



# Same old story?

**African disease stereotypes persist  
in Covid-19 media coverage**

**Maame Nikabs and Mphathisi Ndlovu**

Academic Fellows Report  
June 2022



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## About this series

The Academic Fellows program has brought together 11 African academics based around the continent and the Diaspora to investigate Africa's narrative across a range of mediums and topics that include social media, arts reinstitution, the impact of Covid-19, and spoken word poetry. The program brings academic rigour and an evidence-based approach to Africa No Filter's work to understand and shift harmful and stereotypical narratives about Africa. It forms part of a larger research agenda to understand narrative and its impact. It is co-funded by Facebook and supported by The African Union, AUDA-NEPAD and the New York-based Africa Centre.

## About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that is working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. The donor collaborative is funded by Ford Foundation, Bloomberg, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Luminate, Open Society Foundations, Comic Relief, the Hilton Foundation, the British Council and the Hewlett Foundation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Representations influence policy, investments, and perceptions, and so they matter.

Representations are particularly key for Africa, a continent marked by negative, stereotypical disease narratives, for example narratives about HIV/AIDS and Ebola. Informed by this, we undertook a comparative analysis of Covid-19 articles published by Western and African media houses from March 2020 to March 2021. We complemented this with an analysis of messages about Covid-19 in Africa, made by key Western and African media and development organisations.

Using corpus linguistics tools and critical discourse analysis, we undertook a quantitative and a qualitative enquiry to understand how

media, global and African organisations framed Covid-19 in Africa. While the quantitative analysis showed a variation in media focus, the detailed qualitative analysis revealed the continued perpetuation of deep-seated, negative historical disease narratives or frames of Africa in all our data sets, despite African countries' successes in containing the spread of the disease. In Covid-19 coverage, we found homogenous representation of the continent, reliance on quotes by Western leaders and experts, lack of balance, minimal use of African local sources and lived experiences, and limited agency assigned to African governments in handling and dealing with the pandemic.

Below are some of the key insights from the report.



# KEY INSIGHTS

## 1 Western media speculated about negative Covid-19 African outcomes:

The media analysed in this study used words like “could”, “will almost certainly”, “will turn into” to prophesy doom for the continent, especially expressing doubt that the hospital infrastructure on the continent could cope.

## 2 The portrayal of Africa as diseased persisted:

Global media had reported that Africa would be worst hit and expressed surprise that Africa did not reach the record high death rates that occurred in Western countries. Journalists were at pains to make sense of this “mystery”, for example, suggesting the low numbers were due to Africans being afraid to go to hospital.

## 3 Many development agencies also used negative stereotypes:

Many publications from development agencies focused on barriers to the response to the epidemic in Africa, such as widespread poverty, lack of education, poor infrastructure, and irregular power supply. They further lamented a low test per case ratio and portrayed the continent as a charity case. Fears were also expressed about socio-economic impacts of Covid-19, such as job losses, economic contraction, and recession.

## 4 African media focused on government handling of the pandemic:

African media mainly highlighted the African governments' agency in dealing with Covid-19. Some articles also reported on the mishandling of Covid-19 funds. However, within countries, different news sources sometimes reported differently, for example, in Zimbabwe, NewsDay typically reported on poor governance and corruption, while The Herald reported positively on actions being taken in the country.

## 5 African media chastised Africans about their behaviour:

Many of the African media houses portrayed Africans as quarantine violators and fugitives who were breaching Covid-19 regulations and infecting family members, thereby spreading the virus.

## 6 Western media continued to represent Africa as a single entity:

Just as with global coverage of Ebola and HIV/AIDS, the Western media outlets we studied continued to report on Africa as a homogenous entity and did not give attention to how Covid-19 was impacting differently in different countries – albeit that it gave some attention to South Africa, where death rates were high.



# INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) broke out in Wuhan, China. The first case in Africa was recorded in Egypt on 14 February 2020. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Against this backdrop, we conducted a study to analyse the African and Western media coverage of the pandemic in Africa. Media representations “matter”, as they shape audiences’ perceptions of Africa<sup>1</sup>. Further, media framing has “implications for global flows of finance, trade and tourism”<sup>2</sup>. Based on a comprehensive analysis of over 1 200 news stories from Western and African media, this report identifies and discusses the dominant frames of news about Covid-19 in Africa. Africa has “historically suffered in a multitude of ways” from negative depictions by Western media<sup>3</sup>.

## 1.1 COVERAGE OF AFRICAN PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES IN WESTERN NEWS MEDIA

All countries experience epidemics. Because such events are negative, they are considered as newsworthy, and hence receive wide coverage in the media. However, the coverage of disease in Africa has generally been stereotypical. Previous studies of media coverage of Ebola in then-Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC) in 1995, showed that Canadian, US and British media reassured the public and allayed the fears by othering Africans<sup>4</sup>. Media coverage in the US also perpetuated “Ebola-is-African, Ebola-is-all-over-Africa, and Africa-is-a country” narratives<sup>5</sup>.

Recent literature<sup>6</sup> on how the media covers diseases in Africa analysed news coverage of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Mali in 2014. Studies found that Western news media coverage of Ebola perpetuates a narrative that the disease is a “distinctly African problem”<sup>7</sup>, ravaging the lives of “faceless and nameless Africans”<sup>8</sup>. The US media also described the disease as the “homogenized other”, “scary” and “African”, which led to the “explicit discrimination and stigmatization of Africans living in the United States and those returning from West Africa, including non-Africans”<sup>9</sup>.

Western media use the technique of “othering” to “Africanise the disease”<sup>10</sup>, and assure the West that they were “safe from the disease”<sup>11</sup>. Othering is a discursive process by which the powerful groups define the subordinate groups, using inferior characteristics<sup>12</sup>. In othering the situation in Zaire, the media sought to “allay the fears aroused by Ebola”<sup>13</sup>. Africans offering care and mobilising resources in the fight against Ebola were

overshadowed by images of “white saviours”<sup>14</sup>, while the voices of marginalised communities were “almost entirely missing from mediated narratives of Ebola” in USA media<sup>15</sup>.



In their study on the news coverage of Ebola, Zhang and Matingwina<sup>16</sup> conclude that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) shifted from the traditional approach of negative stereotypes towards constructive journalism narratives. They recommend constructive journalism as a journalistic approach that can be used to cover crisis such as Ebola in Africa. Constructive journalism allows journalists to not only expose vices such as corruption, but also explore solutions<sup>17</sup>, celebrate accomplishments, and identify heroes<sup>18</sup>.

Using this approach, some news stories were also narrated from the perspectives of “survivors and medical staff who put their lives at risk”<sup>19</sup>. Thus, the reportage





sought to understand the problem from the perspectives of affected communities. Another topic covered, using the constructive journalism approach, was the vast investment opportunities in Africa, despite an Ebola outbreak<sup>20</sup>.

A study of Ebola narratives in US newspapers (*New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*) indicates the dominance of human interest, conflict and action frames<sup>21</sup>. Narratives from US and UK media (*New York Times* and *The Guardian*, respectively) on the Ebola outbreak indicate an emphasis on Africans' limitations in dealing with the crisis<sup>22</sup>. Stereotypes of Africa as war-torn, diseased and a charity case were presented by Western media<sup>23</sup>.

However, in a recent study, Gabore<sup>24</sup> examined the Western and Chinese media representations of Africa in Covid-19 news coverage. His research findings on Cable News Network (CNN), BBC and France24 indicate that Western media coverage of "African events presently is not predominantly negative"<sup>25</sup>, and representations of Africa in Chinese media were "uncommonly affirmative"<sup>26</sup>.

Although not recent, the coverage of HIV/AIDS in Africa has also generated scholarly interest. The framing of HIV/AIDS in Africa by Western media has centred on the "behavioural frame"<sup>27</sup>. Stereotypes of "African sexuality", promiscuity, untenable sexual urges, poverty and ignorance have been reproduced by the Western media<sup>28</sup>. In the late 1980s, the UK media portrayed HIV/AIDS as "something to do with Africanness and blackness itself"<sup>29</sup>. An analysis of the *New York Times'* representations of HIV/AIDS in Africa between 2001 and 2004 shows the prevalence of the human disaster frame (prevalence of HIV, deaths from the virus etc.)<sup>30</sup>.

HIV/AIDS was framed in Western media as a "black" problem<sup>31</sup>. *Time* magazine's framing of HIV/AIDS in Africa was centred on the depiction of bodies as "diseased" and "clean" in a racialised and gendered manner<sup>32</sup>. An analysis of 26 images taken in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana by *Time* in 2001 suggests that race is constructed as the "marker of disease" as HIV/AIDS is portrayed as "only black"<sup>33</sup>.

## 1.2 COVERAGE OF PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES IN AFRICAN NEWS MEDIA

Many scholars, from different perspectives and areas, have extensively studied the coverage of health pandemics in Africa by African media. Using a comparative approach, Antwi Boasiako<sup>34</sup> focused on the lived experiences of journalists in Sierra Leone and Ghana during their coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. He observed an "African approach" to the reporting of the health pandemic. His findings reveal that journalists adopted country specific responses in their coverage, assigning agency – often non-existent in Western coverage. The study suggests a difference in how African and Western journalists reported on Ebola in Africa, as we suggest is the case for Covid-19.

Adopting a similar focus, Winters et al<sup>35</sup> investigated the roles and experiences of Sierra Leonean journalists in reporting about the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak. From their interview data, Winters et al. found that the role of reporters evolved from being sceptics at the start of the outbreak to becoming instructors at the end of the pandemic. According to these reporters, this shift can be attributed to the training that they received.

Mayrhuber et al<sup>36</sup> analysed other important aspects of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia: discrimination and stigmatisation. News articles published by a dominant newspaper in Liberia (the *Liberian Daily Observer*) informed the public on social consequences of surviving the virus, which included stigmatisation and discrimination. Mayrhuber et al observed that coverage of social consequences was comprehensive and well-balanced. However, Humphries et al<sup>37</sup> reported that journalists did not scrutinise the quality of interventions introduced by the government or non-government organisations. Similar observations have been made by other scholars<sup>38</sup> who have attributed it to "brown envelope"

journalism (a practice that involves freebies, bribery, material gifts or other incentives given to journalists by sources).

From the perspective of citizen journalism, some researchers<sup>39</sup> examined digital news coverage by Africans of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. While Western coverage of the crisis focused on the theme of fear and helplessness, African citizen journalists demanded accountability and action from government. These demands suggest the deepening of democracy.

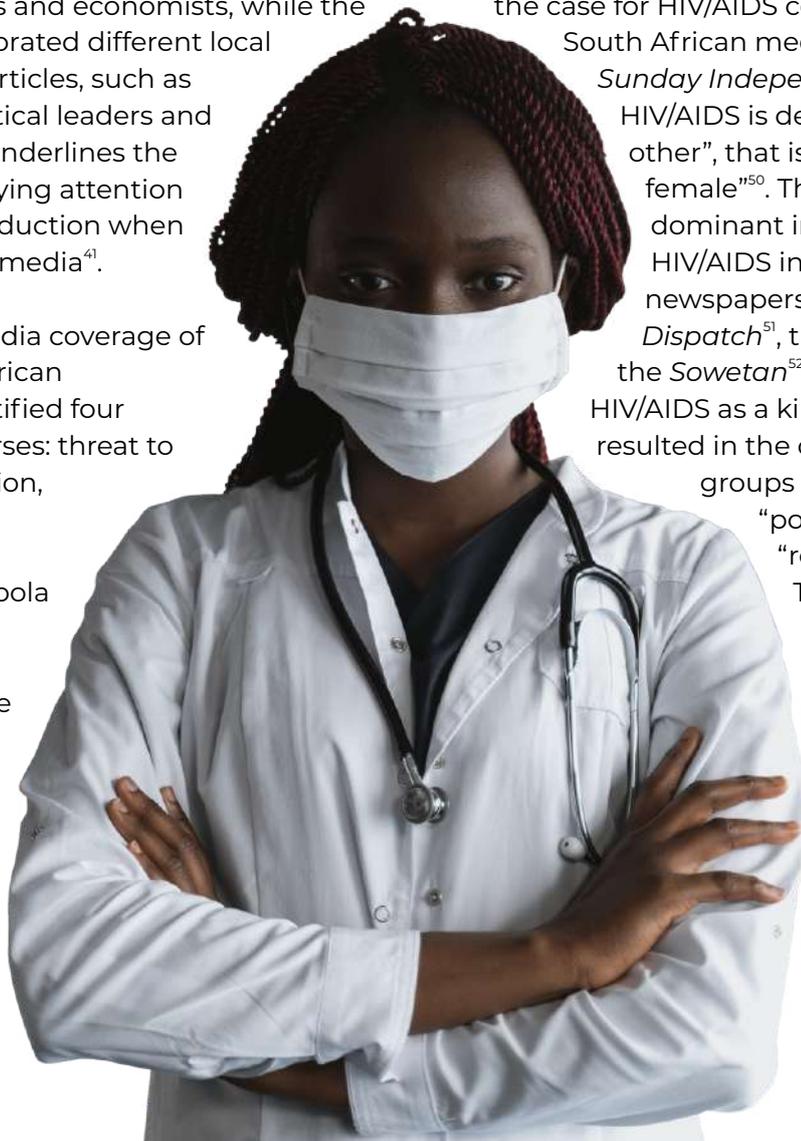
As is relevant to our research, Humphries et al point out that geographic contexts can shape reporting on the same event<sup>40</sup>. Our content analysis of articles published in two newspapers, *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) and *Vanguard* (Nigeria), revealed differences in coverage in relation to topic and content as well as sources consulted. *The Globe and Mail* emphasised the security and humanitarian aspects of Ebola, and the need for international intervention, while the *Vanguard* focused on a local solution to controlling the disease highlighting the roles of the nation, people, and government. *The Globe and Mail* quoted expert voices such as infectious disease specialists and economists, while the *Vanguard* incorporated different local voices into their articles, such as religious and political leaders and merchants. This underlines the importance of paying attention to contexts of production when investigating the media<sup>41</sup>.

A study of the media coverage of Ebola in South African newspapers identified four dominant discourses: threat to humanity, predation, invasion, and conspiracy<sup>42</sup>. The construction of Ebola as a predator was meant to induce fear. The discourse of invasion was used to frame Ebola as an “invading entity” moving “from country to country” and

causing massive devastation<sup>43</sup>. Within this narrative, Africans were blamed for “kindling” and spreading the virus, potentially impacting on xenophobia<sup>44</sup>. The threat to humanity discourses reinforced “colonial hegemony” by projecting “Africa’s deviation from Western norms” as the “cause of Ebola”<sup>45</sup>.

In their news coverage of Ebola, *This Day* (Nigeria), *Concord Times* (Sierra Leone) and *The Inquirer* (Liberia) emphasised local efforts and the broader implications of the public health crisis<sup>46</sup>. Through the publication of news stories on commerce and travel restrictions, the newspapers highlighted the impact of Ebola on Africa’s economy and general well-being<sup>47</sup>. Thus, Ebola was seen as a threat to the continent’s socio-economic development. Further, the mentioning of health workers, volunteers and local organisations in news stories highlighted local efforts in the fight against the Ebola outbreak<sup>48</sup>. Whilst the Western media (*New York Times* and *The Guardian*) framed Africans as “poor”, “diseased” and a “charity case”<sup>49</sup>, the African media showed African agency.

Although there were differences in the Ebola frames in the West and African media, this is not the case for HIV/AIDS coverage. An analysis of South African media (*Mail & Guardian*, and *Sunday Independent*) shows that HIV/AIDS is depicted as a disease of “the other”, that is, the “poor, black and female”<sup>50</sup>. The rhetoric of war is dominant in representations of HIV/AIDS in South African newspapers such as the *Daily Dispatch*<sup>51</sup>, the *Mail & Guardian* and the *Sowetan*<sup>52</sup>. The personification of HIV/AIDS as a killer and enemy has resulted in the othering of certain social groups as the “diseased body”, or “polluters”, “infectors”, and “reservoirs of HIV/AIDS”<sup>53</sup>. Thus, the black African body is constructed as the “diseased body”<sup>54</sup>. Within the war discourses, the media tend to portray some social actors as “innocent victims” (infants, rape survivors, etc.) and others as the “guilty party” (HIV positive men, gay men



etc.)<sup>55</sup>. The coverage of HIV/AIDS in Ugandan mainstream media (2000–2004) was characterised by “HIV-prevention”, “action”, “victims”, and “solutions” frames<sup>56</sup>.

### 1.3 REPRESENTATIONS OF PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES IN GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS

Scholarship on Ebola coverage is not limited to media publications. Rausch’s linguistic ethnography investigation of Global Emerging Pathogen Treatment Consortium (GET) on the effectiveness of Ebola communication reveals that “fighting a global pandemic starts with the local”<sup>57</sup>. His analysis highlights the importance of a contextualised approach to global health crisis. He adds that “one-size-fits” all approach adopted by the West in Ebola communication hampered the effectiveness of the messages in Africa; coverage should take account of local circumstances and not generalise.

Allgaier and Svalastog<sup>58</sup> concur that in public health crises such as the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa, it is important for stakeholders to formulate and implement health communication strategies that consider local contexts, especially culture. Due to the lack of appreciation of contextual issues, the Western media coverage of Ebola in West Africa had neo-colonial undertones. African locals were portrayed as “backward and irrational individuals”<sup>59</sup>.

Similarly, Sumo *et al*<sup>60</sup> emphasised the need to design “culturally-appropriate” risk communication strategies during health emergencies. The authors, who were commissioned by the WHO regional office for Africa, made this recommendation after reviewing risk communication of meningococcal septicaemia and meningitis in post-Ebola Liberia. According to them, lessons learnt helped in the adaptation and design of effective communication strategies. Although not the focus of our study, we discuss risk communication by organisations such as the WHO.

### 1.4 REPRESENTATIONS OF COVID-19 IN THE MEDIA

The current global pandemic, Covid-19, has been extensively covered by the media and a few scholars have examined its coverage. Wahl-Jorgensen studying English-

language newspapers worldwide posits that news articles about Covid-19 use the words “fear” or “afraid”<sup>61</sup>. She adds that journalists used “fear language” in their reports and thus contributed to fear among people about the virus. Addressing the role of language in communicating about Covid-19, Rausch<sup>62</sup> recommends four strategies that can foster solidarity and thus result in the effectiveness of key messages. He points out that using locally dominant languages, avoiding blame, invoking shared backgrounds, and using pronouns sensitively avoids othering and thus creates a connection between the sender and addressee<sup>63</sup>.

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp play an integral role in public health messaging<sup>64</sup>. Some African governments such as in Kenya and South Africa are using their official Twitter handles to disseminate information about the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>65</sup>. At the same time, citizens are using the same social platforms to demand accountability from their governments.

In countries such as Tanzania, disinformation and misinformation proliferated on social media about the pandemic because news outlets simply reproduced “government press statements about the pandemic”<sup>66</sup>. Similarly, in Ethiopia, media relied too heavily on government officials as news sources for Covid-19 stories<sup>67</sup>. Because of the over-reliance on government, coverage rarely quoted African scientists to help interpret “the pandemic in a relatable local vocabulary, rooted in local everyday practices and experiences”; however, scientists should have been at the “forefront of providing distinctly local and relatable interpretations of the pandemic”<sup>68</sup>.

Further, local media coverage of Covid-19 was constrained in Burundi due to a repressive political environment<sup>69</sup>. Burundians had to turn to international media organisations for news, which highlighted the lack of political will by the government to address the public health crisis<sup>70</sup>. Covid-19 also has had severe impact on media health and free expression in North Africa, as highlighted by Farmanfarman<sup>71</sup>. In countries such as Algeria and Morocco, the “pandemic has



offered a cover” for governments to curtail press freedom and enact repressive media legislation<sup>72</sup>.

Olijo<sup>73</sup> analysed how Nigerian media reported on the global race towards developing a Covid-19 vaccine, paying particular attention to how African scientists were featured in news reports. Research findings from two television stations and two newspapers demonstrate that African scientists received little attention in news coverage<sup>74</sup>. Olijo posits that the “Nigerian media do not have confidence in African scientists and their ability to develop a vaccine that will be useful for combating Covid-19”<sup>75</sup>.

Institutions like the WHO play a vital role in global health emergencies. However, much is

not known about the discourses of such organisations, although they feed directly into media reports and risk communication. Ho, Li and Whitworth<sup>76</sup> observed a difference in the speeches of the director general of the WHO, pertaining to Covid-19 and the Ebola outbreak, and argue that bias and partiality were evident. While the director general praised the Chinese government for its efforts in reducing the spread of Covid, he represented African countries as being “unprepared” in their fight to minimise the spread of the virus. Examining the discourses of institutions like the WHO contributes to our understanding of institutionalised biases against African countries and how these contribute to the “othering” of the continent.

# METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Our research builds on a growing trend towards the use of quantitative software tools for the study of discourses. These software tools enable researchers to analyse frequency of words and keywords, which provides them with quantitative insights (Baker et al., 2008). We also used critical discourse analysis to describe and interpret the results<sup>77</sup>. The culture and society that inform and influence the production and consumption of texts were considered crucial and necessary for the interpretation of texts<sup>78</sup>.

## 2.2 DATA AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Using the corpus analysis software LancsBox, we obtained word lists totalling 89 338 words from 127 texts from the Western media corpus (BBC and CNN), and 56 8251 words from 1 107 texts from the African media corpus.

To investigate the frames of Covid-19 in Africa, we examined state-owned and privately owned newspapers published in five African countries\*. We then selected newspapers from each of the African countries: *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghana Report* (Ghana), *The Citizen* and the *The Guardian* (Tanzania), *News24*, and *Daily Sun* (South Africa), *The Herald* and *NewsDay* (Zimbabwe), and *Daily News Egypt* and *Egypt Independent* (Egypt). Additionally, we analysed statements and reports issued by the WHO, Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET), and the African Union (AU).

Purposive sampling enabled us to make the deliberate and conscious decision to focus on a one-year period (March 2020 – March 2021) as the scope of the study. March 2020 was selected because it is when the WHO declared Covid-19 a pandemic. The year covers both the first and second waves of Covid-19.

Search box features of the selected news websites were utilised to mine data from the vast number of news stories on Covid-19. We used keywords such as “Covid”, “coronavirus”, “Covid-19” and “Africa” to identify relevant articles. (Some news sites included relevant categories such as “Covid-19”, “Covid-19 in SA”, and “Coronavirus Watch”.) We selected only news reports related to Covid-19 and Africa and excluded from the sample those not related to Africa. In our selection, we considered news genres such as editorials, opinion pieces and news stories.



\*This broad classification is similar to the broad distinction between broadsheets and tabloids in the US and UK.

# FINDINGS

This study examines narratives produced in Western and African media, related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Africa. In *Section 3.1*, we provide a quantitative analysis of Covid-19 stories. In *Section 3.2*, we provide a qualitative analysis of how the pandemic was represented in selected news media and global institutions.

## 3.1 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 STORIES

The quantitative analysis focused primarily on investigating how Africa is framed by Western and African media. Quantitative results of frequency<sup>†</sup> and collocation are presented in *Tables 1* and *2* respectively. (Results exclude the most frequent words – “the”, “of”, “to”, “for”, etc. – which are classified as functional or grammatical words.) The “frequency” column reports raw frequencies<sup>‡</sup>, while the percentage (%) column shows the proportion of the entire corpus that a particular word contributes to an entire corpus, and the last column reports normalised frequencies<sup>§</sup>. Frequency shows word counts and can reveal the most often used words of each newspaper, thus showing or highlighting any ideological differences<sup>79</sup>. It not only provided word counts but also give an indication about the topic, style or genre.

An analysis of most news coverage in the global media outlets included in this study supports our hypothesis, as well as previous research<sup>80</sup>, which shows that Africa is generally represented as a homogenous entity, with little or no variation. The fact that the most frequently used words in the BBC and CNN corpora were “Africa” (599), “South” (472) and “African” (264) (see *Table 1*) exemplifies this narrative. Specific African countries were only mentioned at the end of most of the articles, and thus backgrounded. South Africa was the most extensively covered country during this period, because of its high number of Covid-19 cases and the variant that originated there. At the beginning of the pandemic, Tanzania also ranked high in the BBC and CNN corpus (see *Section 3.2* for a detailed discussion).

*Table 1: Top 10 lexical items in the BBC and CNN corpora*

No	Word	Frequency	%	Normalised Frequencies
1	Africa	559	0.91	6.7
2	Covid-19	474	0.72	5.3
3	South	472	1.16	5.2
4	People	372	0.87	4.2
5	Heath	362	0.86	4.1
6	Coronavirus	318	0.95	3.6
7	Cases	298	1.22	3.3
8	Countries	297	1.45	3.3
9	African	264	1.12	2.9
10	Virus	248	0.98	2.8

*Table 2: Top 10 lexical items in the African media corpora*

No	Word	Frequency	%
1	Covid-19	4 522	0.78
2	Health	2 703	1.18
3	Cases	2 539	1.69
4	People	1 822	1.30
5	Coronavirus	1 573	1.35
6	Government	1 377	1.58
7	Country	1 377	1.34
8	Africa	1 325	2.61
9	Virus	1 273	1.53
10	Pandemic	1 152	1.46

The texts also illustrate the efforts of government and their failures in handling Covid-19 funds. Reading ‘government’ in context shows reference

<sup>†</sup>Frequency is the number of times a particular word appears.

<sup>‡</sup>The number of counts.

<sup>§</sup>The frequency of particular words was divided by the total size of a corpus in which they occur and multiplied by 1 000 because the 2 corpora differ in size.

to funds that were misappropriated in different African countries. The term “pandemic” is used interchangeably with “Covid-19” or “coronavirus” in both corpora. However, while “Covid-19” or “coronavirus” rank high in both corpora, the use of the terms “government” and “pandemic” is high in the African media corpora only (see Table 2). A closer reading highlights the agency that the media in African countries assign to their various governments, regarding how to handle and deal with the effects of the virus.

### Examination of collocates

Collocation is important for discourse analysis, because the company a word keeps (its position relative to other words) reveals presuppositions that underpin its use. Mutual information score (MI) was used to derive collocates of the search terms for each of the corpora separately<sup>81</sup>. MI measures the association between words based on ‘effect size’. It therefore does not take into account the frequency of a word. MI is important because it reveals the patterns around the subject under investigation. A weakness of MI, however, is its bias towards low frequency words. Different collocates for the search terms were generated for global and African corpora, based on our emphasis on paying attention to context and how it informs and influences media narratives and frames. Collocates presented in see Tables 3 and 4 show words that occurred five or more times, within a span of five words or more to the left or right of the search terms “Covid-19” and “coronavirus”. Words that appeared near to “Covid-19” and “coronavirus” indicate the framing of the pandemic.

The frequency (collocates) column shows the number of times the word occurs with Covid-19 or coronavirus. The other frequency (corpus) column indicates the texts in which it occurs.

Covid-19 and coronavirus were largely framed by the African media as something dangerous and catastrophic, indicated in the frequency (collocates) column by collocates such as “deadly” (52), “dies” (9), “dreaded” (9), “alleviation” (18), “repercussions” (6), “scare” (6), “curb” (41) and “taskforce” (17). Overall, the collocates indicate a narrative that painted a gloomy picture of a

disease that negatively impacted the lives of many and necessitated extraordinary measures to keep in check. For example, the *Daily Sun* in South Africa used the term “deadly”:

*A progressive decline in vigilance will pose a deadly threat to our well-being as we ignore cardinal rules of safety and survival*<sup>81</sup>.

*Daily News Egypt* used “repercussions”: “Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi asserted, on Saturday, the importance of strengthening joint African efforts to combat the repercussions of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the continent’s economy, health, and security”<sup>82</sup>.

Table 3: Top collocates of “Covid-19” in the African media corpus

No	Word	Stats	Frequency (collocates)	Frequency (corpus)
1	drops	6.7	6	6
2	disseminate	6.5	5	6
3	obtaining	6.4	6	9
4	rendered	6.2	6	10
5	scare	6.2	6	10
6	taskforce	6.1	17	30
7	lessen	6.1	5	9
8	curb	6.0	41	78
9	receive	6.0	13	25
10	relects	5.9	5	10

Table 4: Top collocates of “coronavirus” in the African media corpus

No	Word	Stats	Frequency (collocates)	Frequency (corpus)
1	alleviation	8.4	18	63
2	novel	8.20	109	131
3	dreaded	7.49	9	18
4	cap	7.37	6	13
5	seventh	7.27	6	14
6	repercussions	6.99	6	17
7	state’s	6.90	5	15
8	deadly	6.86	52	161
9	dies	6.76	9	30
10	lowest	6.57	5	19

<sup>81</sup>Mutual information (MI) is an effect size statistic which measures the strength of association between two words.

The African media selected for analysis also foregrounded the novelty of coronavirus. The adjective “novel” co-occurs with “coronavirus” 107 times (see Table 4). For example, Daily News Egypt stated: The Egyptian Medical Syndicate (EMS) announced, on Monday, that five new fatalities have been reported among doctors due to complications related to the novel coronavirus (Covid-19)<sup>83</sup>. Interestingly, the noun, “novelty” was also used, although in only one example, in which *Egypt Independent* highlighted an innovative approach developed in Rwanda, in the face of limited resources: The second novelty is speed. Each round of testing takes about three hours, and this approach needs just two rounds<sup>84</sup>.

Tables 5 and 6 show the top collocates of Covid-19 and coronavirus in the BBC and CNN media corpus. The BBC and CNN framed coronavirus as an enemy in a war, illustrated by the lexical items “fight” (63), “treat” (28), “against” (117) – see Table 6 – which are classified as war metaphors. According to Koller<sup>85</sup>, war metaphors are used extensively in communicating about experiences that are subjective, complex and sensitive, including health and illness. However, the use of metaphors is context based and therefore explains why the war metaphors “fight”, “treat” or “against” did not co-occur often with Covid-19 or coronavirus in African media articles. The use of metaphors is not universal but informed by contextual factors. This may explain the prominent use of metaphors in Western media as compared to African news outlets.

In the following sections, we provide a detailed country-by-country qualitative comparison of the publications.



Table 5: Top collocates of Covid-19 in the BBC and CNN media corpora

No	Word	Stats	Frequency (collocates)	Frequency (corpus)
1	illness	6.33	6	14
2	related	6.39	5	12
3	Task	6.23	6	15
4	rapid	6.14	6	16
5	identified	5.89	6	19
6	treat	5.74	8	28
7	surge	5.71	7	25
8	force	5.70	5	18
9	patients	5.61	18	69
10	caused	5.61	6	23

Table 6: Top collocates of coronavirus in the BBC and CNN media corpora

No	Word	Stats	Frequency (collocates)	Frequency (corpus)
1	fight	6.3	18	63
2	patient	6.23	7	26
3	die	6.13	5	20
4	outbreak	5.91	11	51
5	treat	5.90	6	28
6	against	5.652	21	117
7	variants	5.62	6	34
8	positive	5.59	10	58
9	effective	5.58	6	35
10	confirmed	5.34	9	62

### 3.2 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Given that there is scant literature on how African mainstream media cover disease in Africa<sup>86</sup>, our analysis seeks to provide timely insights. The corpus for our qualitative analysis was drawn from Covid-19-related news stories from five African countries (Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana and Egypt) across four regions (Southern, East, West and North Africa). Two newspapers were selected in each country. We focused on how linguistic tools such as referential strategies<sup>††</sup>, predication<sup>††</sup> and transitivity<sup>§§</sup> were used, not only to depict Covid-19 in Africa, but also to reinforce or to shift the negative stereotypes of the continent.

## NewsDay and The Herald in Zimbabwe

An analysis of the coverage of Covid-19 in two Zimbabwean mainstream newspapers (*NewsDay* and *The Herald*) is telling. The political standpoints of the two newspapers informed how they represented the coronavirus pandemic in Zimbabwe. *NewsDay* is privately owned and takes an anti-government stance. *The Herald*, which is state-owned, supports the perspectives of the government.

Themes of tragedy, despair and hopelessness were dominant in *NewsDay*'s framing of Covid-19. The newspaper represented the government's response to the pandemic as "poor" and "haphazard". Health institutions were constructed as being in a "crisis", "incapacitated", "poorly equipped", and not able to "cope". *NewsDay* depicted patients being turned away from hospitals due to the absence of services. In the first weeks of the pandemic, a narrative that hospitals would "easily transform into death traps" created a discourse of danger. Health workers were described as "carriers of the deadly virus", "sick personnel", and "equipped with the bare minimum of safety clothing". In essence, the privately owned *NewsDay* projected a gloomy picture, reinforcing themes of African hopelessness and tragedy<sup>87</sup> in the coverage of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe. While, on the one hand, the private press in Zimbabwe has traditionally been lauded for exposing the government's human rights violations, on the other hand, describing hospitals as "death traps" reinforced the idea of Africa as a "continent of despair"<sup>88</sup>, "doomed to failure"<sup>89</sup>.

Additionally, *NewsDay*'s stories on Covid-19-related corruption in the health sector reinforced the themes of corruption and poor governance. Quarantine centres were described as "squalid", "deplorable" and "crowded", with "returnees" sharing buckets, not observing social distancing and "rioting". Such descriptions contribute to perpetuating a narrative of African failures. Further, *NewsDay*'s criticism of the government for "weaponizing" the law and using Covid-19 regulations to "persecute" opposition members reinforced the theme of human rights abuses.

As a contrast to *NewsDay*, the state-owned *The Herald* provided a positive narrative on Covid-19 in Zimbabwe. Reports described health workers as "ready to defend the nation" and celebrated hospitals and isolation centres as fully equipped, "state-of-the-art facilities" and hospital beds as "ready for Covid-19 patients". *The Herald*'s constructive articles "laden with puffery and patriotism...overestimated the country's capacity to respond to the pandemic"<sup>90</sup>. Other positive narratives included the involvement of young people in producing face masks, and hand-washing innovations in rural areas. This constructive journalism, which was meant to "create public confidence in the country's leadership" also created "a false hope that Zimbabwe had capacity to respond to the pandemic"<sup>91</sup>. The newspaper applauded President Emmerson Mnangagwa for "ramping up prevention measures" and exhibiting "astute leadership" and launching a Covid-19 response plan. In countries such as Zimbabwe, constructive journalism can "become a propaganda tool that perpetuates existing inequalities"<sup>92</sup>.

Themes of violence and crime, linked to Covid-19, were dominant in both newspapers. Terms such as "deportees", "defying", "violating", "contravening" and "quarantine violators" were used by both *NewsDay* and *The Herald* in ways that criminalised the actions of citizens, accusing them of evading Covid-19 testing, escaping from quarantine centres, and infecting family members. Other negative frames were deepening poverty and an increase in child marriages and gender-based violence. These discourses served to reproduce prejudicial narratives of Africans as criminals.

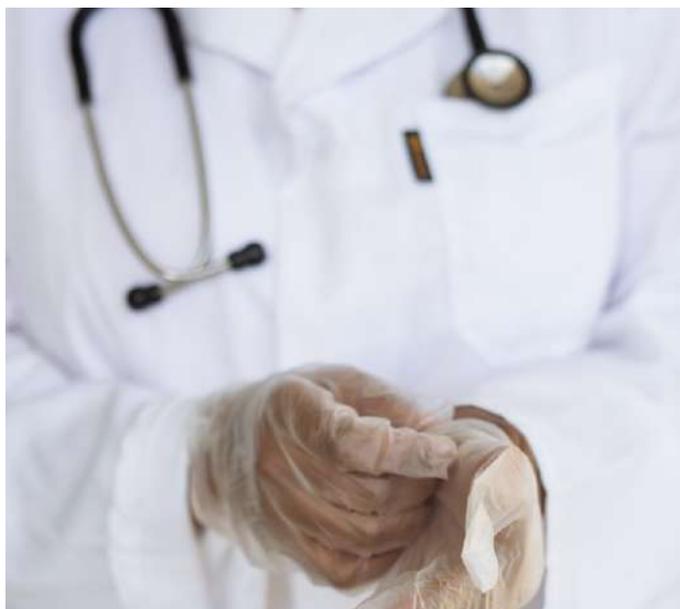
The two newspapers gave considerable attention to other African countries, albeit the framing was different. South Africa received the bulk of coverage in both papers, with the focus on a new Covid-19 variant and the high number of infections. Expressions such as "frightening" and "worst hit in Africa", and the depiction of hospitals bracing "for an onslaught of patients" highlighted a dire situation in South Africa.

<sup>87</sup>The naming of people or events through language.

<sup>88</sup>The positive or negative stereotypes ascribed to people or events.

<sup>89</sup>The representations of people and their roles and actions.

In *NewsDay*, reports on Nigeria focused on doctors being underpaid and working in “deplorable conditions”. Uganda and Guinea were mentioned as countries where “authoritarian regimes” were using Covid-19 as an excuse for “arbitrary arrests”, “discriminatory beatings” and “mass incarceration”. Ghana and Gambia were celebrated for typifying good governance. Tanzania and Madagascar appeared in stories related to vaccine reluctance. Expressions such as “warnings” and “unproven” were used to delegitimize Madagascar’s herbal remedy as a “self-proclaimed, plant-based Covid-19 remedy”. (Botswana, Congo, Eswatini, Namibia, Mozambique, Lesotho and Kenya seldom appeared in stories on Covid-19 infections and vaccines.) In essence, *NewsDay* depicted African countries in a negative manner, strengthening the representation of the continent as an “unrelenting series of disasters”<sup>93</sup>.



*The Herald*, however, gave considerable attention to positive stories about digital innovations and health research to tackle Covid-19 in various African countries (South Africa, Angola, Rwanda, Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tunisia). Moreover, *The Herald* published a comprehensive article on indigenous knowledge as an answer to Covid-19, with a focus on Covid Organics herbal remedy in Madagascar. Such framing of Covid-19 contributes to the efforts of challenging deep-seated African diseases stereotypes.

### **Daily Sun and News24 in South Africa**

*News24* is the largest online publication in South Africa. The news site is owned by *Media24* and is

part of Naspers. The *Daily Sun* is a popular tabloid newspaper in South Africa that was launched in 2002<sup>94</sup>. In contrast to broadsheets, the *Daily Sun* is seen as the voice of the “poor” and “black working class”<sup>95</sup>. Given the high number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in South Africa, the bulk of the news stories in the *Daily Sun* and *News24* were related to infection numbers and death rates. The two publications also covered the deaths of prominent figures such as government officials.

Negative labelling was dominant in *News24* as the publication denounced citizens who contravened Covid-19 regulations, reporting on the “reckless behaviour” of drunk drivers and the fining of churchgoers. In the same way that Western media blamed cultural practices for the spread of Ebola<sup>96</sup>, other stories blamed funeral for the spread of Covid-19.

Additionally, *News24* reproduced the theme of danger in its narratives on Covid-19. The second wave was described as a “tsunami” and hospitals were represented as “totally overwhelmed” by an “upsurge” of cases. The online publication was also critical of the country’s health system. With Covid-19 cases “rapidly approaching one million”, *News24* framed the local hospitals as moving into “disaster mode”. This motif of danger was reinforced with news stories that reported on how local hospitals were mixing patients who had Covid-19 with those who did not. At the same time, stories about personal protective equipment (PPE) scandals and corruption sustained and perpetuated this negative narrative about Africa being a “hopeless continent”<sup>97</sup>, as did stories that gave gloomy forecasts, such as “auto industry under threat”, or used metaphors of darkness to predict “dark times ahead”<sup>98</sup>.

*News24* gave considerable coverage to Covid-19 in other African countries, with Zimbabwe appearing frequently. The language used to describe the health sector in Zimbabwe reproduced themes of danger and catastrophe, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about the continent. Predicational expressions, such as “crisis-ridden economy”, “ravaged economy”, “crippled healthcare system”, “woefully ill-equipped” and “deeply eroded disposable incomes” appeared. Other negative reports were on how Zimbabwe was “facing catastrophe” and “hunger”, and women were engaging in “dangerous sex work”.

These negative depictions were not confined to Zimbabwe. *News24* gave considerable attention to various African countries, although the emphasis was on danger, disaster, failure, catastrophe and human rights abuses. In stories on Kenya and Sierra Leone, the publication reported on doctors' strikes, scarcity of intensive care unit (ICU) beds, and the "creaking" public health system. News stories on Ethiopia focused on how women were turning to sex work due to the pandemic. Stories about Ghana reported on the lack of PPE, and a "potential Covid-19 calamity". Rwanda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Kenya were covered in stories related to human rights violations during lockdown. Tanzania was reported as having a lack of coronavirus data, and *News24* described fears of a "silent epidemic". Former Tanzanian president, Magufuli, was depicted for his scepticism of Covid-19. Madagascar appeared in news stories about Covid Organics, what was depicted as a "controversial" drink, "disputed by WHO".

Most news stories in the *Daily Sun* related to the spike in Covid-19 infections. Expressions such as "rising", "alarming", "third wave fears", and "a more infectious coronavirus variant" reinforced the theme of danger. Headlines such as "Knock Knock! Who's There? It's Me, Corona" gave testimony to the fact that tabloids thrive on sensationalism, emotionalism, and the grotesque<sup>99</sup>. This style of reporting underlined the Afro-pessimistic discourses in the tabloid. Other news stories depicted South Africans as "boozers" and "illegal cigarette traders" who behaved "recklessly and irresponsibly" and did not wear masks or observe social distancing. Stories on "demonic cult churches" popped up and reinforced the narrative of chaos and crime.

Additionally, the *Daily Sun* produced news stories that were critical of the government. Tabloids like the *Daily Sun* position themselves as alternative public spheres that help to keep the powerful accountable<sup>100</sup>. Tabloids "satirize", "undermine" and can be used as weapons against "corruption, scandals, or other issues of political and social importance"<sup>101</sup>. The government was denounced for displaying the "worst form of incompetence" by bringing in expiring vaccines. Expressions such as "vaccine flop" and "fong kong vaccines" were used to ridicule the vaccines, and to represent the country's vaccination programme as disastrous.

Other *Daily Sun* stories amplified the voices of ordinary people narrating their experiences with Covid-19. The tabloid focused on everyday experiences in townships as people coped with the coronavirus pandemic. For example, it provided a voice to Covid-19 survivors from Soweto (Johannesburg) and Khayelitsha (Cape Town), who described how they overcame the virus through faith and support from their families. Other stories focused on how young township dwellers engaged in informal businesses to cope with the impacts of Covid-19. Although a few stories described how Covid-19 survivors had to grapple with stigma, and although tabloids thrive on sensationalism, scandals and the grotesque, by and large, the *Daily Sun* – with its attention placed on the daily struggles of its readers (marginalised groups) – contributed to a positive shift in the African narrative<sup>102</sup>.

In contrast to *News24*, the *Daily Sun* did not provide adequate coverage of other African countries. From the data sampled, Zimbabwe and Madagascar were among the few countries given attention. The *Daily Sun* presents itself as a newspaper that foregrounds silenced knowledges, and this was demonstrated in a news article on traditional healers and on the need for Africans to utilise Madagascar's herbal drink.

### ***The Citizen and The Guardian in Tanzania***

*The Guardian* is a leading daily newspaper owned by The Guardian Limited, a private company. *The Citizen* is another popular daily newspaper that is published by Mwananchi Communications Limited. When reporting on Covid-19 in Tanzania, both newspapers generally promoted a positive narrative. Rather than taking a critical stance against former President Magufuli's policies and response efforts, most news stories expressed a predominantly optimistic view.

First, news stories in both publications perpetuated a biblical discourse, as citizens were encouraged to "turn to God" to overcome the global pandemic. Prayer was seen to play a pivotal role during the "difficult times". Second, rather than creating a narrative of tragedy, disaster and hopelessness, *The Citizen* used celebratory rhetoric such as "fall", "gone down", "dropping" and "massive reduction in Covid-19 cases", which reinforced the government's narrative that the health crisis was under control. Third, *The Citizen*

sought to support Magufuli's scepticism about Covid-19 testing facilities in the country and applauded the former president for making "good of his promise" to send a plane to Madagascar to fetch local herbs. In essence, *The Citizen* supported the stance that prayer and local herbs were key to overcoming Covid-19. Given that the World Health Organisation (WHO) was critical of the government's response to Covid-19, the newspaper sought to project a positive narrative on what was transpiring in Tanzania.

*The Guardian* newspaper was also characterised by providing positive stories on Covid-19 in Tanzania, such as the contributions of banks, businesses and the private sector towards combatting the virus. Other news stories were on the efforts of rural communities to mobilise resources to address water shortages and to join hands in fighting the pandemic. Additionally, there were stories on "hope for tourism" and "banks' profits up" even amid Covid-19. Evidently, local news was dominated by Afro-optimistic narratives. However, there was a paradigm shift in how these two newspapers portrayed the rest of Africa.

*The Guardian* published news stories that reinforced harmful stereotypes of Africa as a hub of poverty and war<sup>103</sup>. These narratives were of tragedy and disaster, with Covid-19 threatening "food availability" in Africa, and the "world's forgotten wars" continuing to take their toll on citizens as Covid-19 "burns". Although the latter story was on the "world's forgotten wars", most of the illustrations were set in African contexts. The author identified wars in Libya, South Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and "elsewhere in Africa", giving a negative impression of the continent as a warzone. The phrase "elsewhere in Africa" reproduced the narrative that Africa is a homogeneous<sup>104</sup> entity typically ravaged by wars.

*The Citizen's* depictions of the rest of the continent were also predominantly negative. The publication's news stories were centred on the new Covid-19 variant in South Africa, and reported cases and deaths in Uganda,

Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan and North Africa. Few stories reinforced a positive African narrative that focused on research, innovation, ICTs, and the role of universities in combating the novel coronavirus pandemic. In a nutshell, while the depiction of Covid-19 in Tanzania was characterised by positive stories, the narrative on the rest of Africa was broadly negative.

### ***The Ghana Report and the Daily Graphic in Ghana***

The Ghana Report is a popular news website in the country. *The Daily Graphic* is a prominent newspaper in Ghana published by Graphic Communications Group Limited. An analysis of data from both publications shows that the framing of Covid-19 in Ghana was predominantly negative.

A harmful, stereotypical African narrative was mostly produced through stories on Covid-19 cases and deaths, hospitals, and the breaching of lockdown regulations in the country. Expressions such as "jump", "rise", "shoots", "upsurge" and "soared" featured prominently in both newspapers. This language used by *The Ghana Report* served to construct a narrative about a health crisis in Ghana. *The Ghana Report* seems to take an anti-government stance in its reportage. Stories about Covid-19 cases and deaths were framed to propagate the myths of tragedy and hopelessness in Africa.

Additionally, *The Ghana Report* portrayed a state of tragedy and calamity in Ghana's health facilities. Descriptions were characterised by images of death: "bodies multiply"; "bodies piling up in the mortuaries at racing

speed"; "morgue managers overwhelmed"; a "rise in deaths"; people "charred", "shattered" and "frustrated" served to project a hopeless situation. Covid-19 was termed an "invisible enemy" that was "stretching health services to breaking point". The gloomy picture continued, as "ventilators, protective equipment, and even



medical staff are becoming scarce”, and “beds are filling up with Covid-19 patients” and was augmented by reports on infections at schools and children contracting the virus. The portrayal of doctors having to make a “heart-wrenching choice of who lives and dies” contributed to the narrative of Africa being a place of darkness, tragedy, hopelessness and failure.

The theme of poor governance was reinforced by reports on how the government had “abandoned health facilities”, with *The Ghana Report* asserting that 53 health facilities had been “left to rot as coronavirus bites”. The metaphors of rotting and biting also served to buttress negative and stereotypical narratives about Africa. At the same time, news stories about 2 065 health workers being “infected” or testing positive for Covid-19 reinforced the motif of disaster. The description of Accra metropolis as “densely populated” and an epicentre of Covid-19 strengthened harmful “population myths”<sup>105</sup>.

The theme of corruption emerges through media reports on health workers being engaged in “administrative malpractices” that include the selling of PPEs. In this narrative, corruption is depicted as deeply entrenched in society as the culprits are not only government officials, but also health workers.

Stereotypical images of chaos and criminality in Africa were reproduced by the use of criminonyms to describe citizens who violated coronavirus lockdown regulations. *The Daily Graphic* denounced citizens who were not wearing masks, sanitising and observing social distancing. The criminonyms “nose mask violators” and “recalcitrant” were used by the *Daily Graphic* to denounce citizens who disregarded lockdown regulations. *The Ghana Report* also reported on the problem of people who were “arrested” for “flouting”, “breaching” and refusing to “comply” with lockdown measures. The criminonym “fugitive”, used to refer to individuals who defied or disregarded Covid-19 lockdown protocols, contributed to the harmful stereotype of Africans as criminals.

While both Ghanaian publications depicted Covid-19 in Ghana in a similar way, their approach to other African countries was quite different. Very few African countries appeared in the *Daily Graphic*. South Africa and Nigeria featured in

news stories about new Covid-19 variants and a surge in infections. Kenya appeared in the *Daily Graphic* stories on top officials facing “prosecution over Covid-19 corruption” and on how the country lost “Covid-19 billions to corruption”. However, in contrast to the absences and exclusions in the *Daily Graphic*, there was a pronounced coverage of African countries in *The Ghana Report*. However, this was characterised by negative depictions of the continent. Stories about Guinea and Burkina Faso focused on how citizens from the two countries were “busted” for “illegally” entering and “sneaking” into Ghana during the lockdown period. The use of the terms “illegally”, and “busted” reinforced the narrative about Africans as criminals. Tanzania was depicted in reports of a “coronavirus cover up” and the “covering up” of the “country’s true death count”. Kenya appeared in a story about 1 000 people having been “arrested” for “flouting” lockdown protocols and “escaping” quarantine centres. South Africa featured in a story about “fake Covid certificates”, which reinforced the stereotypical narrative of Africans as criminals and corrupt.

The bulk of African countries featured in news stories on Covid-19 cases and deaths (Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Togo, Liberia, Senegal, Kenya, and Tanzania). South Africa appeared mostly in stories about an increase in Covid-19 cases and high number of deaths. News stories about a two-year old baby succumbing to the virus in South Africa, a shortage of oxygen for patients in Egypt, and Kenya running out of ICU beds reinforced the doom-and-gloom narrative on the continent. The theme of hopelessness was strengthened by stories depicting Africans as beggars and the West as saviours, for example, Mozambique was portrayed seeking aid from Portugal, and Ghana receiving donations from Germany.

Additionally, news stories on the negative impacts of Covid-19 perpetuated the narrative of economic disaster on the continent. *The Ghana Report* stated that Africa had been “hit harder than most” and that “signs are that there is worse to come”. Another story framed Kenya, Angola and Zambia as some of the “worst performing currencies globally” and stories on hunger and starvation and job losses continued this theme.

Although most news stories portrayed Africa negatively, a few foregrounded positive narratives.

For example, *The Ghana Report* celebrated South Africa and Ghana for their response efforts to Covid-19, which included conducting more testing.

### **Daily News Egypt and Egypt Independent in Egypt**

Data for analysis was gathered from two leading news publications in Egypt, the *Egypt Independent* and *Daily News Egypt*. Reports on Covid-19 from the *Egypt Independent* indicated the perpetuation of mostly negative sentiments about Egypt. Stories in this newspaper focused on rising Covid-19 infection figures and the death toll, foregrounding the theme of impending disaster. Expressions such as “danger grows”, and “numbers creeping up” in the *Egypt Independent* projected a grim picture of the health situation in the country. This was reinforced by a description that the “second Covid-19 wave will be twice as strong as the first”. Other negative narratives in the *Egypt Independent* related to the breaching of Covid-19 regulations by citizens, for example, concerns were expressed about the non-compliance of transport drivers and shops.

*The Daily News Egypt* framed a more positive narrative on Egypt’s efforts to respond to Covid-19. The newspaper focused on Egypt’s resilience despite Covid-19 and applauded the contributions of banks in supporting small businesses. Some positive stories were about the increase in digital banking and the launch of digital innovations to help small- and medium-sized enterprises cope with the pandemic.



The framing of other African countries was, however, predominantly negative in both newspapers. Burkina Faso appeared in a news story about a “humanitarian crisis”, a health sector weakened by the second wave and “ongoing conflict”. Sierra Leone was depicted in a news story about families marrying off their daughters to ease financial hardship caused by Covid-19. Kenya was represented as having one of the “worst maternal mortality rates in the world”, and pregnant women were regarded as being at risk of death, due to the curfew imposed because of Covid-19. Morocco, Ethiopia and Mali were depicted as having an upsurge in infections, for example, *Egypt Independent* described Covid-19 transmission in Ethiopia as “massive”. South Africa and Tunisia also appeared in news stories about countries in Africa most affected by Covid-19 deaths and infections. South Africa’s problems were described as including looting and “years of rampant corruption” which had weakened the health system. On the death of Tanzania’s President Magufuli, he was depicted as a “Covid-19 sceptic” who downplayed the “severity of the virus”. Some countries were represented as lacking agency in combating Covid-19. For example, Zambia and South Sudan were described as benefitting from Egypt’s medical supplies, and Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea were represented as beneficiaries of vaccines from China.

Stories about African countries’ resilience through local efforts were, thus, missing in the narratives of Egyptian mainstream media. Despite resetting the African narrative through coverage of Covid-19 in Egypt, the representation of the rest of Africa was characterised by harmful stereotypes.

### **COVID-19 and constructions of Africa in Western media**

Drawing on data from the USA and UK news media, this study examines the African narratives produced by CNN and BBC in their representations of Covid-19 in Africa. In the early months of the pandemic, Western media depictions of Africa centred on the construction of anomalies.

First, to make sense of the low infection numbers and death rates in African countries, the BBC and CNN constructed these as anomalous. For example, the BBC sought to explain why “Covid-19 [in Africa] has been less deadly than elsewhere”

and the low figures were described as a “mystery”. The figures did not fit dominant Western media narratives on Africa, which generally contribute to harmful stereotypes of doom, disaster and tragedy on the continent. The absence of these elements related to Covid-19 in Africa became newsworthy, and journalists were at pains to make sense of this “mystery”.

Covid-19 testing on the continent was described as “insufficient”, “low”, and “minimal”. The BBC argued that insufficient testing capacity in many African countries explained the low infection numbers and death rates. CNN stated that the numbers did not give a “full picture” of the outbreak on the continent. The “full picture” was a euphemism for the stereotype of disaster and tragedy associated with Africa. CNN added that, due to low testing, the infection numbers had been “under-reported”.

The two news outlets used Tanzania and Nigeria to illustrate their argument: in Tanzania, there was concern over the lack of data, with the government failing to release official Covid-19 figures; and in Nigeria, according to CNN, Covid-19 testing was not freely available and less than one percent of the population had been tested. The mode of persuasion the two news outlets used<sup>106</sup> was to bring in the voices of “experts” who endorsed and legitimated the narrative that infection numbers and death rates were low in Africa due to insufficient or low testing. Given this explanation, the BBC concluded that “it is almost certain that Africa has already sailed far past the one million mark”. The modal adverb “certain” indicated a conviction about or commitment to the disaster narrative in Africa.

Another anomaly was that “hospitals in many [African] countries are not yet overloaded with suspected Covid-19 cases”. The possible explanation for this anomaly, according to the BBC, was the “fear of going to hospitals”. According to this narrative, if people behaved “normally” in Africa, hospitals would have been “overloaded with suspected Covid-19”.

Other representations of Covid-19 in Africa by BBC were centred on predictions of disaster. First, the news outlet developed a narrative about a rise in infection numbers and death rates, depicting countries such as South Africa and Egypt as Africa’s Covid-19 hotspots, and using expressions such as

“accelerating”, “spreading quickly”, “worried”, and “braces itself for a dramatic rise”. The BBC represented the early months of Covid-19 in South Africa as a “lull before the surge” and reinforced the narrative of an impending disaster by urging audiences to “brace for the potentially devastating impact of the pandemic” and constructing the atmosphere in South Africa as a “calm before a devastating storm”. Thus, the metaphors “tsunami” and “storm” denoted the magnitude of doom and tragedy – in South Africa in particular, and Africa in general. Modal verbs such as “could” and “will” were used to construct these predictions, for example:

- “Poor healthcare systems that *could* be overwhelmed”
- “A dramatic rise in infections that *will* almost certainly overwhelm its relatively well-resourced healthcare system”
- “Outbreak *will* get worse”
- “Africa *could* be the next epicentre”
- “The coronavirus *will* turn into a national crisis and its impact *will* be huge”

Evidently, the BBC reinforced pessimistic constructions of Africa being home to tragedy, disaster and hopelessness<sup>107</sup>. CNN also reinforced the narrative of an impending disaster through expressions such as “Africa must prepare for a second wave” and “the peak has yet to hit the continent”.

The framing of the health care systems in African countries by Western media was also negative. For Kenya, the BBC published a news story on the shortage of PPE for healthcare workers in Kenya and reported that citizens were escaping from quarantine centres. CNN reported that the pandemic was spreading to the rural areas, where the health system was “creaking”. For Zimbabwe, the BBC published news reports on a lack of PPE and a consequent nationwide strike of healthcare workers. According to the BBC, the health crisis in Zimbabwe resulted in seven babies being stillborn in one night at a hospital. For Tanzania, the BBC depicted hospitals as being “overwhelmed”, and for Guinea as having run out of testing kits. For Ghana, CNN represented Covid-19 infections as “skyrocketing” and “threatening to overwhelm the health system” and depicted South Sudan as having “four ventilators for 12 million people”. For Malawi, health workers were reported as having been hit hard by the pandemic.



Another negative theme – corruption related to Covid-19 funds and supplies – was also prominent in the BBC’s narratives of African countries. Kenya was linked to a scandal involving the “alleged misuse of \$7.8m meant to purchase emergency PPE for healthcare workers and hospitals”. The misuse of Covid-19 funds in South Africa was seen as “frightening”. A Covid-19 procurement scandal is also identified as a problem in Zimbabwe.

A BBC’s news report described “whipping, shooting and snooping” in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda, thus perpetuating a negative narrative of human rights abuse in Africa. The story was about how security officers were committing these violations under the guise of enforcing measures aimed at curbing the spread of Covid-19. Expressions such as “armed variously with guns, whips and tear gas canisters”, and “beating, harassing and, in some cases, killing people” underscored the theme of human rights abuse in Africa.

The BBC represented Tanzania as failing to release data on Covid-19 infections and deaths and downplaying the epidemic. Additionally, former President Magufuli was denounced for his resistance to following the advice of “international experts”, an expression that was used to legitimate the BBC’s perspective and dismiss Magufuli’s position on Covid-19. Further, the BBC criticised Madagascar for propagating a

“conspiracy theory” and “baseless theory” on an “untested” and “unproven herbal tonic”, thus dismissing Madagascar’s alternative herbal cure. For its part, CNN referred to Magufuli as a “Covid-denying leader” and accused him of downplaying the virus. Repeating the views of the WHO, CNN censured Madagascar for promoting an “untested” herbal tonic.

Other negative narratives were centred on the impacts of Covid-19 on the economy. According to the BBC, Nigeria’s economy was predicted to “suffer” due to a “collapse in the oil price”. Covid-19 was reported to have “crippled” the tourism industry in countries such as South Africa and Rwanda.

South Africa received the bulk of BBC and CNN coverage of Covid-19. Most stories, which centred on the “South African variant” gave a negative narrative. However, there were some positive narratives about South Africa. First, the BBC represented South Africa as having “good data” on infection numbers and deaths “as compared with most of Africa”. (Seeing South Africa as an exception had the effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Africa in general.) Second, the BBC praised South Africa for its “early and decisive imposition of a lockdown”. Last, a story on the decline in South African crime, due to lockdown regulations, was another positive frame. However, CNN’s report about a “war on women” – or a surge of violence against women in South Africa during the lockdown – negated this.

The BBC also gave positive coverage to Lesotho, DRC and Nigeria. Lesotho was praised for introducing public health measures before a single case was reported. DRC and Nigeria were applauded for having good community health systems.

As compared to BBC, CNN published considerably more positive stories about Africa. Rwanda was praised for managing to contain Covid-19. The leaders of Senegal were applauded for inspiring civic duty. Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Mauritius and Liberia were commended for implementing aggressive lockdown measures. Other positive CNN narratives included a story on the roles of artificial intelligence and digital services in providing health advice about Covid-19. Stories about digital stores in Nigeria and solar technology in Kenya reinforced these positive

narratives. Additionally, CNN commended innovations such as test kits and drones that could deliver medical supplies in Rwanda, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana. The news outlet also celebrated frontline workers in Ethiopia, Cameroon and Kenya, who were involved in manufacturing and distributing masks, and who also provided free medical care to people in remote areas. A story applauding a local doctor in Somalia who self-funded a test lab to help fight Covid-19 started off as a positive narrative, but degenerated into a negative narrative about conflict, disease, poverty, overcrowding and the “vulnerable population” in Somalia.

### **The African narrative in reports from global and African institutions**

Data for analysis was also drawn from reports and statements on Covid-19 that had been issued by global and African institutions: the World Health Organisation (WHO), World Bank Group, African Union (AU), and the Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium (GET). In this section, we explore Covid-19 narratives produced by these institutions.

For GET, data was drawn from the organisation’s *African Newsletter on Emerging Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity*<sup>108</sup>, which contained both positive and negative narratives. Most articles in the newsletter reported on general issues pertaining to Covid-19, safety measures, and the effectiveness of vaccines. First, the theme of danger was heightened through the framing of Kenyans as being at risk of transmitting bat-borne coronavirus diseases due to the human-wildlife-livestock interface in Laikipia county. The narrative of impending disaster was reinforced through an article that denounced Kenyans for engaging in risky practices such as consuming “sick animals” and “collecting animals found dead”. Second, widespread poverty, lack of education, poor infrastructure, and irregular power supply in Africa were constructed as barriers to epidemic control. Whilst the dominant frames were negative, there was a positive story on the need for Africans to invest in biobanking and protect genetic resources, to understand diseases.

An analysis of AU reports and statements indicated the dominance of the theme of danger and catastrophe, linked to “higher” case fatality rates in Africa. Terms such as “increased”, “rising” and “highest” were commonly used to describe

Covid-19 cases and deaths. Such language sought to frame dangers in, for example, Morocco, South Africa, Libya, Kenya, Tunisia, Ghana, Somalia and Algeria. Morocco was constructed as the “epicentre” of Africa’s second wave. The rising cases among health workers in countries such as Kenya was attributed to a lack of PPE at hospitals. Other AU statements lamented the test per case ratio, which was believed to be below the recommended range. The argument raised by the AU reports was that many Covid-19 cases were “likely going undetected”.

AU reports also portrayed the continent as a charity case, which was evident in the depictions of various African countries that received medical equipment and supplies, and other donations from Germany, Japan, and the European Union (EU). There was less emphasis on local efforts to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, except a few reports on the positive contributions of MTN Group Limited – A South African multinational mobile telecommunications company.

An article on the need for the WHO and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct clinical trials of traditional medicines in Africa constitute a positive narrative. Such stories indicate an appreciation of African indigenous knowledge in the fight against health crises. Other positive narratives included stories about the Africa CDC’s launch of a web-based tool to manage public health emergencies, a network of laboratories for Covid-19 sequencing and the launch of an online system in Kenya to authenticate Covid-19 test certificates.

The WHO published positive reports that contributed to rewriting the African narrative. One focus was the role of local village health workers and community involvement in helping to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, in home-based care facilities in Zambia. Another positive narrative focused on Nigeria’s Covid-19 surveillance initiative. Further, the WHO applauded Mauritius’ timely and decisive implementation of strict measures to detect and prevent the spread of the virus. Namibia was also applauded for the “leadership it demonstrated in containing the Covid-19 pandemic”. In essence, the WHO commended African governments for taking “strong public health measures” to combat Covid-19.

The WHO's reports on Covid-19 in Africa also perpetuated negative narratives. Some reports focused on the infection rates, which were depicted as “accelerating”, “surging” and “increasing”. Other reports highlighted the social stigma associated with Covid-19 in Uganda and Nigeria. In reports on vaccination campaigns in Angola, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Sierra Leone, there was an emphasis on donations from countries such as South Korea, China and Denmark – thus portraying Africa as a charity case.

The framing of Africa as a charity case was also dominant in World Bank reports, which

focused on donations received by African countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger and Nigeria for responses to Covid-19. Other negative World Bank narratives were on the socio-economic impacts of Covid-19, such as job losses in Ghana, economic contraction in Kenya, and recession in sub-Saharan Africa. However, according to the World Bank, amid the recession, Africa's economy was “poised for recovery”. In addition to the projections of recovery, other positive World Bank reports covered community responses to Covid-19 in Djibouti, Madagascar and Uganda, and applauded African governments for stepping up measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic<sup>109</sup>.

# DISCUSSION

An analysis of Covid-19 news articles in African and Western media shows the persistence of harmful stereotypes of disease in Africa. Despite many African countries' successes in dealing with Covid-19, both Western and African media reproduced deep-seated negative disease narratives about Africa.

In Western stories about Ebola and HIV/AIDS, Africa was framed as a homogenous entity. Further, the coverage of the continent was predominantly negative, with the diseases depicted as distinctly African. In stories about Covid-19, Africa was also treated as a homogenous entity. A quantitative analysis of stories produced by BBC and CNN showed that the terms "Africa" and "African" were frequently used by these news outlets to paint a gloomy picture about the continent's affairs. Themes of danger, catastrophe and tragedy persisted in the African disease narrative produced by Western media. Covid-19 was framed as "deadly", "scary" and having devastating consequences. The low infection figures and death rates in Africa were constructed as anomalies. Other Covid-19 narratives were centred around themes of corruption, human rights abuses, and hopelessness. Positive stories

were generally on digital innovations, and on some countries' response efforts.

In African media, Ebola frames were predominantly positive, as Africans were assigned agency in dealing with the virus. African journalists demanded accountability from their governments. Ebola news stories also focused on local voices, efforts and solutions. In contrast, African media's stories about Covid-19 were predominantly negative. Africans were depicted as quarantine violators and fugitives who were breaching Covid-19 regulations and infecting family members. Themes of tragedy, catastrophe, despair and danger dominated the narratives, which were similar to the harmful stereotypes that were produced in Western coverage of Ebola and HIV/AIDS. Most of the positive narratives were produced by state-owned media (*The Herald*, *The Citizen* and *The Guardian*) and these stories served as propaganda for African governments.

In essence, news stories about corruption, human rights abuse, and calamities at health facilities indicated the persistence of harmful African disease narratives in both Western and African media.

# CONCLUSION

The comparison of Covid-19 stories published by both Western and African media reveals established practices of stereotypical, negative representations of Africa, unlike the coverage of Ebola by African media. The framings show that even across a range of media organisations in Africa and the West, these negative narratives persist. Although our quantitative analysis reveals differences in story angle, our qualitative analysis exposes deep-seated stereotyped representations of Africa.

We suggest that the negative narratives from African media can be explained by the media and communications training currently delivered on the continent. In other words, historical stereotypes still guide our media training. In this way, coloniality is continued by the way we represent ourselves and how we are represented by others.

Directly linked to the colonial training received by African journalists is a limited understanding

of what news is, in the Western sense. From this perspective, news is that which is strange, short and exaggerated. The African media is unfortunately also caught up in this understanding of what is newsworthy, to generate readership. In addition, African news publications pick up global news outlets' negative representations and frames of Africa, and echo, repeat, and internalise these representations through training, workshops and quotes from Western leaders.

Mano and Milton propose Afrokology as a solution to the prevalent negative frames. Afrokology essentially argues for the African reality and lived experience to be reflected in a balanced way<sup>18</sup>. Afrokology therefore recognises and critiques the misrepresentations of Africa and pushes back on coloniality. In other words, Africa should be represented in a "decolonial" sense; this means media must connect with and reflect the lived experience of African people and no longer reinforce the negative representation that continues to undermine African efforts.

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