Conflict narratives in the news and digital spaces:
The dangerous placebo of geopolitical power and their digital news versus technology effects on stories of water and border disputes in Africa

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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 African 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

Whether it is in the international media or in-country media, news about conflict in Africa is not shared with the resolution of the conflict in mind, but instead to bolster specific political interests. However, the internet, in some instances, creates opportunities for new peace-seeking narratives to emerge.

In this study of narratives surrounding two African conflicts – the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict and the dispute over the Grand Renaissance Ethiopian Dam – I looked at traditional news and creative digital spaces to analyse how these narratives evolve. My special interest was to find journalists or content creators who, in telling the story of a particular conflict, had the aim of helping to resolve the conflict.

In my research I used deductive thematic analysis and purposive sampling to look at stories about territorial integrity, national identity, and vital water and energy sources for development, and to identify grand narratives. Based on online ethnography and critical discourse analysis, I looked at 1500 news articles and 50 YouTube videos between December 2020 and May 2022, with the aim of mapping the complex process of narrating conflict stories in the public sphere.

The research showed that narrating stories on conflict in Africa is especially complex because what is deemed to be democratic internationally does not necessarily serve the people living in the conflict zone; further if the metanarrative of a conflict is trapped in a non-democratic ex-colonial system or a weak regional one, it is difficult to move towards conflict resolution.

Information distortions in African countries are not unique due to colonial legacy and geopolitical and socio-economic conditions in African nations, but also because technology can either upset or mirror old cultural tunnels established by all the powers at play. The research identified fundamental flaws and glimmers of hope in how we approach African conflict narratives. These are presented in the key insights below.
KEY INSIGHTS

1 Western media coverage of conflicts is often self-serving, based on vested interests, while ignoring the interests of all parties in the conflict:
Western states have more power in Africa than the African Union, but they use conflicts as leverage and are not necessarily concerned about resolving a conflict unless they have direct interests in its resolution. This is reflected in news reporting that flattens stories and stays silent on the legitimacy of Western powers in affecting the narratives. As a result, resolutions stall for decades, while the Western media takes sides and fails to fathom human rights and identity in multi-ethnic, indigenous and tribal contexts.

2 In-country media also aligns with specific political interests and does not offer analytical narratives that could help to broker peace:
In the case of media coverage of both conflicts in this study, in-country media tended to align with the political elite, without providing space for other voices; failed to provide background information; and did not offer analysis of breaking news events. In the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict, Moroccan news argued that Morocco had the best plan for resolving the conflict; the Polisario Front’s coverage simply reiterated its long-held position; while Algerian media fanned the flames. In the Renaissance Dam conflict, in-country media mirrored their governments’ positions: Ethiopian media heralded the benefits of the dam, while Egypt and Sudan expressed fear over the impacts on their countries.

3 Digital tools can give rise to new narratives based in historical analysis and humour:
Digital tools are not necessarily democratising because they can be hijacked by governments to maintain their own metanarratives. In this study the digital narratives about the Renaissance Dam were not much different to the main media narratives – possibly due to government crackdowns on internet users. However, in the case of the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict, vloggers with different views were able to adopt a position based in historical analysis, leave space for the audience to make up their own mind, and in some instances use humour to carry the story.

4 The digital space can add “performative identities” to existing conflicts – shaping stories and giving alternative narratives, while engaging audiences:
It is not clear if the performative identities help to resolve a conflict or not, but they definitely add African views and voices to the narrative. In adding African voices, the narrative becomes more diverse, informative, and engaging in a way that is missing in national news (although in this research this was more the case in the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict than the Renaissance Dam conflict).

5 Regardless of the roles that new technologies can play in creating new narratives, they are not necessarily a powerhouse for democracy, because of their minimal influence:
Traditional news is still more powerful in constructing narratives, especially when many audiences do not have digital literacy or have limited access to new technologies. This points to a strong need for media houses to get behind journalism that can present issues in a way that could lead to conflict resolution, instead of stirring the pot.
INTRODUCTION

Modern media communications have great potential to influence opinions, including conferring legitimacy on political positions. As has long been observed by many scholars, modern media impact on cognitive and political processes; they also influence conflict and public affairs. Cohen classically pointed out that news media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about...The world will look different to different people, depending...on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.

This is particularly important in relation to standpoints and perspectives on emerging conflict narratives in Africa.

At face value, the internet and most digital media are credited for being extraordinarily democratic platforms where historically underrepresented voices can swiftly find audience. As a result, slowing the growth of, if not wholly reversing, the “digital divide” – or what others have termed “digital apartheid” (Hess and Zimmermann 188) – emerged as a modern international fight. With this increased global flow of information and interconnectedness, the discourse around reshaping African narratives globally gained increasing momentum. Netflix’s The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind (2019), Marvel’s Black Panther (2018), Kony 2012 (2012) and the question of slacktivism, Chimamanda Adichie’s TED talk The Danger of the Single Story (2009), and the Black Lives Matter movement (#BlackLivesMatter) that started in 2013 are some of the reoccurring key references in a new social discourse that argues for a wave of change in narratives within and about Africa.

However, reading the presence of computers and mobile phones as digital literacy, and several productions and activist campaigns as a source of change, can be illuding and dangerous. Can the people of Africa use fast-evolving tools and technology to create new, effective narratives about their everyday lives, including narratives of conflict? With the emergence of the metaverse and augmented reality, can old stories find real-time voice? Change is happening indeed, but it is as complex as the tools used to power it.

This report focuses on conflict narratives: it examines how conflict – an image associated with Africa – has been covered traditionally and digitally, internationally and in the continent, in a way that stalls resolutions or enforces them abruptly for vested interest. The purpose of the report is to dig into the complexity of how stories have been told or untold, using different high-tech tools and strategies, and without consideration of the African people as “human”. How do we tell stories of border and water disputes in Africa today? Which narratives prevail in the digital world and whose story is accurate or worthy? Who should care when the story is not prime news?

The study considers two cases of conflict in Africa: the controversial Morocco/Western Sahara deal; and the Hydropower Renaissance Dam of Ethiopia, as disputed by Egypt. It looks at the key powers that shaped the narratives of these two disputes. How do these power-driven narratives congeal, change, metamorphose, evolve and resolve conflict for African people? And how do they jam?
2.1 The Morocco/Western Sahara dispute: narratives at the source of a North/South political order in Africa

The Western Sahara is Africa’s last unresolved colony. The long battle over this arid desert, at high costs financially and geopolitically, is fuelled by many complex factors. In principle, the conflict is between Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and Morocco, yet, in the news Algeria seems to be the main actor against Morocco in this conflict. SADR seems to be a shadow of the Algeria. In fact, the largest concentration of Sahrawi people is within the Algerian/Moroccan borders in the Tindouf refugee camps.

Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (the Polisario Front), which proclaimed the SADR in 1976, defines itself as “a defender of the Sahrawi nation that seeks self-determination and recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)”. The Polisario Front, while having asked for self-determination for SADR since the “desert exodus” of 1975, has accused Morocco of imperialism and terrorism and highlighted the plight of over 100,000 Sahrawi refugees in camps in the Tindouf Province of Algeria.

Morocco claims sovereignty over what it considers to be its “Southern Provinces”, drawing on a history that goes back to Moroccan dynasties before the Spanish occupation of the Western Sahara in 1884. As part of this claim, it defines the Polisario Front as “a Cold War hangover; a Communist dictatorship controlled by Algeria’s geopolitical interests, implicated in crime, smuggling and Islamic terrorism – in contrast to Moroccan democracy and human rights”. The Polisario Front stands accused of being simultaneously communist and Islamic fundamentalist, holding a dictatorial grip on the Tindouf camps and facilitating lawlessness.

The articles analysed in this study reflect on peace efforts and international responses to the conflict. Figure 1 provides a timeline of post-colonial peace efforts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and establishment of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Referendum planned but not followed through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Suspension of the peace plan when MINURSO fails to broker peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Referendum planned but not followed through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Autonomy initiative proposed by Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008 &amp; 2012–2013</td>
<td>Manhasset negotiations – Moroccan government and the Polisario Front meet to attempt to resolve the conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Donald Trump recognises Western Sahara as Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Spain recognises Morocco’s autonomy initiative; the end of diplomatic tensions between Spain and Morocco</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2 Hydro-hegemony in the Nile Basin: Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) comes from Ethiopia wanting to dam the Nile River near its source, which would result in limited access to water for Egypt, and potentially damaging environmental changes in the river system. The disputes centre on how quickly Ethiopia should fill and replenish the reservoir, and how much water Ethiopia would release downstream in case of a multi-year drought.

The Nile Basin river system flows through 11 countries, and the Blue Nile and White Nile merge in Sudan before flowing into Egypt and on to the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt has based its share of the river’s waters on a 1959 deal that gave it 55.5 billion cubic metres of water annually, and Sudan 18.5 billion cubic metres. Other countries were not given allocations at that time and Ethiopia does not recognise the agreement.

The GERD, a structure planned to be 145m high, with a total capacity of 74 billion cubic metres of water, is the centrepiece of Ethiopia’s bid to become Africa’s biggest power exporter. It has a projected capacity of 6 500 megawatts. Even though construction has been hit by delays due to mismanagement, the process of filling the vast reservoir began in 2020, with Ethiopia announcing in July of that year that it had hit its target of 4.9 billion cubic metres; in July 2021, Ethiopia said it had again hit the target for that year, adding 13.5 billion cubic metres.

Egypt, a desert country with a rapidly growing population of more than 100 million, relies on the Nile for at least 90% of its fresh water and it is already short of water. It imports about half its food products and recycles about 25 billion cubic metres of water annually. Egypt is most worried about the risk of drought conditions such as those that occurred in the late 1970s and early 80s and, therefore, has pushed for Ethiopia to fill the reservoir over a longer period if needed and guarantee minimum flows. If water flows are restricted in drought conditions, Egypt says it could lose more than one million jobs and $1.8bn in economic production annually, though it acknowledges such a scenario is unlikely. Overall, Egypt has regarded the dam as an existential threat to its water supplies. When Ethiopia began generating electricity from GERD, Cairo claimed that Addis Ababa was “persisting in its violations” of a 2015 declaration of principles on the project.

Sudan does not face shortages in its Nile water supplies and it could gain from the dam’s electricity generation and flood mitigation. However, Sudan is concerned about the safety of the dam, which lies just on the other side of its border with Ethiopia. Khartoum has called for information sharing to minimise the effect on its own dams and water stations and it took precautionary measures at its own dams before the GERD’s second filling, citing a lack of data from Ethiopia.

The conflict around GERD is not a postcolonial conflict and, unlike Western Sahara, does not involve ex-colonial powers – albeit that when Donald Trump was president of the US, he intended using the conflict as leverage for the Abraham Accords and threatened that Egypt would “blow up” the dam if Ethiopia did not come to the negotiations table. This support for Egypt was to encourage Egypt to resume relations with Israel. Once Trump was out of office, Egypt and Ethiopia resumed blaming each other for negotiations repeatedly stalling. Talks between the two countries, hosted by Washington, broke down in 2021, and an effort to relaunch them in Kinshasa earlier in 2022 also failed. While the African Union has facilitated recent efforts, it completely avoided the topic in its last meeting in...
Addis Ababa, where both Ethiopia and Egypt were present. Sudan and Egypt have called for the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations (UN) to mediate in the conflict, even though they know how these Western powers broker such situations. Ethiopia has resisted this, saying that diplomacy outside the AU process is “demeaning” to the African body’s efforts. This may be true, but Ethiopia continues to show no willingness to negotiate.
LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Conflict narratives in the news: Narratives versus frames

All conflicts, says Cobb, are “a function of the stories that are told, retold, and foretold about the conflict”. Indeed, narrative approaches have gained substantial popularity in conflict studies. Thus, scholars have engaged in dissecting the characteristics and effects of conflict narratives, while taking into consideration diverse contexts – from individual stories in intergroup encounters to educational textbooks and settings, including historical narratives. According to these inquiries, such narratives can emphasise conflict-supporting views and support the de-legitimisation of the ‘other’… [or] contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliatory efforts, by opening opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and support for peaceful solutions.²⁰

News stories rarely take a narrative-focused enquiry in reporting on conflicts, partly due to a consensus that news stories belong to the realm of information on current events, rather than a storytelling practice. Communication and journalism scholars, however, define journalists as prominent storytellers in the modern time, and thus news coverage as a form of narrative²¹,²² . As such, a narrative approach to news implies that the news media do not just list information impartially, but actively construct, maintain, and disseminate cultural narratives, which refer to a group’s myths, beliefs, identity(s), principles, and view(s) of the world.²³

Such narratives spread between the present, the past and the future, collapsing the idea of time. Many who watch news reports on conflict lose track of when a conflict started and have no insight on how long it might last.

Sometimes a conflict narrative remains dormant until reawakened by an event or a new interest of some kind. In the present, news narratives link contemporary stories to prior events and collective memories, and very often predict future scenarios and suggest courses of action²⁴. Thus, conflict narratives reported by media play a pivotal role in shaping the public discourse on disputes such as the border and water conflicts described in Section ² of this report²⁵; similarly, the echo hits the social web with such discourses in a rather complex way²⁶.

Narratives should not be confused with frames, a related and more popular concept in studies of news content in general, and conflict coverage in particular. Framing is usually understood as a practice whereby particular information is woven into an articulate interpretative framework²⁷. The resulting frames differ from narratives in two ways.

First, unlike narratives, frames do not open room for different views and voices,²⁸,²⁹ . Frames are less cooperative and accommodating. They provide selective readings and assessments for a problem or a situation. They are what Modigliani and Gamson³⁰ call “central organizing ideas”³¹. Narratives, on the other hand, are usually (though not necessarily) inclusive of wide-ranging voices, events, and opinions³².

Second, while narratives can be understood as “discursive representations of time-ordered sequences of events”³³, frames lack similar temporal evidence. They might, at times, be sourced from the past to frame a legitimate future recommendation³⁴, but that is only within a limited period. The panoptic focus is usually on specific events that need to be rationally framed for a purpose.

In fact, narratives can also be viewed as sophisticated discursive paradigms, constructed primarily by gathering and connecting specific frames³⁵. In other words, conflict narratives link frames into a series of related events (a plot), giving key roles to principal conflict actors³⁶.

As for the storytellers, most official conflict coverage, if not all, relies on government sources and frames; especially since, at the time of conflict, sentiments of nationalism and national identity are played as a winning card against the enemy³⁷,³⁸ . Such practice enhances the element
of “us” versus “them” in a dehumanising way at a
global level. Recently, however, a news
broadcaster tried to give voice to all sides of the
story as a practice boosting public service
broadcasting (PSB) as the solution to framing and
agenda-setting⁴⁹ ⁵⁰.

All this gets much more complicated in Africa
because of foreign intervention and the power of
different interest groups. Cyberspace translates
this complexity.

3.2 Hybrid narratives: networked digital
voices and a gagged press

3.2.1 The inclusion/exclusion of the internet:
Agency and Westernisation

According to Ojanperä et al, Africa saw an internet
user increase by tenfold from 2.7% to 28.2%
between 2005 and 2009 (ITU, “Percentage of
Individuals by Country”) – more than three times
the global average during the same period (ITU,
“Global Numbers”). However, increased internet
penetration does not correlate with digital
knowledge production, nor does an increase in
internet access necessarily correlate with increased “voice, representation, and
participation”⁴¹. Graham and Foster⁴² emphasise
the high level of blatant “inequalities in the
amount of information produced from and about
different parts of the world” and indicate “that
older patterns of informational inclusion and
exclusion were being reinforced”⁴³.

Access to the internet and digital platforms makes
it seem that Gayatri Spivak’s “subaltern” ⁴⁴is no
longer denied access to both mimetic and
political forms of representation. Sharp⁴⁵ took
Spivak’s term further, to claim that:

To be heard and to be known, the
subaltern native must adopt Western
ways of knowing (language, thought,
reasoning); because of
such Westernization, a subaltern people
can never express their native ways of
knowing, and, instead, must conform
their native expression of knowledge to
the Western, colonial ways of knowing
the world⁴⁶.

Mano and Milton⁴⁷, have a different approach.
They “introduced and contextualised Afrokology
as a heuristic toolkit that mobilises and speaks to
issues of decolonising, Africanising,
internationalising, indigenising media and
communication studies”⁴⁸. Their centring of
Afrokology, they argue, goes beyond “de-
Westernizing or internationalizing media
and communication”:

De-Westernization or internationalization
does not necessarily lead us into the
Global South. One can de-Westernize but
still remain within the privileged spheres
of the Global North with its capitalist
excesses and geopolitical privileges⁴⁹.

They call for an Afrokology that “allows for more
sensitive and imaginative theoretical
interpretations of African contexts and identities
to emerge”⁵⁰.

3.2.2 Interactivity and its impact on the story

Scholars often describe new media narratives as
“interactive”. For Manovich⁵¹, “interactivity” is key
to talk about an effective use of digital platforms
to successfully shape existing narratives. However,
if the user only shares or picks from a
predetermined set of choices framed by others as
closed or menu-based narratives, the digital
platform is merely an echo-chamber. Barry and
Doherty⁵² go beyond to claim that, far from
creating an environment of “interactivity”, these
types of “non-trivial efforts” made to expand the
narrative instead foster “inter-passivity” that
masquerades as “interactivity”⁵³. Echo-chambers
and “filter bubbles”⁵⁴ keep people busy hearing
the echo of their voices among their peers and
only seeing narratives they habitually click.

Otherness, a philosophical concept used
throughout this report, which refers to the
treatment of others as different. It is not
necessarily democratically part of every discourse
in existing narratives online.

Papacharissi⁵⁵ says that narratives about the self
are always “performative”. She adds that even
though notions of identity and community
translate differently in different cultures and
languages, while at the same time being loaded
with Western biases of sociality and self-
representation, online social platforms foster
expression and connection. These polysemic
performances not only contain many layers of
meaning but are remixed and remixable –
sampling digital traces of identity to piece
together performances that are further remixed
and re-interpreted by multiple audiences and publics. This is what makes social platforms very complicated. A networked self – communicated across collapsed and multiplied audiences – seeks social opportunities for expression and connection. Local and trans-local performances of identity are constantly edited, re-tweaked and remixed, to maintain the coherence (or purposeful incoherence) of the performance with varying audiences or publics.

The issue here is that when such sociability happens over topics of conflict, understanding the topics requires a redactional acumen that is still elitist; thus, rather than seeing conflicts resolve, the networked self is not coherent or polysemic while appropriating the narrative of a conflict or expressing a view about it. It is rather conflicted and biased, with a tendency to delete or otherwise edit aspects of a story to match one’s networked identity, or to hide from punitive measures within the network itself, when topics are policed.

3.2.3 The problem of misinformation/disinformation:
The above argument is further enhanced by the concepts of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation (DMM) (see Figure 3).

Misinformation occurs when people hold incorrect factual beliefs and do so confidently. The problem, first conceptualised by Kuklinski⁵⁶ and colleagues in ²⁰⁰⁰, plagues political systems and is exceedingly difficult to correct⁵⁷. Disinformation, on the other hand, includes deceptive advertising (in business and in politics), government propaganda, doctored photographs, forged documents, fake maps, internet frauds, fake websites, and manipulated Wikipedia entries. Disinformation can cause significant harm if people are misled by it⁵⁸. The third information disorder, malinformation, is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country. An example is a report that reveals a person’s sexual orientation without public interest justification⁵⁹.
Using a case study approach, this study innovatively brings together purposive sampling, news frame analysis and thematic analyses. The two cases have already been presented in the background section of this paper; they are (i) the Morocco/Western Sahara dispute; and (ii) the dispute between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia over the GERD. Each of the methods are briefly discussed below.

1. **Purposive sampling:** This provided an opportunity to identify first the news sources, and then themes, in accordance with the research questions. I identified news sources as categories of cases, based on the contextual and theoretical insights on the topic. The selected evidence categories “have a unique, different or important perspective on the phenomenon in question and their presence in the sample should be ensured”.

2. **News frame analysis** was mobilised to explain “how the media structure their delivery of news, promoting certain interpretations of events by selecting certain facts. Frame analysis serves four main purposes within the context of media research – to define problems, to diagnose a course, to make value judgments, and to suggest remedies”. The identification of news frames requires the researcher to know “how” to look for frames, as well as “what” to look for when identifying frames. It is not a perfect methodology, as researcher bias can create reliability and validity problems.

3. **Deductive thematic analysis** is the main research method in this article. I adjusted it by using purposive sampling, rather than creating codebooks. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns in data. It is a method that can easily be modified to suit the need of different studies. It describes data, but also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes. Thematic analysis helps to unpack similarities and differences within the data sets, which helps turn large data sets into salient themes. The method can be used alongside “a range of epistemologies and research questions”. However, while flexibility is a major advantage of thematic analysis, it can also be included among its limitations.

Using purposive sampling, based on the two case studies, this study looked at evidence from 1,500 daily news articles online and 30 YouTube videos from December 2019 to May 2022. Apart from selecting a range of relevant news sources from multiplatforms, I also examined news at local, regional and international levels to understand how the narrative of conflict evolves. I also deployed a certain level of online ethnography and deductive thematic analysis, to make sense of the plethora of articles that are sometimes duplicated across platforms.

For the analysis section, I examined at least 50 articles for each case, then selected those that represented the overall tone of the publication and that was representative of other publications or reporting style in the region. My aim was to examine a style and approach to reporting news on conflict. This report shows how the journalistic style across borders harms conflicts, rather than participates in conflict resolution. It also shows how vloggers do journalists’ work, taking their audience, rather than political power, into consideration.

The approach to thematic analysis is shown in Figure 4:

**Figure 4: Approach to deductive thematic analysis**

(1) **Familiarisation**... with transcripts: Reading and identifying concepts, range of attitudes and experiences.

(2) **Indexing**... transcripts: Applying the thematic framework, coding as many data as possible and clustering concepts to themes.

(3) **Charting**... coded data into framework matrix: Arranging statements to the thematic reference outcome.

(4) **Mapping**...and interpretation of data: Mapping range and nature of experience, finding associations between themes and explanations for it.

(5) **Reduction**... of data while retaining content: Checking for relevance and consistency across the matrix and significance to the research question.

(Source: Lebherz et al., 2022, 346)
5.1 Case 1: The Morocco/Western Sahara conflict in mainstream news

The samples selected for the Morocco/Western Sahara dispute were based on two main events:

- Donald Trump’s recognition of the Western Sahara as being under Morocco’s jurisdiction, at the end of his office in December 2020; and
- The Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs José Manuel Albares’ recognition of Morocco’s autonomy initiative for Western Sahara and in March 2022, the end to diplomatic tension with Morocco.

The two political positions made the conflict breaking news and brought it into public awareness. Generally, this conflict remains dormant in mainstream media, between political outbreaks. Since Europe, the United States and the Middle East are linked directly to peace processes or conflict resolution attempts, while other regions are involved indirectly, negotiations are subject to a complex power struggle and so is news reporting.

Having scrolled through news reports since December 2020, mapped a variety of newspapers from local, regional and international outlets, and completed an online ethnography on YouTube, I selected articles that took a position closest to the general narrative about the conflict. From the literature review, one would assume that countries involved in conflict would consistently narrate the story of their conflict with the aim to seek resolution and enhance reconciliatory efforts. This is achieved via narratives that open prospects for dialogue, compassion and provision for peaceful resolutions. In the interests of a peaceful resolution then, Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario Front should combine information and journalistic frames and narratives.

Below, I present the news coverage and media perspectives on recognition given by Spain and Donald Trump from (i) Morocco, (ii) the Polisario Front, (iii) Algeria, and (iv) international broadcasters. This is followed by an analysis of the content of two YouTube videos about the conflict.

5.1.1 Spanish recognition of Morocco’s autonomy initiative for Western Sahara

In 18 March 2022, post months of reactions to the American recognition of Morocco’s autonomy initiative, the Moroccan royal house announced that it received a letter from the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, recognising Morocco’s 2006 autonomy initiative for Western Sahara. The letter reads that “Spain considers the Moroccan initiative for autonomy to be the most serious, realistic and credible basis for a resolution of the dispute.” This came amid 10 months of negotiations and escalating bilateral spats.

The Spanish-Moroccan diplomatic rift peaked in April 2021 with Spain’s decision to grant Ibrahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario separatist movement, access to one of its hospitals in Logroño for medical treatment under a fake identity. Morocco considered the hospitalization a stab in the back by its strategic partner and a violation of good neighborliness and mutual respect. Later, Morocco decided to withdraw Karima Benyaich, its ambassador to Madrid.

Morocco exercised retaliatory pressures including loosening its grip on illegal immigration stating to the EU and Spain that “Morocco has no obligation.
to protect the borders of countries other than its own. After 22 countries sent diplomatic missions to the Moroccan Western Sahara and America, France and Germany recognised that Morocco’s autonomy initiative was the soldest approach to solving this thorny conflict. Moroccan diplomacy proved to be ahead of the game in terms of identifying a possible way forward, which earned intense tabloid coverage from Algeria and brought the conflict into the international limelight. The following section looks at the approach of newspapers nationally, regionally and internationally towards this conflict.

**Moroccan coverage: Emphasising the “best”, “credible” aspects of the autonomy initiative**

When the Spanish adaptation of Morocco’s autonomy initiative was announced, the Daily News Morocco reported:

> Spain has assumed its historic role on the Sahara question by unequivocally embracing Morocco’s Autonomy Plan as the only and best way out of the long-running conflict over the region. And in so doing, Madrid might have also paved the way for other European countries that have been concealing their reluctance to pick Morocco’s side behind vague, ambiguous statements of “positive neutrality.”… “Spain has taken a sovereign decision,” Albares said… The position taken by the Spanish government “is in accordance with international legality and there is nothing to add on this subject,” he said, calling for avoiding “sterile polemics” on this issue.  

In the Moroccan news on this topic, three narratives emerged: (i) Spain assumed responsibility for its historic role; (ii) the autonomy initiative was “the only and best way” to resolve the conflict; and (iii) the autonomy initiative was the “most serious, realistic and credible”.

Regarding the first theme, Moroccan news presented Spain’s recognition of its historic role as an achievement in negotiations since Morocco regards ex-colonial Spain as a main actor causing the problem. Without using any terms that refer to colonialism, the Daily News Morocco article starts with the notion of “assuming responsibility”. In most reporting, the origin of the conflict was almost dead in the news, for two reasons. First, via the UN, the colonial powers became peace brokers in the conflict they had created and resisted acknowledging their role, with Spain and other colonists having treated Western Sahara as a no-man’s land. Most analysis of the case stemmed from the right to self-determination, which emerged after the American and European revolutions and was framed after the world wars and the decolonisation period. Second, international and regional powers had approached the conflict with no reference to its origins, and instead were driven by vested interests. Thus, narrating the origins of the conflict had fallen on deaf ears, and proved useless for advancing conflict resolution.

Regarding the second theme, while Morocco’s autonomy initiative was used in coverage of breaking news, no background about the initiative and its timeline was provided, nor any reference to counter initiatives by the Polisario Front. Without a proper reference to the previous peace plans and the diplomatic stalemate (as shown in ), news reports adopted an incomplete and superficial approach that stalled the progress of the peace process rather than informing about it. Despite the urgency of this case, more informative coverage was absent from all news outlets, not only the Moroccan ones.

Regarding the third theme, Morocco’s autonomy initiative was presented as the “most serious, realistic and credible” by Spain and other countries that endorsed the initiative, such as the US and France, thereby giving power to the historical narrative about the righteousness of Morocco’s claim on Western Sahara. This confirms the work of Lule (2001), Bird and Bardenne (2009), and Teneenboim-Weinbalt and Neiger (2015) who highlight that the idea of time between the present, past and future collapses in narratives about long conflicts that go dormant in the news, then make it back into breaking news, happening ‘in the now’. News narratives link contemporary stories to a list of prior events and collective memories; in this case the Moroccan-ness of the Western Sahara as a recovered land from the colonial powers. As seen in the news sample from Daily News Morocco, this is done in a fractured way so that readers lose track of time and lack insight into how long the conflict might last. There is a repetitive reference to a “long-lasting conflict”, without background being provided; and progress is presented in breaking
The Western Sahara is the disputed land. SADR is the political representation claiming the Western Sahara, but 90% of the Western Sahara remains under Morocco’s rule.

SADR is based in Tindouf refugee camps (Algerian territory).

The Polisario Front’s coverage: Attacking negotiations and underscoring historic position

One of the Polisario Front’s main news outlets is the Sahara Press Service, the official press agency of the SADR. Another digital publication with coverage of the Polisario Front, called Al-Saharawi (https://saharawi.net/en/) claimed expertise in news analysis. However, instead of analysing news and breaking news reports it delved in conspiracy theories with a focus on Morocco, and therefore, I have not included any of their articles in this study.

More than 50 articles by the Sahara Press Service it became apparent that the service opted for defensive journalism by attacking negotiations and underscoring its historic position. On breaking the news about Spain’s recognition of the autonomy initiative, the Sahara Press Service reported that the Polisario Front said:

The Polisario Front has decided to suspend its contacts with the current Spanish Government until it dissociates from the instrumentalization of the Sahrawi issue within the framework of appalling bargaining with the occupier, and until it conforms to the decisions of the international legality which recognizes the Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination and respect of its internationally recognized borders.\(^{80}\)

In a second article, the Sahara Press Service further stated that:

“According to Spanish media, 147 Spanish and European personalities will travel to the Saharawi refugee camps to participate in the celebrations of the 49th anniversary of the creation of the Polisario Front and the outbreak of the armed struggle”\(^{81}\).

The Sahara Press Service also reported in a third article that:

The Polisario Front representative to the United Nations, Sidi Mohamed Omar, stressed that the exercise by the Sahrawi people of its right to self-determination will remain “the only option” to resolve the conflict in Western Sahara, warning against the Moroccan project to “change the demographic nature of the territory...For the Sahrawi diplomat, it is imperative to “defend the principles of international legality and complete the process of decolonization of Western Sahara through the free, genuine and democratic expression of the sovereign will of the Sahrawi people in the exercise of its inalienable and non-negotiable right to self-determination and independence.”\(^{82}\)

As Sahara Press Service is a mouthpiece of SADR rather than an analytical or investigative publication, which is understandable in view of the conditions of the state, it misses out on peacebuilding and conflict resolution journalism. Two themes emerge from the coverage of Spain’s recognition: (i) restating the right of the Western Sahara to self-determination and cutting relations/boycott; and (ii) dismissing any Moroccan international diplomatic progress.

Most reports re-establish the right to self-determination according to international law: this is the only proposal, and it is repeated in most articles. As such, they do not discuss Morocco’s autonomy initiative or present a counter-plan. Like the other media covering the conflict, the stories provide no background to the conflict, nor

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\(^{80}\) The Western Sahara is the disputed land. SADR is the political representation claiming the Western Sahara, but 90% of the Western Sahara remains under Morocco's rule. SADR is based in Tindouf refugee camps (Algerian territory).
do they provide information about the humanitarian issues related to the plight of the Sahrawis in the refugee camps because that entails reference to the Sahrawis in the Moroccan territories, who outnumber those in the camps. They also do not reference the two failed referendums. As this is an official publication, the journalism should be more informative and oriented to conflict resolution, with a well-established narrative. As it stands, the style is a constant political statement of position and ignores regional or international events, which keeps dialogue at a stalemate.

Many other reports simply reject whatever Morocco claims as progress and hold to the UN’s recognition of the Western Sahara as a state, without any analysis or investigative journalism. Whenever Morocco makes progress in lobbying international support for solving the conflict and, in this case, rallying support from Spain, the Polisario Front first rejects the development and cuts relations with Morocco, before inviting for reconsideration. This position is then taken up by the Sahara Press Service, which gathers quotes from other sources such as ex-ambassadors, Sahrawi diplomatic missions, politicians and opposition groups to the governments involved in the deal.

**Algerian coverage: Fanning the flames of tension**

In most Algerian coverage of Morocco, the media adopts an approach of fuming, gaslighting and slandering, with no attempt to resolve the conflict. For example, the following article, which ran in *El Watan* and *El Moujahid*, defames Morocco using a quote from the SADR ambassador – a typical journalistic style of quoting authority figures:

> "Victory is near," said the ambassador [of SADR- Mr. Abdelkader Taleb Omar], who returned to the last conference against terrorism organized by the Makhzen in Marrakech (Morocco), calling it a “joke in bad taste”...“The terms used by Moroccans are at odds with their attitudes. The latter finance terrorism in the Sahel with narcotics money and indulge in acts of state terrorism by assassinating civilians in the liberated territories and in Mauritania. International organizations must come to Western Sahara to see first-hand the reality of Moroccan oppression,” he pleaded. (Translation from French by the author).

Since the quote gives the ambassador a voice, balanced journalism would have involved giving a Moroccan of equal standing a voice. But the one-sided quote was used to accuse Morocco of illegal activities. The article included the term Makhzen, which refers to the “deep state” and is usually a negative reference to Morocco positioning of itself as a gatekeeper of terrorism between North Africa and Europe. The term represents the fight over the role and status of Moroccan diplomacy, which is at the heart of problems between Algeria and Morocco. So, instead of promoting a resolution, journalism was used here to fan the flames of competitive tensions between Algeria and Morocco, with the Polisario Front’s conflict being weaponised.

*El Khabar*, a daily Arabic language tabloid published and widely read in Algeria uses a similar style, but more confidently, to argue that Pedro Sánchez, Spain’s prime minister, is under threat of falling – but the newspaper does not focus on the logic of Spain’s position nor those who support it.

*El Massa*, an Algerian Arabic newspaper, also attempts to blacken the diplomatic relationship between Spain and Morocco and generate conflict, suggesting that Morocco tapped Prime Minister Sanchez’ phone and used information gathered to bribe Sanchez. (This topic will be discussed further in the next section.) Despite these claims, Morocco and Spain remain on good terms.
International news coverage: Strategic interests of the West brought into play

While international coverage of the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict is diverse, the themes in samples discussed below show how the journalism flattens out the conflict and presents it as a single-story issue, basing the narrative on the strategic interests of Western powers, rather than on the impact of the conflict on the ground. For example, *The New York Times* reported that Spain was seeking better ties with Morocco and had thus shifted its stance on Western Sahara:

> Madrid endorsed a plan for limited autonomy for the territory in North-Western Africa, but the change in policy was denounced by independence groups and could aggravate relations with Algeria. The Moroccan plan would allow the Sahrawis to run their own administration, but under Moroccan sovereignty and with Morocco in charge of defence and foreign affairs...The Polisario Front, which has long fought Morocco’s control over Western Sahara, with the backing of neighbouring Algeria has demanded a referendum on self-determination, as prescribed by a 1991 cease-fire and U.N.-mediated talks.

At face value this sounds like a normal breaking news piece, presenting different voices, which is acceptable journalistic practice in a standalone piece. However, the report is still problematic since it was silent about the origin of this deal and the narrative of the conflict; without background information, it as though Spain backed a Moroccan plan against the Polisario Front’s long battle, and Algeria is a broker of peace, demanding “a referendum on self-determination, as prescribed by a 1991 cease-fire”. As mentioned earlier, two referendums failed, leading to James Baker’s resignation (see ) because the UN overestimated its ability to broker a deal between tribes who are of the same lineage but who hold different political views and allegiances. The way *The New York Times* presented the information flattens the conflict, with insufficient background detail to inform readers, thus showing the conflict as if it exists outside of a time frame and is at a stalemate.

Most other international publications examined in this research approach this conflict in a similar way; providing some information from both sides but no deeper investigation and no acknowledgement of the relevance of the colonial period.

A second theme emerging from the international articles is related to belittling the causes of African conflict and creating a grand narrative of Western superiority. For example, the US news outlet, Foreign Policy ran an article by a Spanish journalist, which asked why Madrid is pandering to Morocco, and suggested, without any supporting evidence, that the phones of key Spanish officials had been hacked, insinuating that the Moroccan government was involved.

> In May and June 2021, during the peak of the confrontation, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s phone was twice hacked by the Israel-developed malware Pegasus. So was a phone belonging to then-Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya, as well as the phones of Defense Minister Margarita Robles and Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska. Agriculture Minister Luis Planas, a former Spanish ambassador to Morocco, suffered a failed attempt.

The journalist supported his claim by quoting an exiled Moroccan journalist, who had fake evidence about this serious matter. The article presented Spain as weak for submitting to what amounted to a criminal state and made no reference to Spain’s historical colonial role leading to the conflict. The article also did not reference the victims of conflict who are suffering in both countries, but used colonial-style politics to present the Spanish government and the person of Pedro Sánchez as weak, and Morocco as less worthy. The journalist suggested that gas from Algeria should be a higher priority for the Spanish government than a less-worthy Morocco and argued that the Ukraine–Russian war should be an incentive for Spain to side with Algeria rather than Morocco. In presenting the conflict in this way, the main concern was about leveraging Spain’s vested interest, totally ignoring humanitarian concerns in the region, which should be addressed by responsible journalism.
Another report by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on the conflict also presents a one-sided, single-story view. It described the plight of 176,000 Saharawis believed to be living in five refugee camps in Algeria's "sweltering desert that many consider no-man's land". The report emphasised that the refugees rely on international aid agencies for help and goods, and are governed by the Polisario Front, which presides over an exiled SADR. It stated that in 2020, "their frustration over three decades in limbo led to the end of a cease-fire and new hostilities between Polisario forces and the Moroccan army." The report continued by arguing that Morocco's autonomy initiative was only introduced after Morocco reneged on its agreement to hold a referendum for Western Sahara, which was a simplification of the peace process and ignored the fact that other peace processes subsequently failed, namely, the Manhasset Negotiations of 2007–2008 and 2012–2013 (see ). It further implied that Morocco is in the wrong and,

Using its leverage in keeping extremism in North Africa at bay and controlling the flow of African migrants towards the EU, Rabat has increasingly scored support for its proposal. First it was backed by France, then in late 2019 by the United States under former President Donald Trump, and more recently from Germany.

As such, ABC reported on this violent conflict – an attack by the Polisario Front on Morocco – as though it was simply a matter of the Polisario Front’s “frustration”, using soft language that would likely not have been used to describe an Iraqi attack on US occupiers. The article also used poetic, lyrical language to draw sympathy for Polisario Front and relies on stereotypes of North African deserts to condemn the existence of refugee camps. In further studies it will interesting to contrast this story with coverage of the war in Ukraine it might become clearer that conflict and war in European countries are indeed not treated in the same way. However, one example of the different way conflict is covered is Vogue’s recent front cover depiction of Ukraine President Zelensky’s wife, Olena Zolenska, as a “portrait of bravery.”

The SADR formed in exile and Morocco holds the same territories it held before the recognition of an independent state in the Sahara. Breaking the ceasefire of 1991 and firing at Moroccan targets is considered an act of war, since an armistice is a commitment in international law to stop trying to settle differences on the battlefield. Although a ceasefire does not mean peace, it means the end of war for the time being. This breach is a regression in resolving the conflict and one of the reasons the US under Donald Trump recognised Morocco’s autonomy initiative. The ABC report, in presenting this as a “frustration” from SADR, undermined the scale of such a breach and ignored the damage caused to Moroccan diplomacy in Europe and the US. It also presented the autonomy initiative out its time frame and did not provide the historical developments that led to it. All this fuels the conflict, rather than helping to resolve it.

5.1.2 United States’ recognition of the Moroccan-ness of the Western Sahara
On 12 October 2020, the official website of the White House published an announcement that US President Donald Trump had recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the Moroccan Sahara. The text of the full recognition stated that

the United States, as stated by previous administrations, affirms its support for Morocco’s proposal for autonomy as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the conflict over the territory of Western Sahara... As of today, the United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire territory of Western Sahara and
reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious, credible, and realistic proposal for autonomy as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the territory of Western Sahara.\textsuperscript{44}

Below I examine how the issue was covered by different country media.

Moroccan coverage: Reflecting on other conflicts and claiming Moroccan legitimacy

US recognition of Morocco’s plan for the Western Sahara was significant breaking news in the history of this conflict. All news articles started by highlighting the full text or big parts of it from the White House website, before adding a section that defended the declaration as legitimate and significant to peace. The White House statement refers to Morocco’s autonomy initiative, but most reports ignore the plan itself and focus on the politics of power.

For example, the most popular Moroccan Arabic online news website, Hespress, which has an English version, reported:

Recalling the exchanged views, during the same conversation between His Majesty King Mohammed VI and His Excellency Donald Trump, on the current situation in the Middle East region in which His Majesty the King reiterated the coherent, constant and unchanged position of the Kingdom of Morocco on the Palestinian question, as well as the position expressed on the importance of preserving the special status of the sacred city of Jerusalem for the three monotheistic religions in His Majesty the King’s capacity as Chairman of the Al-Quds Committee;

Recognizing the historic role that Morocco has always played in bringing the people of the region closer together and promoting peace and stability in the Middle East, and given the special ties that His Majesty maintains with the Moroccan Jewish community living in Morocco and throughout the world including in Israel;

Mindful that the establishment of full diplomatic, peaceful and friendly relations is in the common interest of both countries and will advance the cause of peace in the region, improve regional security, and unlock new opportunities for the whole region.\textsuperscript{45}

Two themes emerge from Moroccan articles on the subject: (i) Morocco defends the progress that has been made, and (ii) the peace process is linked to other peace processes in the region – especially the conflict between Palestine and Israel – and Morocco argues that its plan for the Western Sahara provides new opportunities for peace more broadly.

Regarding the first theme, the Hespress article showed how Morocco responded to Trump’s announcement with a discussion on the Abraham Accords. As for the Western Sahara conflict, this was presented without explanation or definition. Instead, the news about Trump’s statement focused mainly on Trump’s character rather than analysing what the American position meant in solving two long conflicts: Morocco/Western Sahara and Israel/Palestine. The article did not present an analysis of the situation, where Palestinians and Sahrawis are entering fifth and third generations respectively of unresolved conflict and deteriorating living conditions. From a humanitarian perspective, the lack of depth of reporting on these conflicts and of maintaining the highest journalism standards keep the conflicts alive in the news, rather than paving the way for resolution.

Highlighting Morocco’s “historic role” in bringing people together and mentioning the Moroccan Jewish population in Morocco and Israel were a defence of Morocco’s reputation and legitimacy.
While the Moroccan king has kept his title of Chairman of Al-Quds Committee and Morocco has continued to have a full relationship with Palestine and its cause, this relationship received no attention in the Hespress article, part of a global silence in reporting on the Israel/Palestine conflict. At the same time, Morocco pointed to having a Jewish population in both Morocco and Israel so, logically, a peace process is mandatory. Again, there was no analysis of any of the statements quoted in the Hespress article, or what they meant at humanitarian, economic and political levels. In fact, as will be discussed in the next section, Algeria used these statements as grounds for attack; calling Morocco a “Zionist state”, and accusing it for bringing Zionism to the region.

The last section of the Hespress article used generalised words and statements to reinforce the idea that all peace processes are linked together; suggesting that the Middle East peace process and the Western Sahara conflict are both old, legitimate, regional conflicts and solving both in one go is not a problem but an opportunity. Thus Morocco, which takes a leading role in the Al-Quds Committee for Palestine and presents itself as an avid diplomatic negotiator for peace efforts, is committed to peace and progress in the region. In the face of attacks from Algerian and some international newspapers, the Hespress article defends Morocco’s right to resolve both conflicts. The article takes a political position and issues a statement, instead of considering and debating different points of view by other news regional and international outlets. It is a form of monologue in answer to key accusations or attacks.

The Polisario Front’s coverage: Disguised attack on Trump and gentle tone towards Biden

In its initial coverage of Trump’s decision, Sahara Press Service focuses on a statement from James A. Baker, who had previously attempted to broker peace in the region (see ). In his statement, Baker argues:

President Trump’s recent proclamation recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara was an astounding retreat from the principles of international law and diplomacy that the United States has espoused and respected for many years...The Abraham Accords and efforts to widen them are, of course, laudable ways to promote peace in the Middle East by establishing formal relations between Israel and Arab countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and now Morocco...Peace between Israelis and Arabs is critical to stability in that region. And so, Trump deserves credit for seeking to rearrange the chessboard in the Middle East...We should not simply turn our backs on the people of Western Sahara as we try to promote better relations between Israel and her Arab neighbours.

By leading with Baker’s input, Sahara Press Service puts into the voice of an international and US politician any harsh position that the Polisario Front might put forward. The service uses sources such as Baker’s voice and US publications that opposed Trump and Spanish political opposition – including quoting Spanish opposition parliamentarians verbatim to talk about the conflict rather than discuss it from a place of domestic authority. It is as if the Polisario Front disassociates from these critiques of Trump, while still reclaiming its historic position of calling for self-determination. It therefore illustrates how African states are at the mercy of countries that claim to broker conflict resolution, such as the US and Spain, to the extent that they are unable to claim their own African voices. However, relying on Baker as a US politician to present an “expert” position defies logic, since Baker resigned from the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) after failing to resolve the conflict. Nevertheless, the Polisario Front remains dependent on such voices to assert its own position.
In response to Trump’s position, the Polisario Front expressed their disappointment in articles addressed to countries from the Global North. When Biden was elected, the Polisario Front asked the US to reconsider its position; the plea fell on deaf ears but stalled conflict resolution. Sahara Press Service reported from Sydney that

The representative of the Polisario Front in Australia and New Zealand, Kamel Fadel on Saturday called on US President-elect Joe Biden to reverse Donald Trump’s unilateral decision...“We hope that...Joe Biden, whom I consider to be a man of integrity...will have a positive influence on self-determination in Western Sahara and that he will challenge this decision”...“this is not part of Trump’s real estate to give to Morocco and...he could have given them one of his golf properties, but not Western Sahara.”

The Sahara Press Service article showed a distinctive difference in talking about Biden, compared to Trump and Spain, using praise words such as “a man of integrity”, for supporting the Polisario Front’s right to self-determination, in an attempt to influence Biden.

**Algerian coverage: Peddling experts**

Like the Polisario Front, Echourouk, an Algerian daily tabloid quotes another source (*The Progressive*) to back its position, implying that it has consensus with a Western publication that focuses on civil rights. However, by adopting this “expert” voice making demands on Biden, Echourouk shows that it does not feel it is powerful enough to demand the same thing. The same article circulated online in publications such as “Al Khabar” Algeria News, these news articles expire but the article can be found on Fourals.

The American magazine “The Progressive” confirmed that US President Joe Biden should “immediately” cancel his predecessor Donald Trump’s recognition of Morocco’s “alleged” sovereignty over Western Sahara, and this is “for the sake” of the Sahrawi people and the “credibility” of the United States...the magazine highlighted [a recent article in which] Joe Biden stressed that “any use of force to change borders is strictly prohibited under international law,” and therefore preventing any country from expanding its territory by force is one of the founding principles of the United Nations and is an integral part of its charter.

Here the demands are attributed to The Progressive. Terms such as “immediately”, “alleged” “credibility” and even “for the sake” are put in quotes to stress the position and to give the impression of authority for Algeria’s position. It also states Biden’s position to serve as an indirect warning to the US of possibly losing credibility if it goes against international laws; however, the quote by Biden is presented without analysis or interpretation, or explanation whether it applies to the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict. Again, the Algerian tabloid’s tone towards Biden is markedly different to how the Algerian media had discussed Spain’s position on the autonomy initiative, in which it had fanned the flames of the conflict, asserted conspiracy theories, and insulted the Spanish prime minister.

**5.1.3 Western Sahara narratives in cyberspace: Youtube vloggers**

Although the literature above would suggest that cyberspace discussions of the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict would remain superficial, the vloggers discussed below are surprisingly adept at exploring silent narratives and addressing people’s concerns, rather than taking a political position at the expense of the conflict. The two vlogs below were selected as representative of 50 sampled vlogs; they adopted different positions and voices on the conflict but documented these with historical facts.
User Wonderjunkie: “The Western Sahara, an Endless Saga”

User Wonderjunkie, who is based in Morocco, has a three-part video called “The Western Sahara, an Endless Saga”, in which he narrates the origins of the conflict and links it to current developments using a timeline to map important events that led to the conflict. Unlike the news referenced above, his narrative shows that the US and European position, backing the Moroccan plan in the Western Sahara, was not a sudden, reckless decision but an evolution of historical events and complex power relations that go back to the 12th century and lead to the current conflict. While journalists should (but do not) undertake this type of analysis in telling stories, this series of videos shows a strong investigative style, offering substance and expertise to the debate on the conflict. Literature in which authors diminish the work of online users does not pay sufficient attention to how current events are discussed in cyberspace. The video series, “The Western Sahara, an Endless Saga”, reflects three themes: (i) postcolonial conflict and the problem of historicity; (ii) the relationship between the Moroccans and the Sahrawis; and (iii) Algeria as an instigator of conflict, not peacekeeper.

Wonderjunkie opens the series with the Spanish decision to retreat from what it annexed and called “no human land”, during the colonial period. The historical narrative pays attention to identity and nationalism, which are missed in current news reports that voice the right to self-determination, without providing background. The video series maps the struggle of different tribes, including the nomad Sahrawis, and highlights the daunting, almost impossible task of drawing borders for people who lived on the move, and whom colonials did not even consider to be human.
These images from the video series relate to several treaties and map a long Moroccan struggle for independence: the series shows consistency and complexity without flattening the conflict narrative.
The series highlights how, historically, Europe has treated the Morocco/Sahara conflict as a side-issue because it has focused on its own conflicts and problems. Likewise, international news outlets today are more concerned with European vested interests in the conflict, not European responsibility for creating the conflict.

The series also presents a detailed account of the tribal struggle in the region, showing that a referendum would favour Morocco’s autonomy initiative because more Sahrawis live in Morocco than in the refugee camps. This point is usually absent from the mainstream news. The news also rarely explains that, instead of holding referendums that are always challenged by Algeria and refused by the Polisario Front, the autonomy initiative was written to move the issue forward.

The series also highlights the relationship between Algeria and Morocco. It emphasises that, before the Sand War (a conflict over border delineations between Algeria and Morocco in October 1963), the two countries showed friendship and support for each other. Before independence, the border between them was not precisely delineated and existed in the memory of tribes and local people. After independence, the UN required a precise mapping of the border, and the attempt to create this resulted in the Sand War. Thus, the current conflict dates back to the Sand War. In the series, based on the main political events, Algeria is presented as the instigator of the conflict.

After a detailed historical narrative, the series contrasts Morocco’s diplomatic efforts and investments with the guerrilla warfare in the southern provinces and the rise of ISIS networks in the Tindouf camps. Considering the rise of ISIS, the US position no longer looks like the overly reported “impulsive” reaction of Donald Trump, and could be seen as a strong nudge to solve this conflict. Thus, the US endorsement of the Moroccan plan evolves logically in the narratives of this video.
User Beacebrocess: “Morocco and The Sahrawis: Blood in Western Sahara”

User Beacebrocess has made many videos that look at conflicts around the world. In “Morocco and The Sahrawis: Blood in Western Sahara” he takes narrates the conflict from the point of view of Western Sahara. He begins the video with the words, “a nation of refugees fighting in a desert land for the right to determine their own destiny waving a red, white, black and green flag in the face of foreign occupation.” Using animation, Beacebrocess adopts a sarcastic tone and shows support for Sahrawi self-determination, backing his position with historical facts and background details of the conflict. Even though the video is led with opinion, it is rooted in evidence and fact; it is thus received with more respect than are stories that are just opinion and that present only a flattened, single story.

Three themes emerge from the video: (i) Spain created the problem and has not yet owned up; (ii) in this conflict, it is hard to define identity in a distinctive way; and (iii) it is possible to show complexity while taking a side, when presenting a conflict in breaking news.

Regarding Spain, as illustrated in the images below, Beacebrocess starts the video by showing how that country, as a colonial state, was in decline at the time it left Western Sahara. The video argues that Spain handled its departure irresponsibly, because it left the conflict without any attempt to resolve the problem it had created. It also relied on newly formed international regulations that benefitted the Global North more than the Global South.

Regarding the theme of identity, Beacebrocess ridicules the idea that the UN is a capable and confident broker of peace among tribes, when there is no clear distinction between them. He also ridicules the UN approach, which supports the attempts of Moroccan rulers to be liked by the Sahrawis, based on the concept of identity. Beacebrocess points out that even within Morocco identity is not unified by nationalism.
Beacebrocess highlights two key questions that are missed by most news reports: (i) How does one draw borders for nomads? and (ii) Who gets to vote in a referendum, as, despite Morocco being described as a foreign power occupying Western Sahara, there are more Sahrawis in Morocco than in the refugee camp in Tindouf? This gives the issue of identity a different dimension and puts the concept of self-determination under further scrutiny. The identity issue is one of the reasons James Baker’s plans failed twice. The complexity of the identity issue is why this aspect of the story is often left out of the narrative: to reduce confusion and thus flatten the conflict.

The video describes how Spain tried to define an identity for the Sahrawis, which they refused. Beacebrocess explains that they are one population, so setting standards which respect to voting was impossible. The picture above on the far right, at the bottom, shows the similarities between the two Sheikhs from both sides and the Moroccan and Sahrawi frustrations. Because there was no way to differentiate between those who are legitimate Sahrawis and those who are Moroccan, Sheikhs were trusted to identify who gets to vote and who does not. This meant that the census was met with ridicule.
5.2.1 Mainstream media coverage of the dispute
Compared to Western Sahara, far fewer articles cover the Renaissance Dam conflict. The findings from this research were that media coverage from each country involved in the conflict focused on their own country’s vested positions, and strongly diverged from each other.

For example, using narrow framing, the Ethiopian News Agency presented a pro-Ethiopian position, which it regards as a solution to the conflict. It uncritically defines the dam as a “national” project, “financed by the Ethiopian government and all Ethiopian citizens, as well as some Ethiopian loved ones”36. It also frames the dam as a “locomotive of development”37 and, to answer any claims that it threatens neighbouring Egypt and Sudan, quotes President Aby: “We do not have the desire of stopping the flow of the Abay water, rather generating energy,” [Aby] stated, adding that all would “benefit if we work together and through negotiation”38.

According to Aby, if Ethiopia generated energy and Sudan produced food through irrigation, sharing the energy and the food would be more than enough39. There is no mention of Egypt in this Ethiopian News Agency article, but Egypt is mentioned in many other articles within the same rhetoric; the dam is a national project that does not acknowledge any legal challenges contained in legal documents. Most articles promise good will from Ethiopia, stressing its right to this national project and claiming leadership in water-based energy power in all Africa. It is worth noting that although Sudan joins Egypt in raising concerns, it is more friendly to Ethiopia and less threatened, compared to Egypt.

From the Egyptian side, Egypt Independent raised concerns and fears that the construction of the dam was a “threat to their vital water supplies”40, sought reassurance and insisted that “measures be put into place”41 to ensure the dam did not threaten regional stability. The newspaper

The strength of the videos by these two vloggers is that the creators went the extra mile, creating good graphics and narrating stories with a clear perspective and evidence. The vloggers created an environment for people to ask questions and want to know more: the comments section for both videos were vibrant, with audiences applauding or contesting points in the narratives. For example, one Sahrawi contested the idea that the Western Sahara is an unbearable place to live; a Moroccan contested the depiction of Morocco as a country prying in the affairs of a land it does not own; and internationally, viewers discussed certain features of the videos or criticised media articles that did not give them any insight into the conflict. By contrast, the news articles discussed above, written by professional journalists, present simplistic, flattened narratives, often showing one or other form of bias.
adopted frames that positioned Egypt and Sudan as vulnerable to Ethiopia's “failed understanding”. Further, it insisted on “a legally binding agreement” rather than an “advisory” deal with Ethiopia to protect their interests, and the framing suggested that they were less trusting of Ethiopia's dominant stance. The Akhbar Sudan indirectly echoed frames in the Egyptian media, stressing “brotherly”, “historical” ties, “common challenges” and “common interest”. The diagnoses of the problem and remedies offered in the news framing of the conflict reveal that the media are strongly bound to their respective country's national interests, and Egypt and Sudan are full of suspicion towards Ethiopia. As such, the articles do not provide a balanced position, and instead prop up each side, without any effort to resolve the conflict.

By contrast, the international media covering the dispute presented a more complex story. For example, with US-led talks having failed, Al Jazeera framed the dam as a source of “tension” and “unsolved problems”, “blame” games, with “negotiations repeatedly stalling” and in need of “mediations”, especially from the African Union. However, the U.S. News, an American weekly newspaper, relied mainly on Ethiopian sources and suggested that the dam would “benefit Egypt and Sudan” because it would enhance economic prospects when the dam started generating electricity. The Financial Times (Europe) similarly focused on the dam as “an economic icon”, emphasised its economic features and glossed over the regional tensions. It mirrored Ethiopia's assurances of “benefits” to all, without adequately assessing the divergent positions of the other countries in the conflict. The political prospects were also emphasised on US-based news website, Al-Monitor.

Ethiopia has appointed former Minister of Water, Irrigation and Energy Seleshi Bekele as a new ambassador to the United States, in a move aimed to counter Egyptian efforts to draw US support in its favour in the years' long dispute with Addis Ababa over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Analysts see Bekele’s appointment as an effort by Addis Ababa to promote its viewpoint regarding the GERD dispute with Egypt and Sudan as well as the conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region.

There is emphasis in the article that the US-Ethiopian relations were currently secondary to the humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia and its effects in the region.

Euronews, a television news network that presents news from a European perspective reported the same political positions about the dam but highlighted the issue of corruption in Ethiopia just after listing the Ethiopian promises showing contradiction in narratives.

But [Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed] said the dam would benefit Egypt and Sudan.

“We want to export our pollution-free electricity to Europe through Sudan and Egypt, so the way forward is cooperation among us. Ethiopia doesn't want and intend to harm anyone else,” he said.

Ethiopia contends the $4.2 billion dam is essential for its development and will enable it to distribute power to its population of more than 110 million.

Several rounds of talks have been held in attempts to solve the stalemate.

The dam’s construction started in 2011 and the completion date was missed years ago due to embezzlement and design flaws.

The closing line is an indirect indication of why the statements of Ethiopia must be taken with a pinch of salt. While the statement gives a valid fact, better journalism would analyse the potentials and threats with a more balanced and well researched account, rather than highlighting something to show that one side is not to be trusted. The public sphere is already sceptical of political statements; what the public needs is more analysis of how to keep a government accountable.

At regional level, The EastAfrican used similar framing, emphasising how Ethiopia was working to supply electric power to all other African countries as part of "regional integration with its neighbours". The article was used across many other regional websites; the emphasis being on Sudanese satisfaction with the project, and with no mention of Egypt.
should be countered with discussions about the environment and shifts in the way of life in Egypt and Sudan; and should also acknowledge the huge tensions. As discussed above, Afrokology could allow for alternative accounts as well as “more sensitive and imaginative theoretical interpretations of African contexts and identities to emerge”.

The news analysed above promoted standpoints and certain interpretations of the dispute, illustrating differences in how the problem is defined, diagnosed, judged and solved. Power relations, economic interests and national causes dominate coverage, without any effort to incorporate other views.

5.2.2 Renaissance Dam narratives in cyberspace

Several social media accounts discuss the Renaissance Dam conflict, offering varied opinions and positions for and against the dam. More than for the Western Sahara conflict, the vlog coverage of the dam dispute offered extreme news frames, highlighting both the threats and potentials of the dam, depending on the nationality of the vlogger; albeit it most of them are in the diaspora. Inaccuracies and misinformation were a big problem, and although the alternative news form allows for frames to counter the straitjacketed and stereotypical narratives in the other news media, the vlog narratives on this topic did not diverge from mainstream media news, and rather acted as an echo-chamber. For example, Egyptians highlighted the threat as voiced by the Egyptian government and Ethiopians took pride in the dam.

While viral content about this conflict was mainly sarcastic analysis of the way governments were dealing with the matter, it nevertheless stayed within nationalist bounds. For example, a TikTok video that went viral had Ethiopians standing and holding a cup of water, telling Egyptians that they would soon not even be able to find a glass of water, and some poured the glass of water out while others drank it. All three countries control their media with extreme measures, and it is not clear if this nationalism is present because of the authoritative nature of the state in all three countries or if it is the result of the way this conflict is depicted in the news.
DISCUSSION

The two cases in this study are of a different scale in terms of time and historicity, but our examination of the media coverage of both conflicts shows how media narratives can keep conflicts at a stalemate.

The international news often approaches African conflicts from the point of view of their vested interests, and not based on their role in the historical development of the conflict. The silence in international stories over issues of origin of the conflict and over the dimensions of human suffering is misleading; timelines are often confused in the process, such that a new, inaccurate narrative emerges from breaking news. So, for example, when Trump and the Spanish government made announcements about Western Sahara, the narrative sands began swirling. Now the conflict is again dormant in the news, until another event involving Western powers and their interests puts it back on the breaking news agenda. Thus, emerging narratives on the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict tell the story in a way that makes it and the plight of those involved seem lost in time. Similarly, international news coverage of the GRED conflict reveals a focus on economic interests (in favour of Ethiopia) at the expense of other issues.

However, African coverage of GRED – in each of the three Nile basin countries – also gives an example of how African narratives are neither organised nor empowered to make the best of the continent’s rich resources, leaving a young population in scarcity. It is ironic that these is not a positive local narrative of the iconic dam, which is unprecedented in scale and power. The in-country media simply reflect, without analysis, the power struggles and disputes between African countries, in a way that slows dialogue and creates stagnant processes of integration and cooperation.

The in-country coverage in the case of the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict, similarly, fails to broker a narrative of peace. While the Moroccan news media highlight progress in negotiations, confirming and defending any support gathered internationally, most newspapers do not attempt to discuss the origin of the conflict (which in Morocco’s view predates the colonial period of the World Wars). Instead, the stories break news on achievements in working towards conflict resolution in terms of international law and international standards.

The Sahara Press Service of the Polisario Front similarly misses out on constructive analysis of their own political struggle and avoids telling the stories of people living in Tandouf – their everyday lives or future in the camps. Therefore, they waste good media space on political propaganda, attacking Morocco and statements of Sahrawi politicians and diplomatic missions all over the world. While it is important to discuss the Sahrawis right to self-determination, it is as important to discuss the impact of geopolitical developments surrounding the conflict – not only make political statements. Indeed, the bulk of Sahara Press Service articles are simply long quotes from government officials, and they give more voice to Algerians than the Sahrawis themselves. The examples from Algerian media shown above are even further away from generating conflict resolution and peace keeping, and instead stoke the flames in a way that harms, rather than helps, the Polisario Front cause.

And then there is the elephant in the room: because the conflicts are not discussed in terms of the impacts of colonialism, the narratives do not reflect on how borders, shaped by Western powers, have impacted on different indigenous groups who have been pushed together, despite their different customs and beliefs. Further, the narratives do not reflect on the suitability of international law to these local circumstances, nor point to the possibilities of administering or enforcing laws at local level by individuals who have the consensual respect of the local community. It is obvious from the way news around both conflicts is trapped in international positions and international law that these narratives are not helpful for solving the conflicts in a way that takes Africa’s history, lineage, tribal issues and development needs into account.

In the case of the Morocco/Western Sahara conflict, digital technologies seem to provide a decentralised space where new narratives
can take shape. While it would be foolish to throw all the weight of solving conflicts such as the Western Sahara on internet content creators, those vlogging on the subject provided fresh insights and viewpoints, amid state-controlled narratives. Their use of humour and sarcasm to create more public interest in a story, their imaginative appeal and their willingness to go the extra mile in unpacking the history, means they are developing new discourses around possible solutions.

Vloggers on the topic of the Renaissance Dam were, however, more problematic, given the way they mimicked their governments’ positions. Even so, vlogging has the potential to generate an alternative to mainstream media narratives. Whether vloggers are playing a better or alternative role to that of journalists, they present another kind of narrative. In the way they tell their stories they offer up “performative identities” that align with the political position they are taking. This points to the possibilities of developing creative laboratories that provide equipment and training so that new voices can produce content that is both empowering and freeing. With technological developments, such as the metaverse and immersive reality this type of training is essential if not mandatory, for our times. Digital tools are not a solution in themselves, because they can equally be deployed by government and mainstream media, but they do offer opportunities for networked conflict resolution, peace and localised grand narratives.
This project has sought to tease out themes that can be connected to cities and villages across the continent in African digital writing. The pieces of fiction selected for an exploration of these themes are diverse in terms of nationality, region, tone, style and authorship. Yet, what can a handful of different stories tell us about how place is constructed in Africa? How can these stories contribute to or change a prevailing narrative about Africa?

The African narrative is enriched by this analysis because place is understood as a complex enabler of social relations. Place influences how characters behave, and themes develop. In turn, place is influenced by the actions of characters, as well as by the ways in which themes revolve around place. Across various regions of the continent, the selected stories generally challenge and critique stereotypes using these literary platforms that are found online. Digital technology has quickly become intertwined with African creativity. By using the internet to reach wide audiences, African writers not only contribute to global trends in fiction; through their stories they help to shape how Africa and Africans are seen by the world.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how the media is often more concerned with backing certain geopolitical interests than it is in brokering peace. Whether the narratives on conflict are told by international media or in-country media, many reports lack local perspectives and investigative journalism. While the narrative around news writing is that international news is of a higher standard and can be a democratic voice for conflict resolution, this research shows that mainstream media often neither brokers conflict resolution, nor is informative, nor serves the global public.
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