‘Heart of darkness’-Western media rhetoric on Africa: Constructing and associating meaning over time.

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Abstract

This paper examines the British press coverage of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) between October -December 1996. It goes on to illustrate how within this discursive construction the metaphor “heart of darkness” was routinely used in news headlines and texts. It hypothesizes that over time, this specific metaphor has created a particular pattern of association and meaning as it has subsequently been routinely used as a kind of template in the coverage of African issues. It argues that the function of such representation in the context of international communication not only creates an ideological and cultural bias in Western audience perceptions of Africa but equally impacts on journalism itself by creating a media culture of laziness where journalists and headline writers resort to the metaphor of “heart of darkness” when reporting African issues. This metaphor is frequently employed to highlight a particular perspective and sometimes it is used to recast events that pertain to a particular country in terms of the entire African continent. Using such a metaphor to frame news about Africa, sustains and reproduces stereotypes whilst devaluing African issues.
Introduction

Following the end of the cold war, international news coverage in the West has been forced to search for a new framework in which to define itself as Western journalism characterised by a bifurcate view of the world in the cold war years has gradually changed. Hopkinson (1993:2) maintains that ‘US foreign policy during the cold war years set the agenda for the media, not by dictating anything, but by strongly influencing what people think about’. Thus the initiation of coverage of international affairs had to be related to the country’s foreign policy. However, in the current multi-polar world environment, the dynamics of news gathering and dissemination have become so complex that what the media cover is determined by factors such as a story’s news worthiness, its interest/importance to the audience, its significance to national interests, as well as the resources available to the media. At the same time, the end of the cold war rivalries has ushered a new era of security problems in Africa. Warfare between nations has ceded place to armed internal conflicts that increasingly have the tendency to spill across borders. This changing nature of conflicts around the world and their coverage by the mass media has stimulated theorising about the relationship between the media and foreign policy and policy makers. It has equally stimulated theorising about the nature of media coverage of such conflicts.

Cohen (1986: 156) suggests that ‘by affecting the perceptions of both policymakers and the interest groups and general public to whom they are responsive, the media influence the course of foreign policy’. Cohen equally notes that as sources of information, the British media also serve as channels of communication both internally and bilaterally. Internally, members of the government use the media to disclose information to hinder or advance
policies. Bilaterally, they are used in international negotiations to put pressure on other
governments or manipulate them. Elsewhere, Alleyne (1995) suggests that:

While the case of international news reveals the power of information in international
relations, this information is most powerful when combined with the power of
communication possessed by certain kinds of media in specific regions. These
media are the elite press, global television networks, and the international wire services
all based in the international power centres of North America and Europe. (Alleyne,
1995: 91)

Examining Western media coverage of conflicts is therefore significant because the media in
the West are placed in a position to play a significant role in shaping and mobilising diplomatic
and humanitarian initiatives respectively. Essentially, they are published in countries that
possess the resources to intervene in and resolve such conflicts.

Background to the Zaire conflict of 1996

Before an examination of media coverage of the crisis, it is imperative to gain an understanding
of the background to the internal conflict that broke out in 1996. Before the crisis, Zaire had
been faced with a high rate of unemployment, high inflation and a rapid deterioration of the
economy. Several existing ethnic tensions, secessionist tendencies in the Shaba and Kasai
province, corruption in national political culture, as well as state repression and violence further
compounded the political stability of the country. Before the outbreak of the civil war, the
country’s first ever multi-party parliamentary and presidential elections were scheduled for July 1997.

Following the Rwanda genocide of 1994, Zaire had played the unhappy host to more than one million Rwandan refugees (mainly Hutus) who fled the crisis in Rwanda. These refugees were composed of both perpetrators of the genocide and innocent civilians who were afraid of indiscriminate reprisals if they remained in Rwanda. The situation in the refugee camps had began deteriorating in 1995 when in spite of a massive and persistent communication campaign for the refugees to return home, members of the former Rwandan army alongside Hutu militia men in the camps began intimidating refugees into not returning to Rwanda.

The refugee crisis aside, eastern Zaire has traditionally experienced a distinct yet related ethnic tension in the areas around Masisi and Rutshuru where the Banyamulenge (Zairian Tutsis) are principally resident. For several years, the Banyamulenges had sought greater autonomy from Zaire’s central government. Their quest for self-rule had often resulted in small skirmishes in Eastern Zaire. In 1981, the Zairian government passed a new legislation on Zairian nationality that virtually barred the Banyamulenges from gaining Zairian nationality. This cultivated resentment and by 1993, a series of skirmishes instigated by the Banyamulenge over the question of Zairian citizenship began developing.

1 The then Head of State, President Mobutu Seseko had come to power through a coup in 1965 and had rule the country ever since.

2 The Banyamulenges belong to the broader family of Tutsis and are mainly pastoralists who migrated to Zaire from Rwanda and settled in the eastern part of the country mainly in the Uvira, Mwenga and most of the Masisi region hundreds of years ago and form a minority
But in October 1996 when the Banyamulenges were served with an expulsion order from the administration of Kivu Province in Eastern Zaire, the Banyamulenge feared a regional crusade to exterminate Tutsis and began a counter offensive. Originally aimed at heading off a mass slaughter of Tutsis by the Zairian army, the offensive soon gained momentum from other Zairian opposition movements. This created another set of refugees as indigenous Zairians equally began fleeing the area.

Taking advantage of the instability in the camps, and president Mobutu’s absence from the country, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) led by Laurent Desire Kabila, combined forces with the Banyamulenge and they began driving out Hutu extremists and genocide perpetrators in the refugee camps. However what began as clashes between ethnic groups fighting for political supremacy developed into a political crisis culminating in the ousting President Mobutu seven months later. The crisis inevitably drew the attention of the international media and once again Africa became a byword for rampant killings and suffering. News media coverage became mixed between the existing humanitarian crisis (the Rwandan refugees), the impending civil war, and the possibility for an intervention from the West. Diplomatic attempts to resolve the crisis not only exposed the declining influence of France in Africa but highlighted the complex nature of the relationship between the population of about 400,000. Their stay in the area has been characterised by various clashes with neighbouring ethnic groups.

3 Attitudes towards France in its former colonies was increasingly hardening up. France’s ‘Operation Turquoise’ during the genocide in Rwanda was a huge failure. Its suggestions for an international intervention in the Zaire conflict was considered in the West as attempts to support president Mobutu who was a long time French ally. See Hussein Solomon, (1997) *Some Reflections on the Crisis in Zaire* (Institute for Security Studies: Occasional Paper No. 15) and Mel McNulty, “Media Ethnicization and the International Response to War and Genocide in Rwanda” in Tim Allen and Jean Seaton, (Eds.) (1999), *The Media of Conflict.* London/New York: Zed Books
policy makers, the humanitarian organisations and the Western media—the so called “crisis triangle”⁴.

In examining British press coverage of the crisis this paper:

1. Outlines particular themes that emerged from news coverage of the conflict and the discursive framework used in constructing meaning

2. Adopting the approach of frame analysis, the paper goes on to explore the way that discourses around events in Zaire employed particular linguistic frames that came to outlive the event and has subsequently served as a dominant template of reference in news reporting of dissimilar and even unrelated events connected to Africa. In this regard, the paper examines the position of ‘heart of darkness’ as a metaphor in framing news about Africa in the British press. It argues that these particular constructions have implications for how Africa is perceived and also for the journalistic profession.

Such an analysis is valid considering that the media remain a major source of information about international affairs.

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⁴ For more on the nature of the relationship between humanitarian organisations, the media and governments in the West with regards to foreign policy, see Larry Minear, Colin Scott, and Thomas Weiss, (1996) The News Media, Civil War and Humanitarian Action. Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Reinner
**Theoretical Framework**

The framework adopted here is derived from the study of news discourse and that of news framing in news media content. The study of news media language has focused on varied aspects ranging from discourse patterns (van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b, Bell 1996 and Bell and Garrett, 1998) to issues such as the production of ideology in media discourse (Fowler, 1991). Communication researchers have equally researched the development of particular news frames. Entman, (1991) noted that news narratives contain news frames, which encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them. Keywords, concepts, metaphors and visual images all combine to make news frames and these can be detected by ‘analysing for particular words and images which appear in a narrative conveying thematically consonant meanings across media and across time’ (Entman, 1991:7). Entman’s view is that, in providing, repeating and reinforcing particular words and images that refer to some ideas and not others, news frames sometimes work to make certain ideas more salient in a text (Entman 1991). Sociologists, like Erving Goffman, have also considered framing as a process through which societies reproduce meaning (Goffman, 1974). And Fisher (1997) have subsequently advanced the concept of cultural frames defining this as loose, socially-generated structures in discourse which is both employed to organise information, and to develop ideological and policy arguments.

**Method**

Employing a discourse analytic approach, 199 news stories about the crisis in Zaire, appearing in *The Times* and *The Financial Times (FT)* for the period October 1996- January 1997;
were examined. As both a theoretical and methodological approach, discourse analysis seeks
to examine language and how it works to construct meanings. It examines the textual patterns
in a news story whilst taking account of the larger contexts in which these texts are produced
(Wang, 1995). The newspapers sampled represent different readerships and have a reputation
for dedicated foreign news coverage amongst the British quality press. The time frame
represents a period in which consistent media coverage brought world attention to the crisis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Front page (Major)</th>
<th>Front page (Filler)</th>
<th>Straight News</th>
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Both papers gave the conflict significant attention, following it up at first reluctantly early in
October 1996 and clustering coverage to a peak toward the end of October and for the
whole of November when there were discussions about a multinational force of intervention.

*The Times* carried major front page stories about the conflict in 9 editions of the paper during
the period examined. Perhaps this can be explained by the presence of a permanent

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5 For an analysis of television and tabloid coverage of the crisis, see Liza Beattie et al ‘The media and
Africa: Images of disaster and rebellion’, in Greg Philo (ed.) *Message Received: Glasgow Media Group
correspondent in the region. While *The Times* at first appeared to respond to the dramatic and sensational in the form of straight news stories concerning the unfolding of events, *The Financial Times* regularly combined its reporting of straight news stories with substantive commentary and critical analysis to give readers a sufficient background and better understanding of the various facets of the conflict.

**Themes of News Coverage**

Thematic analysis of news discourse is significant given that the theme is the most prominent and informational part of a news text. In newspaper journalism, the theme is usually expressed in the headline of the story. As a prominent feature of news texts, headlines both summarise and give the news story a focus. Through a thematic analysis, emerges the construction of a broader picture. ‘An analysis of the thematic pattern of these headlines reveals not only what is of primary concern to the producers and readers of these texts, but also what the preoccupation and common-sense assumptions are about the social order in which they occur’ (Brookes, 1995: 462). Such an examination of the latent aspects provides a deeper understanding of the most important information in the texts. The major themes that emerged from media coverage of the crisis included: the intricacies involved in international intervention in internal and regional conflicts, the complexity of ethnic relations in the Great Lakes region, the pernicious legacy of colonialism on the continent as well as the malign consequences of cold war rivalries on the continent and the consequences of UN oversights.
The case of humanitarian intervention

In late October when fighting broke out in Eastern Zaire, France, took the lead and called on its European counterparts to prepare for multinational intervention in the area. The French proposal was for a European Union intervention with mandate from the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). Coverage of the crisis that had hitherto concentrated on the intermittent fighting and the plight of refugees began focusing on the logistics of an international intervention force.


‘Canada offers to lead humanitarian force for Zaire’ (*The Times*, 13 November 1996)


‘France to form vanguard of Zaire mission: Doubts remain over role of 15,000-strong relief force’ (*The Financial Times*, 15 November, 1996)

‘Rwanda’s hard line over refugees adds to west’s indecision on military intervention’ (*The Financial Times*, 20 November 1996)

Taking into account the context of existing international power relations, the positioning of the West as an active agent in the above headlines, as well as the overall focus on international intervention, simultaneously positions and promotes a perception of the West as the active/key actor in Africa and Africa as the passive recipient of Western goodwill.

Whilst focusing on the need for international intervention, the newspapers also highlighted some of the intricacies involved in such an intervention. *The Times* emphasised the complexity involved in the French plan that involved keeping the refugees in Zaire rather than
help them return to Rwanda.\textsuperscript{6} This controversial nature of the French initiative was further compounded by the fact that French support for the former Hutu government had left a legacy of distrust among Tutsi army chiefs in Rwanda.\textsuperscript{7} \textit{The Financial Times} also questioned the proposal, arguing that 'the case of intervention was strongest two-and-a-half years ago in Rwanda, where the then government embarked on a deliberate genocide of the Tutsi minority, killing at least half a million people before it was overthrown by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front.'\textsuperscript{8} As a leading article in the paper noted, ‘Tutsis and the Zairean opposition blame France for backing Mobutu and the former regime in Rwanda, while Hutus and even some French policy makers see the Tutsis as protégés of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ powers (the US, UK and South Africa).’\textsuperscript{9} Again, this particular type of coverage reflects McNulty’s (1999) assertion that Western media coverage of African crisis is almost in direction proportion to the scale of direct Western involvement or the clamour for such involvement and that media imagery was significant to the promotion of ‘humanitarian’ reaction to the crisis in the Great Lakes area.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{The Times}, ‘Guts and Gloire’, 8 November 1996, pp. 21

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. Following the French led Operation Turquoise to stop the fighting in Rwanda in 1994, France had subsequently faced accusations that it was seeking to support its former Hutu allies. The French proposal was equally dismissed as springing from ‘a peculiarly French view of its world role in which intervention in Africa is seen as a traditional right as much as a moral duty’.\textsuperscript{7}

Ethnicity in the Great Lakes

An equally dominant perception in both papers was that the conflict was a result of ethnic hatred and intolerance between the Hutus and the Tutsis following a tilt in the existing ethnic composition in the region ever since Hutu refugees entered eastern Zaire following the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

‘Disaster looms as ethnic ware escalates’ (The Times, 23 October 1996)

‘Fears of ethnic war fuelled by clash in Zaire’ (The Financial Times, 24 October 1996)

‘Tribal war escalates on border of Zaire’ (The Times, 26 October 1996)

‘Tutsi rebels attack two Zaire towns’ (The Times, 27 October 1996)

‘Tutsi revolt starts race for control of Central Africa’ (The Times, 2 November 1996)

Although western media coverage of conflicts in Africa has been criticised for often oversimplifying these conflicts as ethnically driven (McNulty, 1999, Stevenson, 1999) an insight into the background of the conflict as outlined in the introduction demonstrates the inter-ethnic tensions that were in existence in the region. The Financial Times identified the principal objective of the extremists in the camps as being ‘to cleanse Zairean Tutsis from the

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hills, establishing a Hutu homeland from which to stage cross-border attacks aimed at destabilising the Tutsi-dominated regime in Rwanda’.10

Colonial Legacies and cold war rivalries

The failure to adequately contextualise events within appropriate historical and political contexts is another criticism of Western news coverage of conflicts in Africa cited by some authors (Stevenson, 1999). However, this analysis found that press attempts to construct a coherent background to the crisis in Zaire sort explanations by drawing on perspectives about post-cold war tensions and the legacy if colonial rule in the country. Both newspapers considered the disintegration of central government control in the country as an indirect fruit of cold war policies pursued for decades by the US and its allies. During the cold war era, the West had considered President Mobutu as a shield against the spread of communism in Africa11. Both papers also highlighted the legacy of colonial rule on the continent as a whole with The Financial Times noting that ‘as with so many African conflicts, colonialism has played a role in fuelling ethnic tensions in the area by establishing frontiers that cut across tribal and language barriers’.12


Although *The Times* upheld colonial divisions as one of the causes of the ethnic tensions facing the country, it is quick to defend the colonisers: ‘the West should resist the temptation to blame itself. Certainly colonial frontiers were drawn that took no account of ethnicity. But this is hindsight made deceptively simple; Zaire contains some 300 ethnic groups, so just where should lines have been drawn?’ Belgium’s colonial administration of Zaire was criticised as marked by economic exploitation and political neglect. These observations notwithstanding, *The Times* admitted that, the ‘...failure to train Congolese senior civil servants and the precipitous departure [of the Belgians] in 1960 plunged the country into immediate civil war. Zaire was born amid bloodshed and confusion’.13

**The United Nations and Aid Agencies**

Another theme that emerged from press coverage of the crisis was the role of humanitarian organisations and aid agencies. Particular focus was paid to the role of the UN in the region. As part of “global peacekeeping” the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) was already working in the area taking care of the Rwandan refugees. Both papers consistently condemned the UN’s role in the outbreak of the ethnic clashes between the Zairian Tutsis and the Hutus living in the camps. *The Financial Times* contended that anarchy could have been averted as far back as 1994 if the international community had taken actions to sort the genuine refugees from the Hutu extremists in the camps and subsequently evict the

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latter. The failure of the UN to neutralise the refugee camps by disarming the Interahamwe (Hutu) militias which controlled these camps; and by virtually keeping the camps in being, the organisation is considered as having nurtured a guerrilla movement whose genocidal tendencies was well known\textsuperscript{15}. By persistently sounding alarm calls predicting that tens of thousands of refugees were dying from hunger, poverty and a cholera outbreak, the aid agencies successfully manipulated the media into putting the crisis and the work of the agencies on the agenda.

Having outlined some of the themes that dominated the press coverage of the conflict, the next section of the paper goes to examine an element of the way the news coverage framed events. Frame analysis offers a means to identify and describe the power of communication texts (Entman, 1993). For Entman, framing involves both selection and salience in defining problems. Frames are manifested through ‘the presence or absence of certain key words, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements’ (Entman, 1993:52). Closely related to the concept of framing is the notion of media templates, which (Kitzinger, 2000) examined. Kitzinger argued that templates are ‘defined by their lack of innovation, their status as received wisdom and by their closure. Far from opening up historical reflection, they reify a kind of historical determinism which can filter out dissenting accounts, camouflage conflicting facts and

\textsuperscript{14} Michael Biyon, ‘West remains weary of going back into sinister quagmire’, \textit{The Times}, 15 November 1996, pp. 16.
promote one type of narrative’ (Kitzinger, 2000: 75-76). Even though both Entman and Kitzinger discuss framing and templates in the context of key events, this paper locates framing within the context of particular linguistic choices (stock phrases/metaphors) that are used to describe and explain events. Its use subsequently outlives the event in context but through a recurrent pattern of association, the frames eventually come to be associated with particular places or people. This following section identifies and describes a particular metaphor used in framing the crisis in Zaire.

‘Heart of Darkness’: Afro-pessimism in the Media

Although coverage of the conflict developed into specific themes that were often discussed from a number of perspectives, an examination of the linguistic choices and framing demonstrates how the press construction of this crisis was used to portray the whole of Africa as a continent steeped in conflict, discord, gloom, despair and instability. Despite the varying perspectives of the two newspapers on the conflict their respective narratives demonstrated a uniform frame of reference that consistently constructed a despairing perception of the African continent. Western stereotype about Africa as a place of evil was perpetuated particularly by headlines such as: ‘Continent plunges into new horror’ (The Times, 15 November 1996). ‘Africa’s Black Hole’ (The Times, 02/11/96), ‘West remains wary of returning to sinister quagmire’ (The Times 15/11/96). There is even a touch of witchcraft, which tie in previously identified Western perceptions of Africa as wrought with witchcraft and primitive customs

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(Brookes, 1999); ‘Voodoo terror haunts fleeing Tutsis’ (*The Times* 13/11/96). This trend was specifically noticeable in *The Times* which used narratives such as ‘a continent of despair’, ‘a land diced with anarchy’, ‘Africa’s black hole’, ‘Zaire and its wretched African neighbours’, ‘darkest Africa’, ‘horribly governed’, ‘the dark continent’ and ‘a black hole in the heart of Africa’.

The recurrent use of these phrases equally tended to recast what was essentially an affair of the Great Lakes region in terms of the entire African continent, making it appear as a place of doom constantly beleaguered by violence and political unrest. Such representations carry powerful associations and potentially confuse interpretations of the conflict. The function of such constructions is both stereotypical and reflects how colonialist perceptions continue to inform Western images of non-Western cultures (Stevenson, 1999). At the same time, it also informs justification for the West’s reluctance to intervene in Africa (Brookes, 1995). It has been observed elsewhere that news of conflicts in Africa not only inform Western audiences about possible threats to their affluence, but media use of stereotype characterisations are convenient for the Western media as it reinforces the superiority of being Western (Lange, 1984 quoted in de Beer et al, 1996). At the same time, this perpetuation of Western superiority presents a dynamic means of legitimising existing geo-political relations of dominance (Stevenson, 1999).

Throughout coverage of events in Zaire, both papers consistently applied the metaphor ‘heart of darkness’ as a dominant linguistic choice in the framing of events. For example: ‘In search of the heart of darkness’ (*The Times* 23/11/96), ‘Zaire’s ailing Mobutu leaves hole at the heart of darkest Africa’ (*The FT*, 05/10/96), ‘Save us from this African folly’ (*The Times* 27/10/96).
16/11/96). ‘Heart of darkness’ (The FT, 29/10/96), ‘Broken Heart of Africa’ (The FT 16/11/96). In fact in the space of four months two separate editorial comments in The Financial Times relating to events in Zaire were headlined ‘Heart of Darkness’ (The Financial Times 26 July 1996 and 29 October 1996). This particular type of representation was not only reflected in the headlines but in the texts as well with constant reference to darkness:

The metaphor ‘heart of darkness’ has its origins in Joseph Conrad’s novel of a similar title published in 1902. A tale of colonial adventure set in the Belgian Congo Heart of Darkness recounts the journey of a sea captain Marlow through the country to find a colonial ivory agent, Mr. Kurtz. Marlow’s encounters with savagery, primitive cultures provide the running theme in the book. Thus it can be asserted that this particular framing device is developed from and reflects a psycho-sociological legacy of slavery and colonialism by the West. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) also noted that the professional and organisational norms of journalists as well their cultural beliefs contribute to the construction of frames. In this instance, the context of such cultural beliefs can be located within the development of imperialist and neo-colonialist ideologies derived from the legacy of European colonial rule in Africa. Perhaps the metaphor ‘heart of darkness’ could reasonably be considered to have befitted the particular circumstance of the war in Zaire (Congo).

Nevertheless, with the benefit of an examination of the subsequent references that employ this particular metaphor, one can identify its recurrent use in the British media coverage of Africa demonstrating how it wheels and moulds perceptions about African issues.
Examining such framing devices is crucial in developing an understanding of how meaning is embedded in texts and operates through its recurrent use over time. For example:

‘Into Africa’s **heart of darkness**’ (*The Sunday Times*, 3rd June 2001) (story about an Aid agency in Ghana)

‘A city returns to the **heart of darkness**. Those who dare go out are the reason others stay indoors’ (*The Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 2000) (Story about Sierra Leone)

‘Light in the **heart of darkness**’ (*The Sunday Telegraph* 2 April 2000) (Mass suicide in Uganda)

‘Hope in the **heart of darkness**’ (*The Guardian*, 3 April 1999) (Civil war in the Great Lakes region)

‘Tourist massacre plunges **heart of Africa into deeper darkness**’ (*Sunday Times* 9 March 1999) (Massacre of tourists in Uganda)

‘Little sign of light in Monty’s **heart of darkness**’ (*The Times* 8 January 1999) (Wars in Africa)

‘In the **heart of Conrad’s darkness**’ (*The Daily Telegraph* 12 February 2002) (Tony Blair’s trip to Africa).

‘Bright spark in the **heart of darkness**’ (The Sunday Times, 18 January 1998) (story about ‘a white-middle class Yorkshireman’ who had been made chief in one Ghanaian village)
These are some examples that demonstrate the varied contexts/events in which ‘heart of darkness’ is used, and suggests a uniform frame of reference that constructs Africa as a place of despair. Owing to its association with previous events (like the crisis in Zaire) such framing is likely to reactivate and reproduce particular images in audiences.

Using black or darkness as an adjective in depicting Africa connotes fear and evil (Chavis, 1998). The routine use of this frame reinforces stereotypical representations of Africa, while at the same time, providing a framework within which the journalists make sense of events.

The consequence of the frame ‘heart of darkness’ within the respective contexts of existing unequal power relations between the West and Africa, Western news coverage and public opinion about Africa is an understanding that light and civilisation is a Western preserve, and that such concepts cannot penetrate into Africa. Its casual use in reference to different events and issues related to Africa suggests a continent that is bad and possibly mad, a rationale which McNulty (1999: 13) sums up as follows: ‘they are mad, we are sane, we must save them from ourselves’. At the same time such framing tend to reproduce imperialist ideologies that seek to repress any hint of a similarity between the North and South (Stevenson, 1999).

A significant body of analysis of racist discourse in the European press has examined the construction of ethnic minorities and foreigners (Van Dijk, 1988a and 1991). An examination of the operation of similar discourses in Western news coverage of Africa can significantly illustrate the interrelationships between racist discourses and possibly highlight how they are mutually reinforced (Brookes, 1995). This particular framing narrative simultaneously
produces an ‘inherent, automatic and culturally programmed racism about Africa and African societies which can distort the interpretive lens’ (McNulty, 1999:273). It is important to challenge such reflex framing for it is not only a blind condemnation that clearly limits the scope for rational analysis, but potentially impacts on how Africa and Africans are perceived. In an increasingly competitive environment in which media outlets have rapidly cut back on foreign news coverage in general and Africa in particular, the easy journalism of ‘heart of darkness’ provides ready-made headlines for news about Africa. Again this exemplifies the lack of innovation that is characteristic of media templates (Kitzinger, 2000).

Conclusions

This paper has identified and examined the British press coverage of the Zaire conflict of 1996. Despite the preoccupation of the papers with domestic rather than foreign news, the conflict in Zaire received a significant amount of attention in the British media. News reports, commentaries and analyses of the crisis, highlighted the failures of the UN, the legacy of colonial rule and the consequences of cold war rivalries in Zaire. Focus on the conflict as ethnically driven was equally central to its representation in the British press. Despite the considerable amount of attention the crisis received, coverage of the events remained prejudiced and biased in Western stereotypic representations of Africa. Coverage demonstrated a sense of frustration not only with Zaire but framed the continent of Africa as a homogenous block. The treatment built on and rearticulated pre-existing Western media negative and pessimistic discourses of Africa as a continent of darkness and uncivilised people-‘a land diced in anarchy’. The nature of such media representations outline here, not
only sustain the stereotype that African’s are unable to efficiently govern themselves, but also vindicate Western colonial rule on the continent.

Identifying the metaphor ‘heart of darkness’ which was frequently employed in news coverage of the crisis in Zaire, the paper has highlighted a particular pattern of constructing and associating meaning over time as ‘heart of darkness’ has ceased to be a reference point just for the Congo. In highlighting its occurrence within British press coverage of African news in subsequent years, this paper has demonstrated the readiness with which the British broadsheets frame different events in Africa using the metaphor of ‘heart of darkness’. For the media, this particular framing device provides ready-made headlines. It not only stereotypes African countries but risks obscuring meaning and understanding of events in Africa altogether. However, its predominant association with events in Africa, and its meaning understood within the context of discourses of slavery and colonisation, reproduces and reinforces racist discourses and emphasizes a view of White Europeans as superior and civilized and Africans as a homogenous group of uncivilised people who are incapable of self-government.
References


