

## ***American Readers' Interests in News About Africa; A Preliminary Report on a Case Study of the Washington Metropolitan Area***

***William Lobulu\****

### **ABSTRACT**

This is a study on the global news flow controversy. It is a preliminary report of a case study of some selected American readers and journalists. The study was aimed at finding out if there is a general agreement between American journalists and their readers on the kind of African news that is important and interesting to American readers.

The research method used was sample survey. An initial sample of 200 readers and 40 journalists were randomly selected for the study. Only 72 readers and 16 journalists completed and returned the questionnaire sent to them by mail. Four newspapers were included in the study.

The study found, among other things, that most of the readers studied read foreign news, almost all the respondents read at least one of the articles about Africa in the newspapers included in the study. It also found that more than half of the journalists and readers agree that there is more news about disaster and politics than about other types of news. Although both the readers and journalists surveyed agree that the stories on development activities were important, the majority of them also agreed that such stories were not really interesting to them. The study is continuing.

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\*Mr. William Lobulu, a former lecturer at the Tanzania School of Journalism, now works with SHIHATA. The Tanzania News Agency.

**Intérêts des lecteurs américains vis-à-vis des  
informations concernant l'Afrique: Rapport préliminaire  
portant sur une étude de cas de la Zone M<sup>t</sup>ropolitaine de  
Washington**

**RESUME**

Il s'agit d'une étude sur la controverse sur la circulation de l'information au niveau mondial, d'un rapport préliminaire sur une étude de cas à la quelle ont participé des journalistes et des lecteurs américains choisis; l'étude avait pour objectif de voir s'il existait un consensus entre les journalistes américains et leurs lecteurs sur le genre d'informations africaines qui sont importantes et qui pourraient intéresser les lecteurs américains.

La méthode utilisée a été l'enquête par échantillon nage. Un premier échantillon de 200 lecteurs et de 40 journalistes avait été sélectionné au hasard pour l'étude. Seulement 72 lecteurs et 16 journalistes ont complété et retourné le questionnaire qui leur avait été envoyé par la poste. 4 journaux ont été choisis pour l'étude.

Entre autres choses, les résultats indiquent que la plupart des lecteurs enquêtés lisaient les nouvelles étrangères, que presque tous ceux qui avaient répondu avaient lu au moins un article sur l'Afrique dans les 4 journaux inclus dans l'enquête.

L'étude a aussi révélé que plus de la moitié des journalistes et des lecteurs convenaient qu'il y avait plus de nouvelles sur les catastrophes et la politique que sur d'autres sujets. Les lecteurs et les journalistes enquêtés ont convenu que les articles sur les activités de développement étaient importants; toutefois, la majorité d'entre eux ont dit que ces articles ne les intéressaient pas vraiment. L'étude se poursuit.



## Introduction

The coverage of the Third World by the Western press has for many years now been a matter of controversial debate in world forums. This is likely to remain an area of disagreement between the Third World and the West in the years ahead in view of the irreconcilable attitudes by the two blocs towards international flow of news.

The Western press is charged with providing a distorted picture of the Third World and of transmitting stories with news values which have little regard for the countries' attempts to foster national integration and cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> The Western press is further accused of being more interested in denigrating the young developing countries than reporting their positive achievements.<sup>2</sup> The evil is aggravated and the tendency, it is argued, is for the Western press to stress the phenomena of tension or violence and keep silent on events of a positive nature that occur in the Third World.

Spokesmen for the Third World appear to be convinced that if public opinion in the industrialized countries is not prepared for structural changes in the world economy, it is because the international press dominated by the West is failing to report the "crucial evolution of this century".<sup>3</sup>

Many Western journalists, it is further argued, are not familiar with the multi-ethnic structure of the new nations in post-colonial Africa and hence lack conceptual tools for analyzing and understanding political events in such structures.<sup>4</sup>

American communication researchers have also come up with studies which tend to support complaints of the Third World countries. Some of the studies show that the news about the Third World in U.S. newspapers often deals with crises, the bizarre, or the East-West struggle.

James Larson, who compared the developed countries and the Third World coverages by U.S. network television, found that coverage of the Third World countries contained a higher proportion of crisis stories than did coverage of developed nations.<sup>5</sup>

If a newspaper is a mirror reflecting society, the image of Africa, reflected by the Western press, some studies show, has been deformed. A study of three prominent news magazines - *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* - showed that in covering Africa there was greater emphasis on conflicts and neglect of social events, education, religion, medicine, and science.<sup>6</sup>

By the nature of their work, journalists are great speculators. They speculate about the event that would interest their readers because a basic need of all journalism is to satisfy the needs and wants of their audiences. Thus, in their reply to the Third World cries, American journalists have often responded that they select news with a keen awareness of and concern for their readers' interests.

The often violent and bizarre issues reported in the press, in the opinion of Western journalists, often satisfy readers' demands.

### **Readers' Interests Studies**

Hypotheses and propositions which explain treatment of news events by the media are not hard to find. It is almost universally accepted that news items thought by reporters and editors to have relevance to the audience will be selected more often than matters which have no immediate bearing. Also events socially or culturally familiar to the audience will receive more attention in the media than the unfamiliar.<sup>7</sup>

Conflicts which include matters such as violence, crime, and confrontations will more often be reported than peaceful developments, and, according to an often quoted study, the



more distant socio-culturally the nations are, the more negative the events.<sup>8</sup>

Hillier Kriegbaum, who measured the amount of foreign news read by newspaper subscribers in the United States, found that 57 percent of the subscribers read either all or some of the foreign news.<sup>9</sup> A more recent study on public interest in foreign news showed that a majority of the sampled readers in Syracuse, New York, expressed a moderate to strong interest in foreign news. A small proportion of the sample expressed a desire for more news from specific regions. The study also found an expressed interest by the readers for more news of "ordinary people" and social problems in other countries. A strong majority of the sample wanted less news of violence.<sup>10</sup>

On the content of foreign news reports, a study of international news coverage in *The New York Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* found a presentation of discrepant pictures of international events. Enough discrepancies were found to suggest that interested readers may find it worth their while to consult at least several news sources and compare them explicitly and systematically.<sup>11</sup>

A recent newsroom attitudes study concluded among other things that many journalists are cynical about the public's intelligence, underestimate the public's demand for news, and are arrogant about their roles as gatekeepers.<sup>12</sup> The responsibilities of journalists as gatekeepers are indisputably heavy as they have to decide almost instantly what ought to be reported. Their judgments govern whether a newspaper serves well or badly.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this study therefore is to find out if there is a general agreement between American journalists and their audiences on the kind of foreign news that is important and interesting to American readers. Some of the research questions to be answered by this study are:

- (a) Does foreign news interest American readers?
- (b) Which content factors in news about Africa is considered important and interesting by American readers?
- (c) Which content factors in news about Africa is considered important and interesting by American journalists? and

- (d) Do American journalists and readers share some of the communication researcher's views that Africa is unfairly treated in the American press?

### **Method**

A systematic random sample of 200 readers was selected, using the telephone directory, in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The selected research subjects were from Washington, D.C.; Alexandria, VA; Columbia and Silver Spring, MD.

Questionnaire mailed to them sought to find their demographic characteristics, their interest in foreign news, and how they would rate a number of stories about Africa. The key part of the questionnaire involved readers' interest and importance rating on a selection of stories made up for the purpose of this study.

Of the eight stories that readers were asked to rate three were about economic development activities, four depicted conflict situations, and one was about a cultural event in Africa. To measure how the readers perceived the stories on the basis of interest and importance to them, a four point rating order was used for each story.

Stories on economic development contained news often regarded by journalists as positive news. The news is about a water project, a bumper corn harvest, and a railroad construction; the conflict stories featured a coup d'etat, guerilla activities, and a bomb explosion; and the cultural event was about a traditional social ceremony.

Readers were also asked to assess whether the information that they read in the major metropolitan newspapers - *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and *USA Today* - were adequate for their needs. Except for *USA Today*, the rest of the papers were selected for their reputation of extensive coverage of international affairs.

A similar questionnaire was mailed to 40 journalists, mostly editors, of the above-mentioned papers. The journalists, over 90% of whom have covered foreign news, were listed in the 1984 Editor and Publisher Yearbook as news executives. The questionnaire sought to find out what African news journalists think is important and interesting to their audience. 72 copies of the questionnaire were filled in a returned by the readers and 16 by the editors.



## Summary of Findings

1. Most of the sampled readers in the Washington metropolitan area are interested in reading foreign news. More than half of the respondents read foreign news daily or frequently. Only one percent did not read foreign news.
2. More than three quarters of the respondents read *The Washington Post*, a paper regarded as one of the top quality newspapers in the United States. The paper covers international news extensively and receives world coverage by big wire services such as Reuters, AFP, AP and UPI.
3. Almost all respondents read at least one of the articles written about Africa, around mid-September 1984, in the four newspapers included in this study. More than half of the readers read about the extensively covered famine in Ethiopia. Only one of them read an editorial that appeared in the *Post* about reforms taking place in Guinea after a coup d'etat earlier this year.
4. More than three quarters of the readers and almost all journalists agree that much of the news written about Africa and Western Europe in the American newspapers falls under the politics category.
5. More than half of the journalists and readers agree that there is more news of disasters written about African than Western Europe.
6. Most of the readers agree that they find more news concerning economy and finance written about Western Europe than Africa. Most of the journalists think that economy and finance is as widely covered about Africa as about Europe.
7. Most readers and journalists agree that for both Western Europe and Africa very little is written about religion, education, science and technology.
8. More than half of the readers indicated that the three stories which featured development activities in Africa were either important or very important to them. Except for the water project, most of the journalists also thought the stories were either important or very important to the American audience.

9. Although both readers and journalists seemed to agree that the stories on development activities were important, the majority of them also agreed that the stories were not interesting or just somewhat interesting to the American audience. This underscores the fact that what is important to the readers is not necessarily interesting to them. During the period of this study attention of the American people was drawn by the media to the devastating famine in Ethiopia. Series of in-depth articles were written almost daily in papers, and television frequently showed pictures of people dying of hunger. Appeals for contributions were frequently sounded and momentarily there was great concern for the Ethiopian people. The grim situation in Ethiopia might have created a feeling among many American readers that economic development and the well being of people in other parts of the world was also important to them.
10. In only two of the four stories about conflict situations in Africa did the majority of the readers indicate that they were important or very important to them. Only one of the stories was seen by the majority of the journalists as important. The two stories viewed by readers as important were the only two also viewed by most readers as interesting. The majority of journalists also indicated that the most important conflict story was also the most interesting to the readers.
11. On the news about a traditional social event in Africa, readers and journalists seemed to think alike. Less than one third of the respondents said the news was important or interesting to them.
12. The majority of the journalists indicated that the information written in the newspapers about Africa and Western Europe was adequate for the needs of their readers. The journalists' views were confirmed by over half of the readers who indicated that the information was indeed adequate for their needs.



PLEASE NOTE: "An in-depth analysis of the data will not be done until cross-tabulations are made by computer. This is forthcoming." See Appendix I for the Frequency Distributions of Responses to the Questionnaires. This is just a preliminary report of a still on-going study.

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