical idiom and theory which describes the impact of Transatlantic slave-trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism among other historical events, on the structural conditions as well as the personal, subjective and lived experiences of Africans or people of African ancestry.

Although not always seen as a negative theory or a form of scepticism (as the term pessimism may imply), Afro-pessimism is mostly associated with disaffected political thought. Thus, critics often use the term to articulate the subject-position of renunciation, refusal, distancing, dread, doubt and abjection often adopted by Africans

in reaction to the historic traumas and ongoing effects of Tans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism. This includes the belief that postcolonial Africa's chances to achieve economic development and democratic governance are minute, if not inexistent. The conceptualization of Afro-pessimism also include the maxim that eradicating white hegemony in the world will automatically entail dismantling many of the political institutions that structure the modern world.

Another manifestation of Afro-pessimism is when many African express the belief that their continent is still a savage and helpless group of nations, "needing the disciplinary forces of western civilisation to 'tame' and aid their unruly bodies and psyches into modernity" (Jayawardane 2018, p. 31). In the media sector in particular, the Afro-pessimistic current is seen when "Africans portray themselves as victims of forces they had little control of, finding solace in the narrative of slavery and colonialism in an attempt to exonerate themselves from blame" (Magirosa 2014, p.6). They do this either by conviction or as a survival strategy; that is, to please those who pay their salaries (Japhace 2015; Coulibaly 2020).

The Afro-positivist framework goes contrary to Afro-pessimism. It rather stresses the power, depth and vitality of the resilience and radical imagination of people from African origins. The idiom is seen in philosophico-cultural movements such as negritude, African renaissance, African conscientism and pan-Africanism. These movements are all aimed to project and celebrate the beauty and power of the African race on one hand, and challenge the myth of the Whiteman's superiority on the other hand (Aina 2014; Fanon 1952). In tandem with this, Afro-positivism or optimism is said to drive media production (in Africa) when African media practitioners (including citizen journalists) are at all times bent on rejecting decade-old colonial representations of their continent through media reports that display or celebrate the positive facets of life in Africa. As noted by Nkono (2018), the Afro-positive turn is not about "whitewashing and romanticising Africa. It should be about challenging the simplistic nature of Afro-pessimism, through introducing multiple and complex images about the continent and its people" (p.17). In the same line of thought, Magirosa (2014) endorses Afro-positivism. She contends that:

> The huge advances the [African] continent has made in recent years have yet to be acknowledged by the Western world. In the modern day of technology, social media and bloggers from Africa speaking the truth about their own countries would make a difference. This way, the young

generation of African leaders, writers, academics and others are changing the way Africa is perceived. They have taken the pen to challenge stereotypes, and prejudices. Overall, we Africans have embraced technology and in doing so, we must make it work for us. The Internet through social media like Facebook and twitter or blogs can help us speak and challenge the Western stereotyping of Africa. (p.25)

As shown by Magirosa (2014) above, Afro-positive perspectives on the media representation of Africa state that foreign media's gloomy representations of the African continent are just incomplete representation of the truth or rather, subtle distortions of the reality. These perspectives most often advocate a deconstruction of colonial stereotypes of Africa. They also promote media coverage of the "other side" of life on the continent. This "other side" includes features and facets of the continent which reveal Black people's uniqueness and efforts towards development. It also stresses the fact that the African peoples are in no way culturally, psychologically and anthropologically inferior to their western counterparts, and that they are not non-human creatures as colonial stereotypes have for long depicted them.

The Counter hegemony theory

Developed by Italian cultural theorist and philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971), the hegemony (or hegemonic control) theory seeks to describe the ability of the dominant classes to exercise socio-cultural leadership over "weaker classes" by consent and not by direct coercion. Originally, the hegemony theory was conceived and propounded by Gramsci. The latter used it to describe a capitalist state as a system composed of two overlapping spheres namely (i) the "political society" (which uses force to rule) and (ii) the "civil society". Gramsci's concept of "civil society" defers remarkably from the modern understanding of the term as it does not mean an association which voluntary work for the common good; but a public sphere where trade unions and political parties gained concessions from the bourgeois state. It is also a sphere where ideas, beliefs and myths are defined and where the bourgeois hegemony is reproduced or perpetrated through the agencies of such powerful social and cultural institutions as the media, the educational system and religion. Such reproduction of bourgeois hegemony aims ultimately at manufacturing consent and legitimacy.

As used today by most culture and communication scholars, the hegemony theory explains how power is constituted in the realm of ideas and knowledge; and expressed through consent and not force (Heywood 1994; Watson 2006; Enow 2008; Endong 2020). By such consent, the dominant classes maintain their power over the political, economic and cultural directions of the nation. Thus, a key feature in the hegemony theory is that the dominant classes establish their hegemony over other classes not by forcing the latter against their conscious will but rather by actively seeking their consent through ways that naturalize the hegemony of the dominant classes. These ways imperatively hinge on what is called the "*Power Flite*; that is, influential social institutions such as the media, religion, education and the family among others, which possess immense power to shape the popular imagination in favour of a hegemonic order. As a community which holds or influences the holding of the reins of power in the nation, the "*Power Flite"* contributes actively to making the culture or ideology of the dominant classes appear "common sense" in the eyes of the majority of the population. Among these "*Power Flite"*, the media of mass communication occupy a central position. Media representations of reality most often play a great role in the process of naturalising the hegemony of dominant classes.

The hegemony theory is often used in international communication and international relations. Critics such as Enow (2008) have associated it with the myth of Western cultural/media imperialism. In the same line of thought, Javawardane (2017) contends that foreign media representations of Africa as land of negativities function more as a vicious system aimed at maintaining or naturalising a hegemonic order which is favourable to the West and detrimental to Africa and the rest of the Third World. Taking photo journalism as a site of questionable Western representations of Africa, he writes that:

> International news agencies based in North America and Europe such as
> the *Associated Press*, *Reuters* and *Agence France-Presses* [...] contribute
> to problematic views that simplify Africa into a repetitive trope. Africa
> remains a monolithic space of violence and poverty uncomplicated by
> global politics and military action, because the images and narratives
> chosen by powerful news agencies and newspapers continue to speak to

foundational myths that Europe (and white ex-colonists and plantation owners in America) manufactured about Africa, in order to better ease their conquest and exploitation of a regionally, politically and socially complex, dynamic continental shelf. If the construction of the African as child-like, or not quite human, who has little agency or intellect, aided the colonial project, today, the narrative continues to aid the construction of the European self as civilised, maintaining the African and Africa as the location of savagery, helplessness, and devastation. It also creates Europe as a desirable location that those who have no agency and have done little to better themselves attempt to infiltrate - much to Europe's chagrin (p.8-9).

Although very consequential in the political, economic and cultural realms in terms of defining relations between classes, hegemonic control is never or hardly perfect and complete. In tandem with this, O'Sullivan *et al.* (1996) explain that:

The continuous conflict of interest between classes, which forms the ownership and the industrial organisation of production cannot help but continuously reproduce, ensure that hegemony can never be total. There are always emergent forms of consciousness and representations which may be mobilized in opposition to the hegemonic order. This means that a lot of work, called ideological labour, goes into the struggle between hegemonic and counter hegemonic forms. And what's at stake in the long term in this struggle can be political and economic power itself. (p.105)

By definition, counter hegemony is a situation where the status quo is put to question. It is also a situation where there is a movement to critique or dismantle a hegemonic order. Counter hegemonies advocate alternative ethical models that pose a challenge to the dominant narrative in a society or in the world at large. These models are often actualised or implemented through what is commonly called a "war of position" or a "war of movement". In a war of movement, a counter-hegemonic movement seeks, with the instrumentality of propaganda, persuasion or counter-representations, to challenge popular perceptions and increase the number of people who share its position on the hegemonic order. In such a war, counter-hegemonic movements seek to ultimately overthrow the current hegemony. The concept of counter-

hegemony is seen in movement such as Afro-positivism which attempt to challenge Afro-scepticism on one hand and Western cultural imperialism on the other hand.

Social media as powerful tools for rebranding

The proliferation of the social media in countries across the world has given the ordinary internet user the power to function as an agent of brand creation. In effect, the social media have given each internaute or "netitizen" the ability to generate their own personalised contents and to share their opinions or knowledge on everything with any audience willing to listen to, or read them. The social media have thus enabled a situation where, anyone can start a conversation or get involved in a conversation about a destination or the image of a country. In line with this, it is becoming more and more common to find online contents generated by tourists, travel bloggers, photographers or any ordinary people about specific touristic destinations. It is also common to come across blogs, sites or Facebook pages where ordinary internet users disseminate information susceptible to influence readers' perceptions about specific countries or destination. No doubt Dickinger and Lalicic (2015) remark that the social media are a popular source for tourists, particularly when the latter are in search for new inspirational destinations or when they seek information about a specific destination.

Tourists and the general public tend to trust the contents generated by fellow tourists or ordinary internauts more than those provided by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) or public relation organisations. This follows from the fact that, it is commonly believed that destination information provided by DMOs and PR organisations are essentially staged and persuasive meanwhile those generated and shared by ordinary tourists or ordinary "netizens" are authentic and the fruit of their personal experience with the destination or country (Shen *et al.* 2015). In line with this, a number of nation/destination branding projects have rather heavily or mainly hinged on the online contents generated by ordinary tourists or "netizens". A case in point is New Zealand's nation branding scheme christened "*100% Pure New Zealand*", which relied on various hashtags and instagram driven movements for its success (Morgan *et al.* 2002). Actually, the nation branding project created an Instagram account called @purenewzealand, and launched the two hashtags #NZMustDo and #RealMiddleEarth which it used to collect stories and experiences from tourists across the world. As of

2017, the project's Instagram account had more than 500,000 followers; similarly, its #NZMustDo hashtag movement feature over 380,000 posts (Krikler 2017).

Another case of social media based nation branding project is Indonesia's 2014 "Explore" initiative aimed to brand major Indonesian cities such Bali, Malang, Jakarta, Lombok, Jojoba and Bandung among others. For this destination branding scheme, the Indonesian authorities created a series of Instagram accounts notably @explorebali, @malangtouristguide, @explorelomboc, @explorejakarta and @explorenandung through which they collected stories and pictures from tourists and sought to shape popular narratives about the country's most attractive destinations. By the year 2015, the @explorebali account alone had more than 89.900 followers (Fatani & Suyadnya 2015).

The few examples mentioned above illustrate how social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have revolutionized the destination marketing business, enabling ordinary internet users to fruitfully function as brand creation agents. As noted by commentators such as Basit *et al.* (2020), these social media have represented a serious weapon of mass seduction not only in travel marketing but also in destination branding. They provide both DMOs and individual tourists or internautes with the relevant instruments to collect, store and share information and experiences about specific destinations (Martin *et al.* 2019). Through Instangram for instance, users/tourists can capture, edit and share images or videos of their experiences with a destination or a country. Through the sharing of these images and videos on Instagram or Facebook, they show the beauty of specific destinations. In so doing ordinary internet users, the same as DMOs, subtly sell specific destinations. Their subtle marketing of these destinations is facilitated by the powers and potentials of the visual media they used. In effects, visuals are theoretically more successful than written words, in showing the beauty of a destination.

The African experience

The advent and proliferation of the social media in Africa have given Africans the opportunity to create many stories about their continent and challenge or deconstruct the negative stereotypes of Africa on the international scene. In effect, from the year 2000 till present, there has been an impressive Internet penetration in Africa. Nkono (2018)

estimates that mobile phone users on the continent have increased from 4,514,400 (in 2000) to 453,329,534 (in 2017). This increase in the number of mobile phone users has enabled the African continent to enjoy an internet penetration of 35.2%. The *United Nation Development Program* [*UNDP*] (2018) similarly concedes that Africa is the fastest growing mobile telephone market, with its number of subscribers rising from 10 million (in 2000) to 647 million in 2011. The world ICTs observers We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020) on their part reveal that from April 2019 to January 2020, the number of Internet users in Africa increased by 10% (that is by 42 million).

Following from the statistics mentioned above, many telecommunication observers have argued that the rapid growth in Internet penetration has enabled social media use in Africa to exponentially increase over the years. While Portland (2016) observes that from 2012 to 2016 there has been a 34 fold increase in the number of geolocated tweets in Africa, Nkono notes that the number of African users of Facebook has risen to 177,005,700 at the end of 2017. In line with the above statistical data, the world ITCs observers *We Are Social* and *Hootsuite* (2020) note that from April 2019 to January 2020, social media use in Africa has increased by 12%. This indicates that, over the years, there has been a growing penetration of both the Internet and social media in Africa. This has been so, irrespective of the fact that the continent continues paradoxically to be the region with the lowest Internet penetration.

Africans' use of the social has been aimed not only at maintaining networks of family and friends, doing mobile banking, collecting useful information and consuming entertainment products, but also at being civically involved, through socio-cultural and political activism. The *UNDP* (2018) corroborates the above observation. It notes that

> The growing use of Facebook, Twitter, African news apps and other forms of social media in Africa has increased citizens' awareness of political events, changing perceptions both nationally and internationally and giving 'less celebrated actors' a voice in global and local discourse. For example, increasing Twitter use in Kenya is said to be linked to citizens' interest in challenging misrepresentation by the international media in terms of how violence and election campaigns are reported. (p.8)

As highlighted by the UNDP in the quote mentioned above, the desire to deconstruct the negative image of African countries has driven many African citizens' use of the social media. Such citizens have been embracing the accessibility of social

media such as Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and internet blogging among others to deconstruct longstanding "Afro-pessimistic" stereotypes and myths which relegate the African continent to a land of negativities such as poverty, corruption, backwardness and primitivism among others. Challenging these old-age negative stereotypes and myths through online platforms has most often meant that African citizen journalists or socio-political activists generate politically committed online contents which explore the positive aspects of life in Africa. The positive aspects in question may be moments of joy, play, celebration, love and human interaction. They may also be any aspects of African cultures and social life susceptible to create a new narrative of/for Africa and igniting a new Afro-positive turn.

The construction of positive narratives about Africa on social media usually takes a variety of forms. A Facebook blog christened "*Everyday Africa*" for instance proposes new photo-based stories about the African continent in a bid to challenge negative representations of the continent. Driven by the mission to "broaden [the] perception of Africa beyond headlines", the *Everyday Africa* initiative function as a site of re-imaging/rebranding for Africa. Posts on this blog feature cell phone photos shot across Africa in a bid to present a more comprehensive depiction of life on the continent and counter the diverse problematic representations of the peoples of the continent. The blog thus shows pictures depicting the joy, pride, industriousness, beauty and cultural development of different African communities. Some of the photos shown on the blog include images of children going to school, playing or laughing, images of men at work, busy market places and dynamic female entrepreneurs among others. The objective of such display of photos is clear: to show the other face of Africa, to reject the gloomy stories of Africa framed by outsiders and to push the rather positive view Afro-positivist Africans have about their respective continents. As noted by Nkono (2018), the "images [displayed on the *Everyday Africa* blog] are significant in their symbolic distancing from the stereotypical, pessimistic portrayal of Africa as a homogeneous bloc of violence, helplessness, human right abuses and lack of democracy" (p.8). The popularity of this block is revealed by the fact that, as at December 2020, it had amassed up to 428,000 followers on Instagram and 73,000 followers on Facebook.

Similar to the "*Everyday Africa*" site, another blog christened "*Voice of Africa*" seeks to challenge colonial narratives about Africa as well as stereotypical depictions of Africans in the Western media through an emphasis on stories that exclusively report the positive aspects of life in the African continent. The blog's objective is to:

Tell the stories the world doesn't hear often enough. We believe the everyday accounts of Africans getting on with life deserve more attention. From the fashion-crazy women in Dakar to the eligible bachelors in Somalia; from the extravagant weddings in Tanzania to the nightlife in Nairobi, we want to showcase life in Africa by those who live it (*Voice of Africa* 2017, para3)

A third example illustrating Africa Afro-positivist movements' use of the Internet is the media project christened "*This Is Africa*". The project seeks to provoke a positive perception of African among Africans and non-Africans through the sharing of images, articles and videos relating scientific inventions, break-through, identities and examples of good leadership in Africa. The project has been able to curate and share the critiques and opinions of credible voices across the continent, putting an emphasis on voices that seek to reclaim the Africa narrative. By focusing more on issues such as African inventiveness, complex identity as well as positive examples of socio-economic development in the continent, the *This Is Africa* project has for close to a decade now, told African stories that Western media will likely overlook or downplay. The Afro-positivist nature of the project has also motivated it to launch the #OurContinentOurStories campaign which has been another platform dedicated to the sharing of various forms of Afro-positivist contents.

Other categories of social media often used by African citizen journalists, "*netizens*" and social activists to rebrand Africa include video sharing platforms such as YouTube and TEDx among others. African opinion leaders such as Chimmamanda Ngozi Adichie and Mark Eddo among others have for instance used the *TED Global Talk* forum to criticize Western stereotypical representations of the African continent and its peoples. In her famous 2009 *TED Talk* titled "The Danger of a Single Story", Chimmamanda Ngozi Adichie censures Western media and social institutions' tendency to view Africa solely along demeaning stereotypes such as underdevelopment and poverty and senseless wars. Such a view overlooks most, if not all the positive aspects of life (notably economic growth and cultural development) on the continent. Adichie also laments that major negative narratives about Africa emanate from an old-age storytelling tradition started by early Western writers such as John Locke and Kipling. This old-age tradition has mainly consisted in representing Africa along gloomy stereotypes. Adichie writes that:

The single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Locke, who sailed to West Africa in 1561and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses", he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts." […]One must admire the imagination of John Locke. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are "half devil, half child." (cited in National Geography 2016, p. 89).

Another *TED Talk* worth mentioning here is the one delivered by Botswana born Siyanda Mohutsiwa to discuss how African citizen journalists and activists found a voice on Twitter and how this social networking site in particular could be a powerful instrument to discuss the image and the future of the African continent in real time, without borders bordering on finances and the watchful eyes of governments. In the talk, Mohutsiwa also contends that Twitter among other social networking sites could help foster what she calls "social pan-Africamism). Mohutsiwa defines social pan-Africanism as the "Pan-Africanism not of leaders, but of ordinary Africans", especially young people bursting with creative energy and innovative ideas, whose potential could go to waste with "bad governance and shaky institutions" (cited in Elena 2017). The three examples reviewed in the preceding paragraphs show how video sharing platforms such as TED Talk and Youtube have become pivotal in Africa people's activism for the rebranding of their respective countries and for laundering the image of the African continent in general.

Of all the social media used to build or launder the image of Africa, Twitter is evidently among the most prominent (Chiluwa & Bourvier 2019; Endong 2020). The ubiquity of Twitter in today's digitally driven world has made the hashtag a part of our quotidian vernacular. In effect, hashtags are today increasingly used to express almost every type of feeling on social networks. They are for instance used to manifest sarcasm or to raise awareness of burning social issues such as social inequalities, dictatorship (in underdeveloped countries), racism, and police violence among others. In line with this,

hashtagged words, phrases and sentences have become one the most influential ways to get people to support particular causes (Chiluwa & Bourvier 2019). No doubt, the most popular social movements which the world has witnessed in the last ten years have in most cases been masses' responses to well designed hashtagged phrases, words or sentences on social media. From the #BlackLivesMatter (of 2012) to #MeToo and #BringBackOurGirls movements, hashtag activism has become one of the world's postmodern techniques of voicing strong sentiments and seeking social change.

Conscious of such an immense power and popularity of hashtag activism, Africa based activists have these last years deployed hashtags to criticize western stereotypical depictions of Africa and project the beauty of life in the African continent. The *UNDP* (2018) notes for instance that "a high proportion of tweeting in Kenya has been done through the use of images in order to dismiss unfounded claims from the international media and to adjust global perceptions of Kenya and its citizens" (p.9). A similar desire to challenge the negative stereotypes of African countries is seen in the hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar generated by the Botswana-based student Siyanda Mohutsiwa. Launched in the summer of 2015, the hashtag enjoined Twitter users of African descent to answer the question "If Africa Was a Bar what would your country be drinking or doing". Answers to this question were to be image-aided. After only a week of existence, the hashtag attracted more than 60,000 tweet and re-tweets from all over the African continent (Elena 2017). The tweets and re-tweets were humorous, sarcastically and self-ironical reactions to Mohutsiwa's question. They poked fun at national stereotypes, criticized African governments for socio-political and economic malaises notably bad governance and shaky institutions and "ironised" over specific geopolitical tensions on the continent.

Another example of Twitter driven campaign aimed at rejecting Western stereotypical representations of Africa is the #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou movement which will amply be examined in the subsequent section of this chapter.

Exploring the birth and logic of the #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou

Genesis, goal and structure of the movement

The #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou movement kicked off on June 23rd 2015 with 22-year-old Twitter user Diana Salah who, tweeting under the handle @lunarnomad,

enjoined her followers to join her in celebrating the unique beauty of the African continent. In the tweet which actually kick-started the movement, Salah strongly invited her followers to emulate her example by showcasing any feature of Africa which speaks to its beauty and uniqueness. Salah's call and initiative was very much motivated by her desire to change or challenge the gloomy and colonial narratives of Africa, narratives which, over the years, have tended to present Africa as a land of negativities. This entailed using the social media networking sites "to promote a positive image and also change misconceptions along the way" (Salah cited in *Fusion TV* 2015). In effect, The Somali-American Twitter user (Salah) notes that "I got involved because growing up I was made to feel ashamed of my homeland, with negative images that paint Africa as a desolate continent [...] I used to get questions ranging from 'were you born in a hut' to hurtful comments about disease and poverty." (cited in *Fusion TV* 2015, para 4).

Salah's call elicited a huge response from Africans in both Sub-Saharan Africa and the African Diaspora in Europe, Asia and America. Few weeks after the birth of the movement, thousands of African Twitter users shared positive photos of Africa on the social networking site, in a bid to rebrand their continent of origin. As at June 30th, 2015, the tag had received over 42,000 tweets and re-tweets chronicling everything about Africa, from touristic sites/attractions to ultra-modern hospitals and from the fashion industry to mechanised agriculture (Banning-Lower 2016; *Fusion TV* 2015). For few weeks, thousands of Africans viewed the movement as an opportunity to use yet a formidable image sharing culture to deconstruct the over-simplified stereotypes of Africa as the land of untold diseases, poverty, internecine wars, primitivism and corruption, which they encounter everyday in their lives. They captioned images of places and industries across Africa with the tag #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowYou. They thus endeavoured to share images which tended to represent Africa as a land which is as developed and modernised as the West. The pictures shared also sought primordially to assert Africans' right to shape their narrative and define their image (as well as that of their countries) on the international scene. Kameir (2015) notes that, by highlighting some aspects of Africa that are overlooked by the global media, the African tweets deployed in the movements did not actually mean to deny the multiple real issues African countries are collectively compelled to deal with. The tweets simply meant "the continent, and the billion people who inhabit its 56 countries, have the same right to plurality that the rest of the world does". In the same line of thought, *Fusion TV* (2015) contends that the campaign was more an attempt to compensate for mainstream media

(as a whole) and not only Western media's failure to do a fair coverage of African news as well as a complete representation of the continent. The online magazine notes that:

> The diversity of a continent made up of 55 or 56 countries (depending on who you ask), each with unique and complex stories, can be lost amidst media coverage of the also very real civil strife and humanitarian crises in many African nations. It's so important to showcase the diversity and beauty of Africa and with mainstream media not up for the task, social media was the perfect outlet. (*Fusion TV* 2015, para 5-6).

A Look at selected images shared in the context of the movement

As earlier mentioned, the images shared within the context of the movement greatly varied according to each follower's interpretation of Salah's Afro-positive concept and call. The images ranged from pristine beaches and other touristic attractions to ultra-modern buildings and aerial views of African megacities. Some of the proponent of the movement gave attention to African fashion industry while others focused on legendary African rulers such as Mandela, Thomas Sankara and Kofi Anan who have made or presently makes Africa proud. In most of the images, the Afro-positive inclination of the followers was very evident. The image shown in **Figure 1** for instance graphically illustrates how follower @mar9_3ha of Chad sought to frame the debate on Western stereotypes of Africa. The Figure shows a collection of ultra-modern installations and magnificent touristic attractions which, besides beautifying Chad, aim indirectly – and ultimately – at challenging stereotypes which mainly associate Africa with under development and poverty. The images vividly suggest African cities have a diversity of facets, some of which include modern accents. Such diversity of facets contradicts the mainly backward and primitive image of Africa most Western media tend to popularise or naturalise through their coverage of the continent (Adichie 2009).

A similar effort at challenging Western negative portrayal of African cities is observed in **Figures 2** and **3**. In these two figures, specific images of Zimbabwe and Cape Town are respectively exhibited to show "considerable" level of economic development and "flaunt" the beauty of these countries' urbanity.

The hashtag #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou goes viral on Twitter as young Africans rush to share positive pictures of the continent

Fig. 1: Images of various Chad Localities
Source: https://www.jkgeography.com/africa-the-danger-of-a-single-story.html

Fig. 2 Aerial View of a locality in Zimbabwe
Source: https://www.quora.com/What-is-something-most-people-dont-know-about-Africa

Fig. 3 A locality in Cape Town (South Africa)
Source: https://mobile.facebook.com/The-Africa-they-Never-Show-you-Lautre-Afrique-185530754814913/?_rdc=1&_rdr

Fig. 4 Image comparing America and Nigeria
Source: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-3160431/The-Africa-media-never-shows-Hashtag-movement-sweeps-Twitter.html

The idea here is visibly to challenge popular Western beliefs that Africa is all about villages characterised with the abundance of thatches-made huts and a forests inhabited by animal-like creatures. The caption used by the twitter user clearly reveals the latter's posture as one who is out to correct non-Africans' or Afro-pessimistic observers. The sharer actually seems to question foreign media's omission in their narrative, of those ultra modern facets/accents of Africa.

The sharer of the image seems to suggest that, as far as they are concerned, there is no (or only very little) difference between the two countries in the sense that the same types of modern architecture characterises towns in the two countries.

It should also be stressed that the tweets and re-tweets deployed during the movement did not all seek to totally overlook the ugly side of life in Africa. Some actually juxtaposed the modern and rural facets of life in Africa. In image **(Fig.1** see above) for instance, the sharer acknowledges the fact that Africa has serious social problems and may not be as developed as the West. The presence of village environment with huts is indicative of such reading of the African socio-economic situation. However, the sharer aptly nuances his reading of the continent's socio-economic development by injecting accents of modernity in his construction of the visual. Accents of modernity are here provided by images of ultra-modern buildings. Images deployed during the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou are therefore diverse and filled with various types of visual rhetoric. The feature they have in common is that they attempt in various ways to market Africa and reject the thesis that Africa is all about poverty, mortal diseases, corruption and primitivism among others. They thus suggest that a second look should be given the African continent. The narratives about Africa should be complex and diversified. They should not be monolithic and exclusively focused on the negativities.

#TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou as an Afro-positivist and counter hegemonic movement

As earlier mentioned Afro-pessimism has for many years, not only been present in Africa but also represented a serious problem affecting the continent's socio-cultural, economic and political development. The phenomenon has from time to time resurfaced particularly in situations where Western nations, politicians or institutions embark on racist policies or political actions that are relatively aggressive to Africans. For instance,

in January 2018, US president Donald Trump allegedly disparaged Africa, referring to it as "shithole countries". Although this insult rhetoric was condemned in many parts of the world, scores of African communities endorsed Trump's comments, seeing in them a vivid portrayal of their respective countries, governments and cultures as well as a justified chastisement of their home land. They thus manifested Afro-pessimistic tendencies, overlooking the fact that the term "shithole countries" could only be too hyperbolic to qualify a continent which is host to eight of the fastest growing economies in the world (Green 2012; Magirosa 2014; Rodrik 2013; *United Nations Organizations* [*UNO*] 2017).

Observing social movements (such as the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement) that challenge both Afro-pessimism and colonial/Western representations of the African continent can only be a positive development. The existence of such movements is evidence of the fact that Afro-positivism is visibly emerging – or has considerably emerged – to present a more complex and comprehensive picture of Africa. The #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou movement did not seek to completely negate the fact that Africa faces a number of development challenges, which would have also been distortion of the socio-political and economic reality of the continent. It rather defended the view that, Africa is not all about negativities. The continent is also fast developing and possesses natural resources, touristic attractions, modern technologies, and a dynamic human resource which can enable it change its story. In other word, the movement has aptly demonstrated that though the continent is plagued by a plurality of problems, it also has a plurality of opportunities to address its development problems. The examples of images shared in the movement (see **Figs. 1** to **4** above) are a clear qualitative indication of the richness and depth of Afro-positive content as far as representing and rebranding Africa is concerned. The examples indicate an Afro-positive turn in the social media.

The images shared in the context of the movement show that Africans are more and more conscious not only of the need to negate images of themselves constructed by external image makers but also of the imperative to exploit the powers of the social media to challenge these external image-makers. As noted by Mbamalu (2019) of the popular pan-African media project *This is Africa*, it is very important for Africans to challenge the entities behind the writing or re-writing of the African story. By partaking in the (re-)writing of their stories and by deconstructing the racist narratives and colonial stereotypes of Africa through movements such as

#TheAfricatTheMediaNeverShowsYou, they show sensitivity to the Igbo proverb which states that "until the lion acquires the ability to write, stories about hunting will continue to glorify the hunter". In Mbamalu language:

> In the absence of counter-narratives, inaccuracies become a culture, and a way of life. It is often said that 'Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.' So until the story of Africa is told by Africans, the story of Africa will always glorify others. We see the urgency to challenge historical revisionism, while deconstructing the negative representation of Africa by mainstream media. (p. 67)

In her assessment of the online pan-African movements, Nkono (2018) even notes that the #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou campaign is an egregious illustration of an Africa-driven move towards Afro-optimism. She notes that given the huge response the movement elicited from African users of Twitter (more than 42,000 tweets and re-tweets few weeks after its launch), it will be plausible to futuristically speculate that the growing ubiquity of new technologies and social media in Africa is enabling Africans to increasingly be empowered to challenge the "Dark Continent" narrative as well as the Blackman's inferiority complex. The movement coupled with many recent Afro-positive social media assisted campaigns (notably #IfAfricaWasABar and This Is Africa) indicate that Africans can now "reclaim their agency by creating and distributing their own self-representations. In this sense, social media may be seen as a democratising space. Previously underrepresented voices now have a convenient and cheap platform for self-expression" (Nkono 2018).

Another interesting issue is that the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou emanates from the desire to contradict influential media-assisted systems which for years have perpetrated racist and relatively inaccurate narratives that enabled the Western cultures, identities and countries to stand as a historic bloc (the dominant class). As have opined critics such as Aina (2014) and Machira (2002), Western media misrepresentations of Africa as a place of negativities have as ultimate conscious or unconscious goal to endorse the Whiteman's superiority myth. By this myth, the Whiteman remains the saviour of the African continent while the black race is viewed as one which still lives in darkness and obscurantism and which imperatively needs the Western civilisation to develop. The logic of the #TheAficaTheMediaNeverShowsYou

movement radically challenges this subtle hegemonic system by pushing for a re-classification of Africa and its elevation to the rank of fast developing continent. The logic of the movement was clear: Africans are in no way inferior to westerners. This logic is readable in all the components of the movement from the lexical composition of the hashtag (the Africa the media never shows you) and the expressed objectives of the movement to the quality of images shared in the context of the digital activism.

Conclusion

It may be difficult to assess the #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou movement in other to know its role in the rebranding of Africa; but its contribution to the debate on Afro-pessimism, Afro-optimism and counter-hegemony is more than evident. The movement actually marks another Afro-positive turn in the social media. From its name to the types of images shared within its context, the movement illustrated African rise to challenge colonial and Western stereotypes of Africa. It was a rise against Western mythologies of Africa which tend to perpetuate the Whiteman's superiority myth and the Blackman's inferiority complex. It was a rise against Western – and unfortunately westernized Africans' – narratives that naturalize the logic of a historic bloc. Thus, it was counter-hegemony.

A number of Afro-positive social-media assisted movements have preceded and succeeded the #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou idiom. An example of succeeding movement is the #OurContinentOurStoriesinitiated by the Kenyan media group *This IsAfrica*, which has been based on the sharing of Afro-positivist pictures, articles and videos on various social media networks. The succession of such Afro-positivist and counter hegemonic online movements is an indication that, as the ubiquity of social media continues to grow in Africa, African *internautes* and "*netizens*" will continue to design new hashtags, news Afro-positive contents, concepts and rhetoric to attempt to redress the image of their countries or continent on the international scene and counter other forms of cultural hegemonies initiated or subtly aided by West-based or westernised entities. This will be a laudable development given the fact that there is a real need to diversify narratives about Africa. Africa needs to participate and if possible, control the overall narrative about her. She needs to actively work through media initiatives such as #TheAfricaMediaNeverShowsYou and similar ones for the other side

of the truth (what Adichie 2016 called "the other side of the moon" or "the other story") to emerge and be considered.

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