

A large, circular graphic element dominates the page, containing a high-speed photograph of water splashing. The water is captured in mid-air, creating a complex, crystalline structure with many droplets and ripples. The background of the splash is a dark grey, and the top edge of the circle is highlighted with a bright yellow arc.

Literature Review of  
**Academic writing on  
African Narratives**

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Report Name:

**African narratives; A gloomy picture,  
with some emerging positive trends**

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## Executive Summary

In 2018 the fictional country Wakanda from the film Black Panther was the fourth most mentioned African country on Twitter, after Egypt, South Africa and Kenya. The fact that Africa's 4th most talked about country doesn't exist tells us two things: pop culture is a powerful tool for narrative work and we need to do more to make Africa's 51 remaining real countries more compelling.

This data point was unearthed during a literature review to understand what insights already exist about narrative in Africa in the media. The review was part of our mission to unpack narrative and give some real substance to that well used phrase; "we need to change the African narrative!".

We analysed 56 documents of literature (post 2000) including research reports, books, chapters, and academic journal articles.

Although by no means comprehensive, the literature review does provide a snapshot into the narrative space. We intend to follow this up with more research to build a comprehensive understanding of narrative and where we can intervene to shift and support narratives about and within Africa.

So, what did we find? A few surprising facts like the one about Wakanda, but admittedly nothing we didn't already suspect.

### Things you need to know

Western narratives about Africa in the media are around two narrative strands, i.e. Afro-pessimistic and Afro-optimistic.

The main themes we found were:

- Poverty is rife, how this narrative has shifted the most however, is with a rise in business reporting.
- African leaders are depicted as poor leaders, who exercise weak governance, leading to failing or failed states.
- Incomprehensible violence is prevalent.
- Africa is rife with diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and Ebola.
- Africa is mostly a place of wildlife and nature, but this is being rapidly eroded by urbanisation and poaching.

The good news is that the last 10-15 years has seen quite a shift in African narratives. The continent has been highlighted as a good destination for investment, with high GDP growth rates, an increase in peaceful elections, stability, falling poverty, and the spread of technology.

### What is missing?

Clearly there are huge gaps in what we know about narratives within Africa but the literature review revealed some solutions that could inform ANF's approach. The reports suggested the following:

- The monolithic nature of how Africa is described needs to be changed by continuously differentiating African countries, portraying different voices and telling different kinds of stories – the last two are key to ANF's strategy.
- Media reporting needs to be more balanced on government's wrongdoing as well as progress.
- The establishment of regional African news agencies to report on the countries in their region and share broadly would help.
- The need to amplify Africa's history as historical distortions strongly underpin how it is seen today. This is an interesting insight and becomes truly relevant with the current debate around the repatriation of African artifacts.

All these solutions have merit, but none touch on the use of pop culture as a potential tool for creating narrative change. There is evidence to show how quickly pop culture can move an issue from the margins of public consciousness to its centre and we saw how the fictionalised Wakanda became a huge topic of interest for many.

So, if we want to push Wakanda out of the top 5 of Africa's most talked about "countries" we are going to need to engage differently and ANF is poised to explore new, 'untried strategies' to advance its mission to shift stereotypical narratives about Africa.

# Introduction

This report addresses the key narratives about Africa unpacked in the literature. This literature review on narratives is based on the 56 documents of various lengths; these include research reports, books, chapters thought pieces, and academic journal articles. While this literature is by no means comprehensive, it does provide a snapshot into the narrative space.

The literature review focusses on the post-2000 literature, as this is more urgent in plotting the current terrain. For this report, I have classified two types of narratives:

- Western narratives about Africa
- African narratives about Africa.

I have not included the new literature of Chinese narratives on on Africa, and this could potentially be the subject of subsequent reports.

Broadly speaking there are two narrative strands, i.e. Afro-pessimistic and Afro-optimistic strands. Although the Afro-optimistic strand is welcomed in the literature, it is also recognised as having problematic elements which I will discuss below.





## // Western Narratives About Africa

The literature on Western narratives is quite extensive, mainly focussed on the Afro-pessimistic narratives. Modern Afro-pessimistic narratives in the Western media have barely shifted since colonial times, albeit that there are some subtle shifts in wording. Although in the last 15 years more Afro-optimistic narratives have emerged, these remain problematic. Below I discuss the Afro-pessimistic and -optimistic narratives.

## // Western Afro-pessimism

As explained by Mahadeo and McKinney (2007) and Smith (2018), the primary problem with media coverage of Africa, is that it creates a picture of a host of problems, but the underlying cause is never explained. For example, where there is conflict, it is treated as irrational rather than, for example, a competition for control of resources to be sold to the west (Gberie, 2018).

Below are some of the narratives in more detail:

### 1. One country

The over-arching narrative that underpins much of the pessimism is that Africa is seen as monolithic: stories about the woes of one African country become markers for the whole continent (Blakley et al., 2019; Mahieu & Joye, 2018; J. K. Wa’Njogu, 2009). Few Westerners have a sense of the size of Africa, nor the number of countries that make up Africa, such that, for example, if Ebola is in Sierra Leone, it is assumed that it is dangerous to travel to anywhere in Africa. While some countries do get individual attention and treatment, these are few, and receive far fewer mentions than the continent as a whole. The countries that get individual mentions depend on which Western country is reporting (and which countries are their former colonies); for example:

- a. South Africa is mentioned across all Western countries (and often talked about as the exception) (coverage of SA had a brief period of optimism immediately post-apartheid, and with the hosting of the World Cup, but has since shifted to the corruption of Zuma (Blakley et al., 2019); no studies have yet been done on coverage of the Ramaphosa era). In February to March 2019, South Africa received a lot of coverage for ‘white genocide’, even though there was no evidence for such claims (Blakley et al., 2019). White South African expat media also promotes Afro-pessimistic narratives about the country (Evans, 2011);
- b. The US and UK give attention to Nigeria (corruption and terrorism), Egypt (the stalled revolution), Kenya (ethnic conflict, but also emerging as one of the Afro-optimist countries);
- c. The US gives attention to Somalia (total disintegration of government);
- d. Belgian gives the most attention to the DRC (ongoing war) and Rwanda (ethnic violence and genocide).

### 2. Animals and nature

Imaginarities about Africa are linked to ongoing assumptions about the under-developed state of the continent (Nothias, 2014). While such narratives could be positive for tourism, mentions about African nature are increasingly centred on poaching and extinction, such that Africans are lambasted for not doing enough to protect nature (Blakley et al., 2019; Rodny-Gumede, 2016; J. K. Wa’Njogu, 2009).

### 3. Poverty

The assumption is that poverty is widespread in Africa (Nothias, 2018), and that Africans frequently go hungry and experience famine. The main thread in this narrative is that Africans frequently experience humanitarian crisis, and that Africans need the intervention of Western development agencies to feed themselves (even though most Africans are fed via small-scale farming) (Ankomah, 2008; Mahieu & Joye, 2018).

The assumption underpinning this narrative is that people can only be seen as wealthy if they look like Westerners, and have the same material resources as Westerners, and until they hold up the vestiges of Western civilisation they will be seen as inferior (B'béri & Louw, 2011; Nassanga, 2009; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Wasserman, 2017).

Also, because Africa is treated as monolithic it is unspoken that some African countries are wealthier than others. The narrative of poverty has often gone along with horrific images of starving children, but this has now shifted to healthy children in ragged clothes (albeit that they look happy) (Ankomah, 2008).

The narrative around poverty has shifted the most however, with a rise in business reporting (Melanie Bunce, 2017), and favourable coverage of humanitarian work that achieves change (Blakley et al., 2019), albeit that a lot of aid-related narratives still talk as if Africans have no agency (Anyangwe, 2017).

### 4. Dictatorship/corruption/failed state/bad governance

Narratives suggest that all African countries are ruled by dictators, who are undemocratic and corrupt (Mahadeo & McKinney, 2007; P. Smith, 2018). They also do not exercise good governance (Mahieu & Joye, 2018) and are failing, on the brink of collapse (Hellmann, 2019; Nothias, 2018). Sometimes the media zoom in on particular leaders, such as Mugabe, which then serve as a cypher for the rest of Africa (Nothias, 2018). When it comes to tackling African countries, there is no coverage of how this is connected to Western interference, such as through bribes, or money being syphoned to Western banks (Mahadeo & McKinney, 2007). These narratives frequently focus on villain/victim narratives: this or that evil dictator is hurting ordinary but poor people, and blocking democratic transformation.

### 5. Terrorism/ conflict/ ethnic violence

While across the world it is common to report on conflict (a well-known media expression is "if it bleeds, it leads"), this is particularly true of Africa (Nothias, 2018; Wahutu, 2017), but far more Africans have to die for it to become a story (than, for example, one white farmer in Zimbabwe) (Gberie, 2018). Africa is often covered as a continent that is incomprehensibly violent and therefore barbaric (Gberie, 2018; Wasserman, 2017) (because Western media coverage does not explain the violence (Gathara, 2019; Grant et al., 2016), especially in the case of tabloid journalism (Hellmann, 2019).

In recent years, the conflicts with the most coverage are Boko Haram (especially Chibok girls) (Blakley et al., 2019; Mahieu & Joye, 2018), DRC (especially the prevalence of child soldiers and rape) (Melanie Bunce, 2017; Hellmann, 2019), conflicts in the Horn of Africa (Gagliardone & Stremmlau, 2011; Hellmann, 2019), ethnic election violence in Kenya (Melanie Bunce, 2017), and supposed genocide of white South Africans (Blakley et al., 2019).

### 6. Disease

In particular, post-2000 coverage of disease in Africa has focussed on the HIV/AIDS crisis (coverage now waning) (Grant et al., 2016; Ojo, 2014), and Ebola (even though this occurred in Sierra Leone and now DRC, it was represented as occurring in the whole of Africa) (Basch et al., 2014; Egbejule, 2018; Rodney-Gumede, 2016).



## 7. Racism

Africans were frequently described in terms of their skin colour in a gratuitous way (Mahieu & Joye, 2018, 2018; Nothias, 2014)

Overall the narrative is that Africa is inferior to the West, and will only stop being inferior when:

- its government systems operate in the same way as Western systems of government;
- when they no longer need financial aid (no mention of reparations and assumption that Western countries pay far more aid than they do);
- when the culture is similar to Western cultures;
- At the same time, Africa must conserve nature and keep the land 'pristine'.

## // Western Afro-optimism

The last 10–15 years has seen quite a shift in African narratives, in that Africa has been highlighted as a good destination for investment, with high GDP growth rates, an increase in democracy, peaceful elections, and stability, falling poverty, competitive sports people, and spread of technology, albeit that there are still problematic hot-spots. However, the literature on Afro-optimism points out a number of flaws in the narratives:

### 1. Ongoing monolithic narratives

For example, the "Africa rising" narrative, posits Africa as one country, all of which is now achieving economic growth (Nothias, 2014, 2018). Specific countries are still not differentiated, and there is no sense of where economic growth is taking place.

### 2. Ongoing reference to Afro-pessimistic narratives

Even when Afro-optimistic messages are portrayed, it is not portrayed as if the old narratives were wrong (Mahieu & Joye, 2018; Nothias, 2014). Instead, it maintains that the old narratives were correct, and Africa is changing. It is not a change of heart on the narratives themselves. For example, there is a strong thread of e.g. "Africa used to be a hellhole, but now it's not so bad..."

### 3. Economy favouring Westerners

The African economy is only written about when it favours Westerners who are seeking to become wealthy by exploiting Africa (Melanie Bunce et al., 2017; Nothias, 2012). This coverage also often remains patronising, because it is still presented as if Western investment is automatically good for the continent and Africa is still in need of rescue (Wasserman, 2017). For example, in her study of Canadian media, Ojo (2014) found that coverage focussed on investment by Canadian companies in African countries (specifically in the mining sector). The coverage also did not highlight the kind of asset-stripping that goes along with such ventures.

### 4. Ongoing judgement of Africa in Western terms

For example, the spread of technology in Africa is talked about because it makes "them" more like "us", in that they also communicate in the way we communicate, or depictions of young Africans wearing the same kind of clothes Westerners wear (e.g. football shirts for Western football clubs) (Mkono, 2018).

## 5. Ongoing racism

Ongoing racism is particularly strong in Western media coverage of African sports people who do well on the international stage. Specifically, African sports people are spoke of as if they have a genetic advantage (although no genetic variation has been found to support this).

This genetic advantage is not seen in a positive way, but portrayed as an unfair advantage; for example the treatment of Caster Semenya, Maximila Imali, and Evageline Makena, who are being told to have hormone treatment if they want to compete (Boykoff, 2008; Cooky et al., 2013).

## // African narratives about Africa

There is very little research on African narratives about Africa; little has been reported on “positive pro-democracy developments, informal economy initiatives and the survival ingenuity of the people in the continent, not to talk of highlighting them or the continent’s resource potentials, and arts and culture” (Isike & Omotoso, 2017). Rather than focus on Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism, I highlight countries that have been studied and what has been said about them. However, most of the studies are inward looking, for example, how does Kenya talk about itself?

### South Africa

Studies of South Africa have the most nuance, because a greater range of topics have been covered, for example the literature looks at: rainbow nation ideology (Barnett, 1999; Chikane, 2018; Evans, 2010), coverage of Mandela (Evans, 2010; K. G. Tomaselli & Boster, 1993; K. Tomaselli & Tomaselli, 2003), coverage of Mbeki’s “African renaissance” (K. G. Tomaselli & Shepperson, 2001), white narratives about South Africa (Evans, 2011), coverage of protests (Dawson, 2012; Pointer, 2015; Wasserman et al., 2018), coverage of government corruption (Wasserman, 2013; Wasserman & de Beer, 2005). The central narrative is that apartheid was bad and South Africans did well to navigate their way out of it, but now South Africa is “in danger” of becoming like other African countries, for example, corruption is rife, South Africa is becoming a failed state, white people face genocide, “rainbow nation” and “African renaissance” are pie in the sky, gender based violence is rife, crime is high (Wasserman & de Beer, 2009).

With respect to coverage of other African countries:

- South African media did reasonably well in its coverage of Zimbabwe, particularly what is at stake politically, but it did not highlight the cultural importance and relevance of land (Sesanti, 2015);
- South African media are highly xenophobic and portray other Africans in a negative light, coming from poor and violent countries and bringing their problems to South Africa (Danso & McDonald, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2009, 2010; M. J. Smith, 2010);
- South African media coverage of conflict in Darfur played up the ethnic aspects of the conflict, and did not discuss the conflict in terms of the fight over oil reserves (Wahutu, 2018a).

Much of the coverage of African countries from South Africa comes from Western news services such as Reuters and AFP.





## Kenya

Despite the Western media playing up ethnic violence in Kenya, Kenyan media tended to downplay this, and rather point to situations where ethnic conflict is being remedied (Melanie Bunce, 2010). Coverage of corruption and governance failures is strong, but equally, coverage of the urbanisation of Kenya is also powerful. Kenya describes itself as a country with ongoing problems, such as ethnic violence and corruption (Blakley et al., 2019; Isike & Omotoso, 2017), but as doing really well in modernising, especially in technological terms, albeit limited reach and use by rural women (Wyche & Olson, 2018). It describes itself as dynamic, with a thriving arts sector, albeit financially constrained (MFA, 2018).

With respect to Kenya's coverage of other countries, the literature only highlighted its coverage of the Darfur crisis, which was similar to South African coverage – highlighting the ethnic variables, rather than resource conflicts (Wahutu, 2018a). The literature mentioned that Kenya extensively covers Somali conflict (Melanie Bunce, 2010; Melanie Bunce et al., 2017), but there were no studies looking at how this was framed.

Much of the coverage of African countries from Kenya comes from Western news services such as Reuters and AFP (Isike & Omotoso, 2017; Wahutu, 2018b).

## Ghana

According to studies of media in Ghana, there is excessive deference to traditional leadership and elders, with a strong focus on the elite (Osei-Appiah, 2020). However, in recent years techno-savvy youngsters are displacing the narrative, and showing the country as thriving with entrepreneurial ventures led by youth.

## Cameroon

Media in Cameroon plays up its own ethnic conflicts, taking one side or another and as such is quite divisive, portraying some as righteous and others as wicked (Nyamnjoh, 2010).

## DRC

One study looked at media coverage of the first democratic elections in DRC and revealed that the media played a peace-keeping and democracy-promotion role, seeking balance reporting of the different political parties (Uzodike & Whetho, 2006).

## Conclusion

In order to shift African narratives, the main thrust is to shift the monolithic nature of how Africa is described. This means continuously differentiating African countries, and portraying different voices, telling different kinds of stories (Nyamnjoh, 2009, 2017).

Clearly, the media DO need to act as a watchdog of governments' wrong-doing, but they also need to balance with the positive efforts being made (Isike & Omotoso, 2017). Isike and Omotoso (2017) also point to a strong need to retell Africa's history and make it more widely known, as historical distortions strongly underpin how Africa is seen today. There is a need to encourage/establish more regional news agencies that can tell the stories of particular countries in each region, and share these both with other regions and with the Western world. The research on African narratives is sparse, and we really need research to develop a much stronger sense of this. Media in very few countries have been studied, and even in South Africa where media is rather more studied, not a lot is understood about its coverage of Africa.



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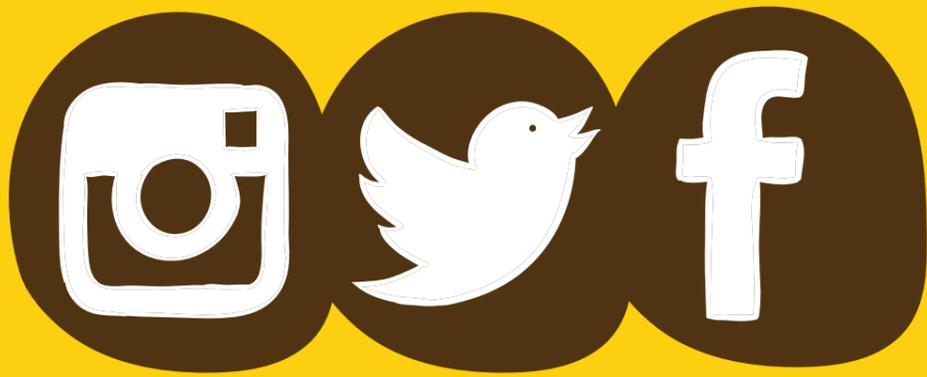
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