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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The AFRICA NARRATIVE is a global initiative to harnesses the power of the arts, media and entertainment, business, education and philanthropy to engage the world in new stories of modern Africa. The initiative will help broaden awareness of the continent and its 54 nations by serving as a catalyst for discussion, providing foundational research, organizing forums for debate and change strategy among stakeholders, and sponsoring creative communications campaigns, meetings and collaborations with private, public and nonprofit partners. The initiative is based at the Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project at USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, in partnership with CrissCrossGlobal, an international communications consultancy based in Washington D.C.

Recognizing the pivotal role of media and entertainment in shaping perceptions and opinions of Africa and African people, A*frica in the Media* is The Africa Narrative's inaugural research project. It aims to generate a deeper understanding of the media's impact on opinions and attitudes toward Africa, and more broadly, on U.S. engagement with the continent. This research project grew out of a belief that we have a great opportunity to engage media industries in telling more diverse stories about Africa's 54 nations.

Not only is there an opportunity, but clearly a need, as was abundantly clear from interviews we conducted among two dozen experts with a deep understanding of Africa's portrayal in the U.S. media and entertainment landscape. The universal consensus is that African media coverage is overwhelmingly focused on negative stories such as Boko Haram, corruption, poverty, electoral crises, migrants and terrorism, while putting far too little emphasis on subjects and stories that provide a counterpoint showing the success, diversity, opportunity and vibrancy of Africa.

Even when the coverage of Africa was, on its surface, positive, it was described as often glib, simplistic, predictable, and sometimes sensationalist or extreme, at the expense of showcasing regular voices and stories of Africa.

U.S. entertainment was found to succumb to some of the same stereotypes and challenges observed in the news media. For example, Biola Alabi, a Nigerian producer working at the nexus of the U.S. and African entertainment marketplaces, noted how shows like *Law & Order*, *CSI* and *Criminal Intent* invariably depict Africans or an African country that are involved in human slavery, smuggling, drugs or prostitution, an observation pointedly borne out by our research.

Though there is a palpable sense that Hollywood is paying increasing attention to African storytelling and creative talent, — something we address at the conclusion of this report — and an acknowledgement that U.S. media coverage has somewhat improved over the past several years, our research suggests that there remains a considerable gap between how Africa is portrayed and how it *is*.

> [U.S. media portrayal of Africa] is simplistic, but less stereotyped than in the past, because there's a lot more diversity of voices out there, and a little bit more of a consciousness among consumers and news producers that they haven't done a good job in the past.
> —John Tomlinson, Synergos

Building on the expert insights of our interviews, the Lear Center's Media Impact Project team (MIP) set out to conduct a rigorous accounting of what kind of media coverage Africa actually receives and what kinds of stories about Africa and Africans are consumed by Americans. At the end of this report, we translate our findings into five clear recommendations for how the American media and entertainment industries can improve depictions of Africa.

To establish a baseline for how often Africa is depicted in U.S. news and entertainment programming, the MIP team monitored the frequency of mentions of "Africa," "African" (excluding African-American), "Africans," and the names of the continent's 54 nations on almost 700,000 hours of U.S. television during the entire month of March 2018.

In order to better understand U.S. public perception of Africa and how it tracks with media coverage, the MIP team also collected over 1.6 million tweets that included the same keywords during the same time period. The Twitter analysis also included the names of all African national capitals and tracked five of the 32 topic categories we used in the TV analysis: Crime/Terrorism, Corruption, Animals, Diaspora and Poverty.

Because storytelling can have a powerful impact on viewers' awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behavior, we wanted to take a closer look at depictions of Africa in scripted entertainment. We aimed to find out what stories were being told, the prominence of these depictions, the sentiment of these depictions, and how often African characters are depicted.

The Lear Center has produced more than 15 years of academic research demonstrating the tremendous impact that entertainment has on audiences, affecting awareness, knowledge levels, attitudes and behavior. Our national survey research has found that 65% of Americans have taken action based on entertainment programming they have seen, ranging from seeking more information about an issue to making a donation to a charity. One notable Lear Center study demonstrated how a storyline on the primetime TV show *Numb3rs* was effective at convincing audience members to register to donate their organs — because a beloved character in the show decided it was the right thing to do.[3]

While most people tend to believe that news coverage is more likely to change someone's opinion than entertainment storytelling, we recently published a study that found exactly the opposite. Entertainment can be far more persuasive and effective at overcoming bigotry than news reports, where people are less likely to suspend disbelief and open themselves to a new way of thinking.[4]

The television research findings in this report illuminate how Africa and its people are currently being cast in the media spotlight, giving us a baseline for measuring changes in those representations moving forward.

In the next phase of the *Africa in the Media* research project, we plan to conduct opinion research among the general public and opinion leaders, using these findings to determine the impact that media depictions have on awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behavior related to Africa and African people. Of particular interest is the impact on tourism, trade and investment, and policy. With this research and focused roundtables in New York, Washington and Los Angeles, we intend to publish a more extensive set of recommendations on how to create a more balanced and informed portrayal of Africa and, more broadly, better knowledge of, and engagement with the continent among Americans.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

TELEVISION FINDINGS

1 Stories about Africa appeared infrequently on U.S. television: a mention appeared once in every five hours of TV programming. Viewers were seven times more likely to see references to Europe. Despite the low frequency of mentions, we know that there were more than 3.6 billion views of these depictions of Africa in the U.S. in March.

2 Five countries — Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, Seychelles and "Congo"[5] — accounted for almost half (49%) of all mentions of any African nation, although there is variation by type of content:

> **TOP FIVE IN NEWS:** Seychelles (16%), Egypt (9%), Kenya (9%), South Africa (8%) and Congo (7%) accounted for 50% of all mentions of any African nation in local and national news.[6]
>
> **TOP FIVE IN ENTERTAINMENT:** South Africa (14%), Kenya (14%), Egypt (10%), Nigeria (10%) and Congo (6%) accounted for 53% of all mentions of any African nation in scripted and unscripted entertainment.

3 Most mentions of Africa (43%) appeared on national or local news, with over 1.5 billion views. Business, technology and economy in Africa accounted for 8% of news coverage while crime accounted for 16%.

4 Viewers saw one out of five references to Africa in unscripted entertainment, including talk shows, game shows and reality programming. Twenty percent of those mentions were on the game show *Jeopardy*. Documentaries (17%) and scripted entertainment (15%) account for almost all the rest of Africa depictions.

5 Several African countries were virtually invisible: Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and Sao Tome and Principe were mentioned less than 10 times in almost 700,000 hours of programming.

6 Of 32 topics tracked across all programming, only three had more positive than negative mentions: history, music and sports.

7 In scripted entertainment, we found that 44% of TV shows and movies only mention "Africa," with no reference to a particular country.

8 Out of almost 700,000 hours of programming, there were only 25 major scripted storylines about Africa, of which 14 centered on crime. Overall, viewers were more than twice as likely to see negative depictions of Africa than positive ones in major storylines about Africa.

9 Over one-third (35%) of African mentions in scripted entertainment were about crime. Many of these stories were told on America's most popular shows such as *Law & Order: SVU* and the *NCIS* franchise. We have viewer- ship information on 87% of these depictions: 179 million viewers watched 392 references to Africa in scripted TV shows and movies during this period.

10 Only 13% of entertainment storylines that mentioned Africa included an African character, and 80% of the roles were small. When African characters did appear, 46% spoke 10 words or less.

11 Only 31% of African characters were women.

TWITTER FINDINGS

1 "Africa" received the most mentions (27%) — more than any individual country — with South Africa a distant second (10%), followed by Nigeria (7%), Egypt (6%), Kenya (5%) and Seychelles (5%). No other country received more than 3% of mentions.[9]

2 Most tweets about Africa shared or voiced reactions to published news media stories. The volume and topics of tweets closely aligned with the tenor of news coverage of Africa, indicating the influence of news on social media.

3 South Africa and Nigeria were the countries most associated with crime, terrorism and corruption.

4 The highest volume of positive tweets centered on successful efforts to address African poverty. Most of these tweets originated with nonprofits and NGOs working to eradicate poverty in the region.

5 Very few tweets about Africa contained any discernible sentiment, potentially indicating a low level of interest and/or lack of contextual knowledge. We also documented this trend in January 2018, before and after President Trump's widely reported remark about "shithole" African countries.[10]

6 Although Twitter was mostly used to express emotions about an issue in the news, we identified one significant case where social media posts preceded any major news coverage. This occurred when a series of negative tweets, often tagged #whitegenocide, decried the murders of white South African farmers. The posts were later reported to have originated from conservative Afrikaner groups' global lobbying campaigns, which were later amplified in President Trump's Twitter feed. The BBC found no evidence to support their claims.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

When we shared a summary of key findings with 30 experts and influencers from Africa and the U.S. at a roundtable discussion in September 2018 at Africa House in Manhattan, it triggered a passionate conversation and strong emotions. While most experts we talked to were not surprised that Africa receives primarily negative coverage in the U.S., many were uncomfortable watching video clips of the entertainment references, the majority of them from well-known, recently-produced shows. For some, the relentless jokes at African people's expense were difficult to watch and felt like personal attacks. For members of the African diaspora who live in the U.S. — especially those who grew up watching U.S. television — these representations are very familiar, attuned as they were to any mention of their (or their parents') homeland in American media. Participants in a roundtable discussion cited several reasons why this research matters to the future of Africa and of the developed world:

THE GLOBAL REACH OF AMERICAN MEDIA: Despite the growing power of Bollywood and Nollywood, Hollywood's $723 billion storytelling engine makes its content virtually inescapable in almost every corner of the world.[47] For three of the last four years, CBS' *NCIS* was the most watched TV show in the world and *Modern Family* and *Big Bang Theory* were among the world's most popular comedies.[48] Though African and African diaspora storytellers are harnessing social media platforms and streaming services like Netflix to tell nuanced, authentic stories to niche and mass audiences worldwide, it will take time before these stories achieve the marketshare necessary to disrupt traditional American media narratives about the continent.

THE LINK BETWEEN MEDIA AND TRADE AND INVESTMENT: No matter how promising the economic outlook might be in any particular place in Africa, that information will be considered within a broader pessimistic narrative about Africa. Since many American business people are exposed to this narrative their entire lives, they grow up with this mindset, which can be incredibly difficult to dislodge. One roundtable participant told a story about how three different businesses called him after seeing a tweet from Donald Trump about attacks on white farmers in South Africa. One tweet, which was based on unverified rumors but was widely reported in news media, was enough to make them seriously consider divesting from South Africa (at least one of the companies did.)

THE IMPACT ON THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: In our interviews with Africa experts, and during this roundtable discussion, several Africans in business, media and advocacy agreed that the key to changing the dominant narrative about Africa is mobilizing the African diaspora. However, relentlessly negative media narratives about Africa can take a psychological toll, making it necessary to defend Africa before it can be promoted.

Several experts agreed that the problem is even more severe for first and second-generation diaspora members who never lived on the continent and may be tempted to forego the uphill battle and simply cut ties.

What American Media Can Do

We believe that large scale, data-driven media research like this is essential to understanding the role that media plays in shaping and informing audience attitudes toward the world. Many have described media as a kind of mirror held up to the world, but we can never know how distorted that mirror is until we take a cold, hard look at its content. As in fashion, there are discernible trends in media representations, and this study captures the current one for Africa. Its findings are intended to provide insights for American media makers and help inform their consideration of African storytelling.

Based on the findings in this report, here are five areas where media makers can take steps to change current representations of Africa in American media:

1. Increase the number of stories that mine the rich and diverse cultures and histories of Africa — including in children's programming — and develop more scripted content that doesn't focus on crime.

2. Include more African characters in stories, and give them larger speaking parts.

3. Make one half of African characters female.

4. Expand the focus from Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, Congo and Nigeria to the continent's other 49 countries.

5. Collaborate with African, including first and second generation, content creators.

Footnotes

[1] "The Nielsen Total Audience Report: Q1 2018." (2018, July 31). Retrieved from https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2018/q1-2018-total-audience-report.html

[2] Baker, T., & Blakley, J. (2008). "How Americans' Entertainment Habits Track Their Political Values: Results from the Zogby/Lear Center Entertainment & Politics Survey." Retrieved from https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/entertainmentandpolitics.pdf

[3] Morgan, S., Movius, L., & Cody, M. J. (2009). The Power of Narratives: The Effect of Entertainment Television Organ Donation Storylines on the Attitudes, Knowledge and Behaviors of Donors and Nondonors. *Journal of Communication*. 59. 135 - 151. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01408.x

[4] Gillig, T. K., Rosenthal, E. L., Murphy, S. T., & Folb, K. L. (2017, August) More than a media moment: The influence of televised storylines on viewers' attitudes toward transgender people and policies. *Sex Roles*. 515–527.

[5.] We found that American media rarely distinguishes Democratic Republic of the Congo from Republic of the Congo, and so "Congo" refers to both countries in this report.

[6] As all percentage values are rounded to the nearest whole number, the total may not equal 100%.