

# **Coverage of Africa By the African-American Press: Perceptions of African-American Newspaper Editors**

**Emmanuel U. Onyedike\***

## **Abstract**

The news selection process of African-American newspaper editors in terms of news about Africa, was evaluated by addressing two research questions: (i) How do African-American newspaper editors decide which African news to publish? (ii) What influences their decision about the quantity and quality of coverage? A two-page questionnaire was mailed to African-American newspaper editors in 1991 and 1992. The study hypothesized that editors' perceptions of a foreign news event had a direct and significant impact on the way they process the news stories they receive daily.

The study reveals that gatekeeping practices of African-American newspaper editors were basically similar to those of other western editors. This was not surprising given the similarity in their education, environment and newsroom socialization. The African-American newspaper editors are distinct, however, in subject matter of reporting.

African-American newspaper editors think though, that positive involvement of the United States in the affairs of African countries would positively influence the education of the American public about the heritage of African-Americans. The reporting and issues in African-American newspapers were also investigated.

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\*Emmanuel U. Onyedike, teaches in the Department of Mass Media Arts, Hampton University, Virginia, U.S.A.

# **Reportage sur l'Afrique par les Agences de Presse Afro-américaines: Les Perceptions de Rédacteurs Afro-américaines.**

**par Emmanuel U. Onyedike\***

## **Résumé**

Le processus qu'utilisent les rédacteurs Afro-américains pour faire la sélection des informations sur l'Afrique a été évalué en s'adressant à deux questions de recherche, notamment: (i) Quelle critère utilisent les rédacteurs Afro-américain pour décider quelles informations sur l'Afrique doivent être publiées? (ii) Quels facteurs influencent leur décision sur la qualité et la quantité du reportage? On a envoyé aux rédacteurs Afro-américains un questionnaire de deux pages en 1991 et en 1992. Cette étude avait pour hypothèse que les perceptions des rédacteurs des informations étrangères avaient un impact direct et significatif sur la manière dont ils traitent les informations qu'ils reçoivent chaque jour.

L'étude révèle que les pratiques de surveillance des rédacteurs Afro-américains sont plus ou moins similaires à celles d'autres rédacteurs de l'occident. Ce fait n'était pas suprennant étant donné que les deux groupes de rédacteurs ont des similarités dans les domaines de l'éducation, leur mode de vie et la socialisation dans les salles des nouvelles. Pourtant, dans le reportage du contenu, les rédacteurs Afro-américains sont plus précis. Les rédacteurs Afro-américains ont l'opinion que l'engagement positif des Etats-Unis dans les affaires des pays africains pourrait influencer d'une manière positive la formation du public américain de l'héritage du peuple Afro-américain.

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\* Emmanuel U. Onyedike enseigne dans le Département de Mass Média à l'Université de Hampton, aux Etats Unis.

## Literature Review

A review of the literature shows that various news factors or criteria influence the selection of foreign news items for local publication. Galtung and Ruge (1965) stated that there are a number of universal news values, such as impact or size of an event, unusualness, and cultural similarity of the event with the audience, that help determine whether an event is seen as news. They also pointed out that Western nations typically have four news values: eliteness of nations, conflict, prominence, and personal affinity with the event. Their study showed that the more distant a nation is from an event, the more likely it is that elite people's actions will be covered. They also stated that the more distant the nation, the more negative the reported event. According to them, 'positive things that happen in the underdog countries will go under-reported and this will promote an image of these countries as being unable to govern themselves, and as inherently inferior to the topdog countries' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). Cultural relevance has also been found to be a factor that determines the amount and type of coverage one country receives in another country's press. Nam (1970) highlighted cultural relevance by stating that countries involved in the same event would report the actions taken by one another. Hester (1971) suggested that cultural affinities and economic associations between countries are determinants of foreign news coverage.

Findings from Peterson's (1979) study of reporters' and editors' news choices support some of Galtung's and Ruge's (1965) conclusions. According to Peterson, events that were unambiguous, unexpected or timely were more likely to be ranked by reporters as newsworthy. She also stated that items that were greater in scope, involved elite people or nations, or were negative, were rated as more newsworthy by reporters.

Some studies (Kariel and Rosenvall, 1984) have shown that elite nations get more coverage than non-elite nations and that economic factors such as a nation's gross national product, or the amount of trade between two nations explain why certain nations receive more coverage than others.

Chang, *et al.* (1986) found that relevance of an event to the United States, and whether the event broke U.S. norms determined whether the foreign event would be covered or not. Ahern (1984) found that an increase in a country's gross national product, trade and political relations with the United States tend to lead to more coverage of that country in elite U.S. newspapers.

Some studies (Lacy, 1987; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986) also show that other factors, such as market and organizational characteristics of the newspapers as well as editors' personal backgrounds and experiences, affect editors' perception of foreign news criteria.

Editors are called media gatekeepers because they are prominent among those deciding what goes in or is left out in a news presentation. Perceived interest of readers in the event plays a major role in editors' news selection process. Many U.S. media gatekeepers think their audiences are not interested in foreign news, especially news from what they see as little-known countries. According to former foreign correspondent John M. Hamilton, 'There is something of an unwritten rule among journalists that local news is news and foreign news is foreign; that people want plenty of the former and will tolerate only small doses of the latter'. (Hamilton 1985).

One reason for the scant mention and treatment of Africa in the U.S media is that very few American media organizations have staff permanently assigned to that continent. Most media organizations, therefore, rely on the wire services for news from Africa. The wire services have a preference for crises-oriented stories. Wilhoit and Weaver (1983) found that while the Associated Press and United Press International had increased their coverage of developing countries, many of those stories involved conflict.

Segal (1976) thinks that development news or feature news about African nations is seldom reported because of "a belief among American editors that their publics are not interested in feature stories from Africa unless there is a "cute" note to them; an animal touch or some other quaintness."

Perceived interest of readers plays a major role in what editors choose to publish. Hough (1988) conceded the likelihood of editors giving their readers "what they ask for". African-American newspaper editors are no exceptions. They try to satisfy their readers' expectations. LaBrie and Zima (1971) found that a majority (66%) of African-Americans saw the role of the black press as that of "informing the black community about itself, its environment and its heritage." Bodie (1992) also found that black-owned newspapers helped fill information gaps and bolster racial pride for African-Americans. Compared to the white media's coverage of Africa, Bodie found that African-American newspapers had lower incidences of crisis reporting. According to him, they concentrated more on news about economic development, internal administration, cultural change and exchange of visits between American and African leaders. Bodie concluded that the overall story content of African-American newspapers "reflected an apparent desire to achieve balance rather than highlight bad news" (Bodie 1992).

It is assumed that news from and about Africa is of interest to African-Americans, given their desire to establish links and bonds of understanding with their countries of origin.

## **Research Questions and Major Hypothesis**

This research was designed to determine the news selection process of African-American newspaper editors in terms of news about Africa. Specifically, it addressed two research questions:

- How do they decide which African news to publish?
- What influences their decisions about the quantity and quality of coverage?

This study hypothesized that editors' perception of a foreign news event had a direct and significant impact on the ways they process (that is, organize, classify and use) the news stories they receive daily.

## **Method**

To test this hypothesis, a two-page questionnaire was mailed to 186 editors of African-American newspapers in 1991 and 1992. All the editors were black. The list of editors was compiled from the newspapers listed in the 1991 *Editor and Publisher International Year Book* because at the time this study was designed in 1991, a complete listing of all African-American newspapers in the United States was not available. The questionnaire had 23 items. To ascertain what personal, organizational and social factors significantly influence the editors' decisions on quantity and quality of coverage, questions were asked about the editors':

- personal interest in African news;
- foreign travel, including travel to Africa;
- years of working experience (as a journalist and as an editor);
- number of news wire services their newspapers subscribe to;
- number of pages they publish;
- space devoted to foreign and African news;
- frequency of publication;
- racial makeup of their circulation areas; and
- their papers' commitment to educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans.

The editors were also asked to rate the importance of each of the following 12 factors in their selection of African news for their newspapers:

- physical distance of event from the United States;
- U.S. involvement in the event;
- cultural relevance to United States;
- U.S. trade relations with the country in which the event occurs;
- readers' interest in the event;
- timeliness of the event;
- threat of the event to the United States;
- threat of the event to world peace;
- human interest of the event;
- economic development of the country in which the event occurs;
- military strength of country; and
- loss of lives and property.

The questionnaire included questions that asked for responses on five-point scales ranging from extremely interested to not at all interested; very much committed to not at all committed; and very important to not at all important.

One hundred and eighty-six questionnaires were mailed in November, 1991. Each had a cover letter and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Forty were returned as undeliverable. Thus, the study had an effective sample of 146 editors. A second wave of mailing was sent in January 1992; a third in February. Of the 146 possible respondents, 75 returned completed questionnaires, for a 51% response rate. Thirty-nine questionnaires were returned in the first wave; 10 in the second; and 26 in the third mailing.

### **Editor and Newspaper Profiles**

Seventy-five per cent of the respondents (56) had been in journalism for more than ten years. Fifty-two percent of them (39) had spent more than a decade as editors. For the most part, the newspapers are weeklies (64), two dailies, three bi-weeklies, three come out twice a week, two are published three times a week while one is a monthly. Thirty-four of the newspapers subscribe to a wire service, nine to two services, and one to three services.

Sixteen of the 75 newspapers publish fewer than 12 pages an issue, 32 of them 16 pages, while 27 newspapers have more than 20

pages. About 50% (37) of the newspapers devote less than one page per issue to foreign and African news. Twelve per cent (9) of the newspapers devote more than two pages to foreign and African news. Twelve of the 75 newspapers circulate in cities where African-Americans make up more than 50% of the populations. Thirty-one newspapers served cities where African-Americans are 26 to 50% of the population. Twenty-six papers are published in cities with 10 to 25% African-American population, while only six newspapers were in cities where African-Americans made up less than 10% of the population.

While 56 of the respondents had travelled outside the United States, 16 had been to Africa. When asked of their personal interest in African news, 51% (38) of the respondents were extremely interested, and another 41% (31) were also interested. Only two respondents said they were indifferent, and four indicated they were somewhat interested.

A further breakdown of the responses showed that all six of the newspapers in predominantly white cities (where African-Americans made up less than 10% of the population) devoted more than two pages to foreign and African news, subscribed to two or more wire services, and their editors had travelled to Africa. Interestingly, all the 12 newspapers circulating in cities where African-Americans made up more than 50% of the population devoted less than one page per issue to foreign and African news. Also, two of the newspapers subscribe to a wire service and only one editor had travelled to Africa.

On their newspapers' commitment to educating the public about the heritage of African Americans, 68% (51) of the respondents were very much committed; another 28% (21) said their papers were committed. One respondent respectively indicated not at all committed, somewhat committed, and could not tell.

Table 1 presents the mean rating for each of the 12 news factors and the percentage of editors indicating that the factor was very important in their selection of African news. The editors considered loss of lives and property very important in their selection of African news (mean = 4.36), followed by timeliness (mean = 4.32), readers' interest (mean = 4.26), human interest (mean = 4.22), and U.S. involvement (mean = 4.06). In fact, about five in 10 editors indicated loss of lives and property (52%) and readers' interest (52%) to be very important. Almost five in 10 editors regarded timeliness and human interest as very important. Also, slightly more than three in 10 editors (30.7%) rated U.S. involvement highly.

*Table 1: Importance of Factors in Editors' Selection of African News*

News Factor	Mean Rating	SD	% indicating Very Important	N
Loss of Lives and Property	4.36	.84	52.0	75
Timeliness	4.32	.73	45.3	75
Readers' Interest	4.26	1.00	52.0	75
Human Interest	4.22	.87	42.7	75
U.S. Involvement	4.06	.82	30.7	75
Cultural Relevance to United States	3.98	1.03	30.7	75
Economic Development of Country	3.98	1.13	38.7	75
Threat of Event to World Peace	3.97	1.12	37.3	75
U.S. Trade Relations	3.45	1.21	18.7	75
Threat of Event to United States	3.38	1.25	17.3	75
Military Strength of Country	2.82	1.23	6.7	75
Physical Distance from United States	2.46	1.29	5.3	75

\* The mean rating was based on a five-point scale, with 1 representing "not at all important" and 5 "very important."

The editors tend not to consider physical distance from the United States to be a factor in their African news selection (mean = 2.46). In fact, only 5.3% of the editors indicated physical distance to be of significant importance. Only 6.7% of the editors indicated military strength of country to be of significant importance while 17.3% rated threat of event to United States highly. Four factors - loss of lives and property, timeliness, readers interest, and human interest - averaged a rating above four. They also had relatively small standard deviations. This means the editors generally agreed that the four factors were very important.

A comparison of responses from editors in predominantly white and black cities showed that editors in white cities gave lower ratings to the importance of loss of lives and property, and economic development than their counterparts in predominantly black cities. They, however, rated the importance of timeliness, human interest and readers' interest higher than editors of newspapers in predominantly black cities.

Pearson correlation coefficients for questions referring to the editors' background, their newspaper characteristics and the 12 factors in news selection were calculated to discover the relationship between these variables. Eight of those correlations were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The longer the respondents had been journalists, the higher they rated the importance of economic development of a country in their news selection process ( $p < 0.016$ ). Respondent's years as editors had a negative correlation with threat of the event to United States. The longer the respondents had been editors, the lower they rated the importance of threat of the event to U.S. as news factor ( $p < 0.027$ ). On the other hand, respondents who had been editors, highly rated the importance of U.S. involvement in the event ( $p < 0.032$ ). Therefore the longer the respondents had been editors, the higher they rated the importance of U.S. involvement in the event in their news selection process.

The space given to African and foreign news correlated positively with readers' interest in the event ( $p < 0.036$ ). The more space their papers devoted to foreign and African news, the higher the editors rated the importance of readers' interest.

Respondents' interest in African news significantly correlated positively with human interest ( $p < 0.020$ ) and cultural relevance of event to United States ( $p < 0.012$ ). This implied that the more personal interest the editors had in African news, the higher they rated the importance of human interest and cultural relevance of event to United States in their news selection.

Commitment of the editors' newspapers to an African-American heritage education had a negative correlation with threat of event to United States. This implied that, the more their papers were committed to educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans, the lower the editors rated the importance of threat of event to United States in their news selection process ( $p < 0.032$ ). On the other hand, commitment of the editors' newspapers to an African-American heritage education significantly correlated positively with U.S. involvement in the event ( $p < 0.005$ ). The more commitment their papers showed in educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans, the higher the editors rated the importance of United States' involvement in the event in their news selection process. In other words, they showed the link, the multi-cultural bond, with being America and having an African ethnicity.

## **Discussion and Implications**

African-American editors' perceptions of news from or about Africa influence how they use the news. The editors perceive foreign news just like other Western editors. Their perceptions appear to hinge on individual organizational factors such as personal interest in African news, years of working experience, wire service subscription, space devoted to African and foreign news, and their papers' commitment to educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans. All these reflect habits of American perception.

Availability of funds is a critical factor in assessing how a newspaper operates. Editors of newspapers in predominantly white cities had travelled to Africa, their papers subscribed to more wire services and devoted more space to foreign and African news than their counterparts in predominantly black communities. In other words, having the money to travel to Africa and subscribe to wire service significantly influences how African-Americans newspaper editors report on African events. To the extent organizational and individual factors influence the editors' perceptions, this study validates the findings of Lacy (1987), and Weaver and Wilhoit (1986).

The importance of professionalism is indicated by the fact that the more experienced journalists in the sample thought the U.S. media should carry more news about Africa's economic progress. This seems to strengthen the multi-cultural bond of being American and having an African ethnicity. It is, however, not for the sake of Africa *per se*.

Of significance to Africa is the finding that African-American newspaper editors think that positive involvement of the United States

in the affairs of African countries would facilitate the education of the American public about the heritage of African-Americans. Thus, African countries have an additional reason to solicit U.S. aid. It seems to be a key to the door of press coverage.

This study also highlights the role information and education play in international and inter-racial relations. While editors whose newspapers showed more commitment to educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans down-played the importance of threat of an event to the United States in their news selection process, they, at the same time, thought that U.S. involvement in an event warranted adequate coverage. In other words, the editors are saying that international and inter-racial understanding can be improved by more, not less and hostile, reporting. This seems to validate the NWIO argument.

This study's findings have some implications for journalists working for black-oriented newspapers. The space devoted to African news needs to be increased to match the high degrees of personal interest in African events and commitment to educating the public about the heritage of African-Americans.

On another level, interest in Africa seems to be relatively inelastic. While Masmoudi, (1979) and other proponents of the NWIO wanted more coverage for the sake of developing countries, African-American editors seem to want more for their sakes and those of other African-Americans. Their interest, however, converge on presenting positive images of Africa.

So, despite an increase in interest, awareness and sophistication of African-related reporting in African-American newspapers, black editors are nonetheless American by orienting news from and about Africa primarily from the African-Americans' aims, while the NWIO sought to report Third World news as a right of the countries themselves. It seems the gate keeping practices of African-American newspaper editors are basically similar to those of other Western editors. This is not surprising given the similarity in their education, environment and newsroom socialization. The African-American newspaper editors are distinct, however, in subject matter of reporting.

For the NWIO, the results underscore the importance of training and work socialization of journalists. Though manifesting a clear affinity to and interest in Africa, editors of African-American newspapers still process news about Africa like other Western editors. It seems they cannot rise above the journalism values into which they were socialized either in U.S. schools or newsrooms.

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