

Nepad is an African story

Nepad is an African story deserving of African media attention. However, say Lilian Ndangam and Andrew Kanyegirire, it is perceived and represented as a plan of, for and by the elite, with little ownership from other stakeholders in society.

On seeing the ubiquitous TV images of waste dumps, sombre-looking black children and dead bodies following the horrors of hurricane Katrina in the US, some bloggers and phone-in enthusiasts in Africa confessed that they initially thought that this was another catastrophe taking place on the continent.

This is not entirely surprising given that Africa is often reduced to disease, famine, war, violence and suffering in the content of most Western media. One could argue that this negative picture is what audiences within and outside Africa have been conditioned to expect of media reportage on Africa.

In attempting to undo this negative reportage, an interesting mix of unlikely bedfellows – journalists, media owners, business, academics, civil society activists and leaders in Africa – have underscored the need for media in Africa to take “ownership of the African story”.

This is in line with South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki’s 1990s emphasis on the African renaissance in reference to the rebirth of African self-respect and unity – the ideals of which can be found in recent initiatives like the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) and the transformation of the Organisation for African Unity into the African Union (AU).

It is within this context that during the 2003 South African National Editors’ Forum (Sanef) conference, Mbeki called upon African editors to counter negative images and to facilitate knowledge and understanding of the continent by reporting “Africa to Africans” and reporting “Africa as Africans”.

Such positions are clearly justified. However, it must be said that inherent in such appeals are the uncritical assumptions that African journalists, by virtue of their being imbued with some self sense of being African – “ubuntu” – and their specific location on the continent, will report on Africa in more positive and informed ways than a European or American journalist.

Yet notions of “telling the African story” and “reporting Africa as Africans” that are central to debates concerning media content on Africa, have not been sufficiently analysed.

Problematising these issues prompts questions such as: What is the African story? What does it mean to report Africa as Africans? In whose interests is it to report Africa as Africans?

Recent reportage

To make sense of these questions we looked at the recent reportage on Nepad by media in Africa. Our interest in Nepad is based on the supposition that it is a pertinent African story among many in as far as it deals with issues of development and democracy.

Briefly, Nepad, which – in its terms – is aimed at poverty eradication and the entry of Africa into the global economy, is the “African-owned” development vision of the AU.

Specific objectives include investment in key sectors such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), good governance through the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and regional co-operation.

Nepad has been criticised for its neo-liberal ideology and for having excluded civil society groups in drawing up its framework, all of which makes it seen as being elitist and exclusionary (Bond 2002; Adesina 2004).

With regard to the media, although journalists are to be consulted during the peer reviews, Nepad is for the most part silent on media freedoms as key criteria for good governance (Berger 2002; IFEX 2005).

In our content analysis of coverage on Nepad between January and July 2005 based on a sample of English-language

African newspapers and news providers available through Al-lafica.com, the leading trends in the reportage included:

- event-based coverage predominated;
- a predominant focus on the APRM and
- the dominance of elite, male news sources.

Out of the 101 stories, Nigerian newspapers reported most elaborately on Nepad. This was followed by South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda and Ghana. Nepad was less visible in countries such as Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Sierra Leone (“Namibia cautious over peer review” – *New Era*, 14 April 2005; “Guebuza hails Nepad but Mugabe ‘looks East’” – *Zimbabwe Standard* 2 May 2005).

The significantly high coverage of Nepad in South Africa and Nigeria is not entirely surprising given that both countries are leading champions of Nepad and key regional political and economic powers (“Nepad: Nigeria continues to play prominent role” – *Nigeria First* 20 April 2005).

Coverage of Nepad was most intense during those periods when there was an event such as a regional summit, national peer review session or project launch.

The APRM was the most frequently-reported topic followed by economic performance and ICTs (e-schools). Topics like poverty (the Millennium Development Goals), agriculture, health and gender issues were least reported.

The focus on the APRM is potentially at the expense of other initiatives. Even the reportage on the APRM was limited to issues of political governance with little focus on corporate and economic governance, which are equally important aspects of the review. While the APRM remains a flagship programme of Nepad, signing up to it is voluntary. By the time of the recent AU summit in Libya in July only 23 out of the 53 member states had signed up to be assessed.

Sources

The most frequent sources relied on were officials attached to the Nepad and APRM secretariats and the various national steering committees.

Heads of state and ministers were for the most part represented as the active parties – doing things, appealing for funds, blasting those standing in the way of Africa’s interests – they are the ones who got to “do” Nepad, “advocate” and “speak” out on behalf of and for Nepad’s interests (“Obasanjo blasts foreign nations over looted funds” – *Daily Champion* 21 June 2005; “Museveni to launch first e-school” – *New Vision* 15 July 2005).

Business sources in particular – Nepad Business Forums in Nigeria and South Africa, CEOs of ICT and banking firms and potential investors were for the most part represented as voices of and for investment and trade in Africa through Nepad (“NAICOM banks on Nepad for improved Penetration” – *Daily Champion* 10 July 2005; “Nepad: 127 billion pension available in 14 countries” – *The New Times* 29 April 2005).

Civil society organisations and representatives were less visible and frequently represented in a responding rather than defining role. They are the ones who deliberate on the implications of the already made decisions (“Civil society deliberates on AU + Nepad” – *The Standard*, Sierra Leone, 21 January 2005).

In addition, the face of Nepad is predominantly male – 61%. Press releases accounted for 25% of the main sources used in news stories, while only 14% of main sources were women. The absence of women as news actors in the reportage reflects the invisibility of gender issues within Nepad’s initiatives. Of all the stories that we examined, only one specifically focused on gender: “Nepad to launch gender task force”

– *BuaNews* 10 July 2005).

From our in-depth reading of the news texts on Nepad the bulk of the stories could be read as being “neutral”. However, some stories were particularly supportive (“Why Nepad’s attempt to eradicate poverty will succeed” – *This Day* 20 January 2005) while others were critical (“Nepad comes up short 3 years later” – *East African Standard* 9 January 2005; “Call for focus on solution to Zimbabwe” – *Business Day* 10 February 2005).

Nepad has expressed concern about its negative portrayal in the African press with strong calls for positive coverage. For instance, following the June 2005 presentation of the review reports for Ghana and Rwanda at the third summit of the APRM forum in Abuja, Nigeria, the APRM secretariat felt that the press had only focused on the “shortcomings identified in the review reports” while ignoring the positives and suggested that the press also lacked a proper understanding of the review process: “The press can and should educate the masses on the positive aspects of the process and highlight the very good and positive developments happening in the African continent.” (Nepad 2005:3)

Trends and issues

In light of the aforementioned problematics about reporting Africa and about “reporting Africa as Africans”, what can we make of the trends and issues concerning Nepad’s reportage?

Arguably, Nepad is an African story deserving of African media attention. However, the implication of the skew in news sources and social actors evidenced in our analysis is for Nepad to remain perceived and represented as a plan of, for and by the elite, with little ownership from other stakeholders in society.

In reporting Nepad the challenge for African journalists is to tell the Nepad story without simply becoming “guard dogs” and “lapdogs” of and for the interests of the elite at the cost of wider African publics.

Another challenge is to be wary of excessive self-congratulation, Afro-optimism and promotional communication, all of which could stifle criticism of the initiative. Being analytical and critical in coverage does not necessarily preclude appealing emotionally to people as Africans or portraying Nepad positively thereby bringing more people on board its “African-owned” credentials.

A key point will be to tell the Nepad story in such a way that is interesting, informative and broad in its range of topics, all of which could help steer clear of the distorted image of Africa, while also pointing out its shortfalls, successes and their implications for the daily lived experiences of the African. ■

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