

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICA: STILL THE SAME OLD STORY?

MICHAEL MAHADEO AND JOE MCKINNEY

ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE WILL FIRSTLY EXPLORE THE CONCEPTS OF REPRESENTATIONS AND STEREOTYPES, AND EXAMINE THE ROLE THEY PLAY IN THE MEDIA INFORMATION PRODUCTION PROCESS. THE FOCUS WILL THEN CHANGE TO LOOKING AT SOME COMMON THEMES AND THE MORE WELL-WORN REPRESENTATIONS IN NEWS. FINALLY, WE CONCLUDE WITH SUGGESTIONS ABOUT WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO TO REDRESS THE IMBALANCE WHERE POSSIBLE.

THE IDEA FOR THIS PAPER HAS COME OUT OF FRUSTRATION AT THE CONTINUING PATRONISING AND STEREOTYPED IMAGES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES IN THE MAJORITY WORLD. HOWEVER, IT IS AFRICA IN PARTICULAR, WHICH GOT OUR ATTENTION, AS IT WAS 2005, AND THAT SUMMER THE FOCUS HAD BEEN ON ‘SAVING’ THE CONTINENT, AND ‘MAKING POVERTY HISTORY’. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN AND ANALYSED ON THE THEME OF MEDIA IMAGES AND THE ‘THIRD WORLD’, BUT IT SEEMS THE MEDIA ARE, AS DAVID CROMWELL AND DAVID EDWARDS CLAIM (2005), “UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT THE REAL CAUSES OF THE PROBLEMS FACING US” ESPECIALLY THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL CAUSES.

THE CONTROVERSIES AROUND MEDIA IMAGES AND THEMES DEPICTING THE WAY IN WHICH THE ‘DEVELOPING’ WORLD IS PORTRAYED, HAVE BEEN GOING ON SINCE THE MID 1970S (COHEN, 2001, IN MANZO, 2006). WITH THE CULTURAL SPACE OPENING UP FROM THE 1960S ONWARDS, AROUND REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER, ETHNICITY AND CLASS, AMONGST OTHERS, THE STAGE WAS SET FOR QUESTIONING THIRD WORLD IMAGERY AND ITS

CONNOTATIONS IN POST-COLONIAL TIMES. THE FOCUS WAS ON NEWS REPORTAGE AND CHARITY WITH ITS “IMAGES OF HELPlessness, DEPENDENCY AND SUFFERING...” (COHEN, 2001, p.178 CITED IN MANZO, 2006, p.9).

ONE OF THE EARLY RESEARCH GROUPS IN THE UK TO PIONEER MEDIA CONTENT RESEARCH, AND REMAIN PROLIFIC IN THEIR CRITIQUE IS THE GLASGOW UNIVERSITY MEDIA GROUP. WE AGREE WITH THEIR ASSERTION, THAT “THERE IS A STRONG CURRENT IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH, WHICH SUGGESTS THAT THE MEDIA ARE ENGAGED IN THE MASS PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL IGNORANCE” (PHILO, 2002). WE HAVE ALSO SEEN OVER TIME, HOW STUDENTS REACT AND EXPRESS THEMSELVES ABOUT ISSUES INVOLVING AFRICA AND OTHER ‘THIRD WORLD’ PLACES, AND ARE DISMAYED AT THE SURVIVAL OF OUTMODED STEREOTYPES IN SPITE OF BEING IN A INFORMATION RICH ENVIRONMENT, WHERE WE ARE SUPPOSED TO HAVE MORE INFORMED CHOICE THAN PREVIOUSLY.

REPRESENTATIONS

“THE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION HAS COME TO OCCUPY A NEW AND IMPORTANT PLACE IN THE STUDY OF CULTURE... IT IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THE PROCESS BY WHICH MEANING IS PRODUCED AND EXCHANGED BY MEMBERS OF A CULTURE. IT DOES INVOLVE THE USE OF LANGUAGE. OF SIGNS AND IMAGES WHICH STAND FOR OR REPRESENT THINGS” (HALL, 1997, p.15).

ONE OF THE MAIN AND VERY INFLUENTIAL MEDIUMS THROUGH WHICH MEANINGS ARE PRODUCED, IS THE MEDIA. “THE CONCEPT OF REPRESENTATION EMBODIES THE THEME THAT THE MEDIA CONSTRUCT MEANINGS ABOUT THE WORLD - THEY *REPRESENT* IT, AND IN DOING SO, HELP AUDIENCES TO MAKE SENSE OF IT” (O’SULLIVAN ET AL, 1998, p.71). BRANSON AND STAFFORD (1999, p.15) POINT OUT THE RICHNESS OF THIS CONCEPT, AND HOW WHAT IS REPRESENTED OR RE-PRESENTED IS A CONSTRUCTION, WITH POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS:

“THE MEDIA GIVE US WAYS OF IMAGINING PARTICULAR IDENTITIES AND GROUPS WHICH CAN HAVE MATERIAL EFFECTS ON HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THE WORLD, AND HOW THEY GET UNDERSTOOD, OR LEGISLATED

FOR OR PERHAPS BEATEN UP IN THE STREET BY OTHERS...THIS IS PARTLY BECAUSE THE MASS MEDIA HAVE THE POWER TO RE-PRESENT, OVER AND OVER, SOME IDENTITIES, SOME IMAGININGS, AND TO EXCLUDE OTHERS, AND THEREBY MAKE THEM SEEM UNFAMILIAR OR EVEN THREATENING”.

BASICALLY, THE PROCESS OF INFORMATION PRODUCTION IS PREGNANT WITH POWERFUL CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHAT IS ‘NORMAL’ AND ‘ACCEPTABLE’ AND THE MAIN CENTRES OF INFORMATION PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION ARE LOCATED IN THE AFFLUENT AND POWERFUL ‘WESTERN’ PARTS OF THE WORLD. IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO REALISE THAT WHAT IS NOT RE-PRESENTED OR IS EXCLUDED CAN BE JUST AS IMPORTANT OR MORE SO THAN THAT WHICH IS INCLUDED IN THE MEANING PROCESS. THERE IS THE DOMINANCE OF CERTAIN TYPES OF IMAGERY/STORY ANGLES IN ALL MAINSTREAM MEDIA, WHICH CREATE AND REINFORCE ASSUMPTIONS, AND STRUCTURES OF SUBJUGATION AND DOMINATION; ‘THEM’ AND ‘US’.

STEREOTYPING

STEREOTYPING IS VERY IMPORTANT IN ANY DISCUSSION OF THIS NATURE. TO PARAPHRASE BRANSON AND STAFFORD (1999, p.125), WE ASSERT THAT THE MEDIA “IN THE IDENTITIES AND UNDERSTANDINGS THEY SO POWERFULLY CIRCULATE” DO OFFER CHARACTERISATIONS OF AFRICA, WHICH WOULD REINFORCE TO AUDIENCES A *CONTINUING NARRATIVE OF AFRICAN UNDERACHIEVEMENT* (AUTHORS’ ITALICS). IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT STEREOTYPES PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN HELPING US TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD, AND ARE NOT NECESSARILY LIES. WE ALL USE CHARACTERISATIONS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES AND BELONG TO GROUPS WHICH CAN BE STEREOTYPED (BRANSON & STAFFORD, 1999, p.137). HOWEVER, IT IS THE PREPONDERANCE OF NEGATIVITY, WHICH IS THE CONTENTIOUS ISSUE HERE.

THE DOMINANT THEMES INFORMING THE REPORTAGE OF AFRICA CAN BE IDENTIFIED AS FOLLOWS:

AFRICAN POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL CORRUPTION

INDEED, THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE SEEN MANY PROGRAMMES AND NEWS FEATURES WITH A 'WHAT TO DO ABOUT AFRICA' THEME - AFRICA THE PERENNIAL PROBLEM WITH A CONSTANT FOCUS ON THE 'DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT' OF AFRICA WITH REFERENCE TO DICTATORSHIPS AND/OR RIGGED ELECTIONS. THE QUESTION ASKED IS 'WHAT WE IN THE WEST' CAN DO TO HELP BRING OR ENCOURAGE DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTINENT. THE FACT THAT MANY OF THE FAILED POWER STRUCTURES ARE DERIVED FROM WESTERN ORIGIN, FOISTED ON THE CONTINENT AT FORMAL INDEPENDENCE, IS NOT MENTIONED AS MUCH. ALSO, THE FACT THAT MUCH OF THE MONEY STOLEN FROM THE CONTINENT BY THESE SAME CORRUPT ELITES, ENDS UP IN THE WESTERN BANKING SYSTEM, IS AGAIN NOT MENTIONED WITH THE SAME FREQUENCY. THERE IS SOME ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE WEST'S RESPONSIBILITY DURING COLONIALISM AND THE COLD WAR, IN THIS PROCESS, BUT WITH THE CONNOTATION OF 'IT IS THE PAST' AND IT IS TIME TO MOVE ON, AS IF POLITICAL HABITS, STRUCTURES AND CULTURES, ONCE ENTRENCHED, CAN BE CHANGED SO QUICKLY.

AFRICA HAS BECOME SYNONYMOUS WITH POVERTY

THERE HAS BEEN A WELCOMED FOCUS ON THE DEBT OWED BY THE CONTINENT TO THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL SYSTEM, BUT THE PHRASE USED IN ADVOCACY FOR DEBT RELIEF, IS THAT OF 'DEBT FORGIVENESS'. THIS IS NOW THE VOCABULARY USED IN DISCUSSING THE THIRD WORLD DEBT, FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS. 'FORGIVENESS' IN OUR VIEW IS A PATRONISING TERM, WHICH MASKS THE COMPLICITY OF THE MAINLY, WESTERN BANKS IN LENDING MONIES FOR DUBIOUS PROJECTS AND ON UNREALISTIC TERMS, KNOWING FULLY THAT REPAYMENT IS NOT GOING TO BE EASY. THIS HAS BEEN WELL DOCUMENTED BY MANY SOURCES, NOT LEAST OF ALL JUBILEE 2000/DROP THE DEBT. IN PICTURES AND NEWSREELS, THERE ARE CONSTANT SCENES OF SHANTYTOWNS, EMACIATED CHILDREN, OLDER PEOPLE, DRY RED EARTH AND BARREN LANDSCAPES, "A DYING MALNOURISHED CHILD IN A CORNER WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARMS..." (ALAM, 1994), OR THE WELL KNOWN SHOTS OF FLIES ON THE FACES OF CHILDREN AND SOME ADULTS ALIKE. THE FACT THAT THIS IS A RESOURCE RICH CONTINENT IS NOT DENIED, BUT WHO BENEFITS FROM THE

EXPLOITATION OF THOSE RESOURCES IS ONLY PARTLY HIGHLIGHTED. THEY FOCUS MAINLY ON ‘WARLORDS’ AND DICTATORS, WHILE UNDERPLAYING THE ROLE PLAYED BY TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS (TNCs), AND THE WESTERN DOMINATED GLOBAL ECONOMY; SHOWING HOW THIS INEVITABLY BENEFITS US IN THE CONSUMER/AFFLUENT WORLD, THE MAIN MARKETS FOR SUCH RESOURCE EXTRACTION.

AFRICA IS CONVULSED WITH TRIBAL WARS

AGAIN, THERE IS AN IMPRESSION OF WARS ON THE CONTINENT, WHICH ARE ‘JUST TRIBAL’ IN NATURE, AND DEFY EXPLANATION. NOT MUCH TIME IS SPENT IN WAY OF EXPLAINING UNDERLYING CAUSES, WHICH REINFORCE PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN HOPELESSNESS, AND INCOMPETENCE. GREG PHILO (2002) ATTESTS TO THIS IN RESEARCHING THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF RWANDA. HE ARGUES THAT JOURNALISTS - WITH NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS - SEE AFRICA AS A COUNTRY, RATHER THAN A CONTINENT, “...WITH MANY DIFFERENT CULTURES WHICH HAVE COMPLEX POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORIES”. HE WRITES ABOUT LINDSEY HILSUM OF CHANNEL 4, EXPLAINING HOW, CONTRARY TO POPULAR PERCEPTIONS, RWANDA WAS A MUCH DISCIPLINED SOCIETY, MORE AKIN TO NAZI ORGANISATION AROUND RACIST IDEOLOGY. THIS GAVE THE HUTU MILITARY A GOOD BASIS TO MANIPULATE RACIST IDEAS. MANY JOURNALISTS HOWEVER, COULD NOT BELIEVE THIS BECAUSE OF THEIR PRECONCEIVED IDEAS ABOUT AFRICA - HOW CAN AFRICANS BE ORGANISED AND DISCIPLINED TO CARRY OUT A SYSTEMATIC GENOCIDE? (PHILO, 2002). YET, THIS CONTINENT HAS WITNESSED MASSIVE STRUGGLES AGAINST COLONIALISM, AND WITHIN RECENT MEMORY, AGAINST APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA.

AFRICAN STORIES ARE NOT POSITIVE OR CONTEXTUALISED ENOUGH

THIS HAS BEEN ALLUDED TO ABOVE, BUT NEEDS TO BE HIGHLIGHTED FURTHER. AS SAID, THERE IS LITTLE OR NO BACKGROUND, VERY FEW POSITIVE NEWS FEATURES (PHILO, 2002) WE NOTED STORIES MAINLY AROUND A VILLAGE TO WHICH DONATIONS WERE MADE, AND THE FOCUS WAS TO SEE IF THE PEOPLE BENEFITED; OR IF THE INDIVIDUAL FARMER/BUSINESSMAN OR WOMAN, WHO IS SHOWING INITIATIVE IN BEATING BACK THE RED TAPE OF BUREAUCRACY, COULD ACTUALLY PROSPER. IN THE LATTER CASES, WE

NOTICED THE WAY IN WHICH THIS PERSON/OR PERSONS ARE SEEN AS BEING LIKE US, SHOWING INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE, BUT NO REPRESENTATIONS OF COLLECTIVE EFFORT OR INITIATIVE, ALTHOUGH AFRICAN CULTURES, ESPECIALLY PEASANT SOCIETY, TENDS TOWARDS A COLLECTIVIST ETHOS. THERE ARE NO STORIES OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES, OR INDUSTRY. HOWEVER, IF THERE IS PRIVATISATION, IT IS HIGHLIGHTED. THIS IS IN KEEPING WITH A NEO-LIBERAL AGENDA IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE, THE DOMINANT TREND IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY TODAY. WHERE THERE WERE/ARE STATE SECTORS, THEY ARE DISMISSED AS IN NEED OF PRIVATISATION. NO FACTS OF STATE SPONSORED SUCCESSES AS IN TANZANIA, IN EARLY POST-COLONIAL TIMES. WE HARDLY SEE AFRICANS AT COMPUTERS OR ANY SUCH ARTEFACTS IN URBAN PLACES, OR AFRICANS USING COMPLEX TECHNOLOGY. SHAHIDUL ALAM (1994) MAKES THE SAME POINT ABOUT BANGLADESH IN THE MEDIA. YET, THERE ARE POSITIVE STORIES AROUND AFRICAN NATURE AND WILDLIFE GENRES. HOWEVER IN THEM, IT IS MOSTLY WHITE AND WESTERN PEOPLE WHO ARE THE ONES WITH SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE AND AFRICANS ARE SEEN AS TRACKERS AND LOGISTICAL PERSONNEL. THIS IS ESPECIALLY THE CASE WITH CELEBRITY DRIVEN WILDLIFE PROGRAMMES; NO SCENES OR STORIES OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE OR SKILL AT USE. THIS ABSENCE OR EXCLUSION FROM THE NARRATIVE OF LOCAL REPRESENTATION, CONTRIBUTES TO BIASES, DISTORTIONS, AND A TREMENDOUS IGNORANCE.

THE RESULTING IMPACT

SO, WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS LEAVE US WITH AS DOMINANT STEREOTYPES INFLUENCING OUR IDEOLOGICAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE 'DARK CONTINENT'? WE SEE MAINLY IMAGES OF THE STARVING CHILD, AIDS AND DISEASE; NO TRADERS EXCEPT POOR ONES EKING OUT A LIVING; LITTLE EDUCATION; NO POLICE EXCEPT AS ENFORCERS OF HARSH REGIMES AND MOSTLY AFRICANS AS HAVING NO AGENCY. THEY ARE BASICALLY BYSTANDERS IN THEIR OWN AFFAIRS, DEPENDING ON 'OUR' BENEFICENCE AS BENIGN AIDING DISPENSING WESTERNERS. THIS SITUATION AMOUNTS TO A CONTINUATION OF COLONIAL IDEOLOGIES OF THE AFRICAN 'OTHER'. THIS CAN "...WORK TO REINFORCE A POWER RELATION BETWEEN THE WEST AND AFRICA THAT, BY PRIORITISING AID, MASKS THE GROSS INEQUALITIES THAT KEEP A MAJORITY OF THE WORLD'S

POPULATION IN POVERTY” (DODD, 2005, p.26 CITED IN MANZO, 2006, p.11). *THE FACT IS, THAT THESE ‘REALITIES’ ARE INDEED REAL.* HOWEVER, IT IS THE SELECTION PROCESS IN NEWS AND INFORMATION PRODUCTION, WHICH MAKES FOR BIAS IN REPRESENTATIONS. THEREFORE, A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THIS INSTITUTIONAL PRODUCTION PROCESS IS NECESSARY.

THE GLASGOW UNIVERSITY MEDIA GROUP HAS LONG ASSERTED NEWS AS A CULTURAL ARTEFACT; AS BEING SOCIALLY MANUFACTURED. GREG PHILO, THEIR SENIOR RESEARCHER, POINTS OUT THAT “COMMERCIAL CRITERIA ARE NOW A KEY CONSIDERATION FOR PROGRAMME MAKERS AND THIS COMES DOWN IN PART TO PROVIDING WHAT THEY ASSUME THE AUDIENCES WILL WANT TO WATCH”. HE GOES ON TO POINT OUT THAT PROGRAMME EDITORS DO NOT REALLY KNOW WHAT AUDIENCES WANT; THEY ASSUME THE AUDIENCE TASTES. THESE ARE ASSUMED TO BE “...HOME, LEISURE AND CONSUMER ITEMS INSTEAD OF THE BROADER AGENDA” (PHILO, 2002). JOHN LANGER (1998, pp.1-5) POINTS OUT THAT NEWS IS A COMMODITY, IN THE BUSINESS OF ENTERTAINMENT, WITH MORE EMPHASIS OF THE LATTER THAN THE FACTUALITY OF THE PROGRAMMES. GREG PHILO TOO, HAS EMPHASISED THE COMMITMENT TO STORYTELLING, WHICH DEPENDS ON SENTIMENT AND SENSATION (PHILO, 2002).

THERE ARE OTHER IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS AT WORK APART FROM SUBJECTIVE ONES LIKE JOURNALISTIC ASSUMPTIONS AND THOSE OF EDITORS. THESE ARE THE ‘RATINGS GAME’ WHEREBY MEDIA ARE IN A VERY COMPETITIVE BUSINESS AND THIS CREATES PRESSURE TO NOT ‘BORE’ THE AUDIENCE. THERE IS A GREAT FEAR OF THE SEEMINGLY ‘FICKLE’ AUDIENCE AND HOW THIS AFFECTS PROFIT LEVELS. THIS IS IN SPITE THE FACT THAT, SOME JOURNALISTS LIKE GEORGE ALAGIAH OF THE BBC AND LINDSEY HILSUM OF CHANNEL 4 HAVE SAID TO RESEARCHERS HOW A FEW EXTRA LINES OF TEXT CAN CONTEXTUALISE THE ISSUE, WHICH INTERESTS AUDIENCES; AUDIENCES HAVE COMPLAINED THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND MUCH OF THE ‘FOREIGN’ NEWS (PHILO, 2002; BRANSON & STAFFORD, 1999). ANOTHER INSTITUTIONAL FACTOR IS THE DETERMINISTIC NATURE OF THE TECHNOLOGIES IN USE IN REPORTAGE, WHICH ALLOW FOR INSTANT RELAY AND REPRODUCTION. THIS

FEEDS INTO THE AFOREMENTIONED FACTORS AND HELPS TO CREATE THE NEED FOR IMMEDIACY AND RAPIDITY, WITHOUT TIME TO GO DEEPER AND CONTEXTUALISE (BRANSON & STAFFORD, 1999) - A SORT OF 'FLY BY NIGHT' JOURNALISM.

WHAT CAN EDUCATORS DO?

BRIEFLY, HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS WHICH HAVE WORKED WITH US TO VARYING DEGREES:

- DISTANCE STUDENTS FROM NEWS BY HAVING COMPETING CRITERIA TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONSTRUCTIVE NATURE OF NEWS; GIVE THEM A FEEL OF NEWS AS A PRODUCT
- EMPHASISE THE ENTERTAINMENT ASPECT OF NEWS, THE PROPS, THE CODES, MUSIC FOR SCENES, IF IT IS TV, THE VOICE TONES
- ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO RANK NEWS STORIES IN ORDER OF THEIR PREFERENCE, AND LINK TO NEWS VALUES CRITERIA. THIS GIVES THEM A VIEW AS TO THE VARYING NATURE OF HOW NEWS IS VALUED AND HOW SUBJECTIVE IT CAN BE.

OF COURSE, TUTORS WILL HAVE ACTIVITIES OF THEIR OWN. IT IS A GOOD RESOURCE TO BE INNOVATIVE WITH. THERE ARE LOTS OF GOOD RESOURCES DEVELOPED BY THE EDUCATIONAL BODIES AROUND REPRESENTATIONS OVER A PERIOD OF TIME, AS THIS HAS BEEN A RICH AREA FOR QUITE SOME TIME.

CONCLUSION

IN CONCLUDING THIS PAPER, WE WOULD REITERATE THAT THE BATTLE FOR FAIR REPRESENTATION IS AN OLD ONE BY NOW, BUT IS LIKELY TO BE ONGOING FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. THIS STRUGGLE WILL EBB AND FLOW, WITH THE TIDE OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. HOWEVER, DEVELOPMENT EDUCATORS/TEACHERS AMONGST OTHERS, HAVE A VITAL ROLE TO PLAY IN HELPING PREVENT THE OBJECTIFICATION OF PEOPLE AND PLACES, AFRICA NOT LEAST OF ALL.

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MICHAEL MAHADEO IS A LECTURER IN SOCIAL SCIENCES IN QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST AND THE BELFAST INSTITUTE OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION.

JOE MCKINNEY IS SENIOR LECTURER AND CO-ORDINATOR OF THE HND MOVING IMAGE DIPLOMA AT THE BELFAST INSTITUTE OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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