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Afro-Pessimist or Africa Rising? US Newspaper Coverage of Africa, 1994–2018

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ABSTRACT

Is media coverage of Africa systematically negative or increasingly positive? Several scholars have argued that too little empirical evidence exists to address the debate between “Afro-pessimist” and “Africa Rising” perspectives. We contribute to this discussion by analyzing 139,012 articles drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* over the 25-year period between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 2018. We find modest support for the Afro-pessimist viewpoint: Articles mentioning Africa are negative on average, are even more negative during peak periods of coverage, and have not become more positive over time. In addition, we examine the thematic coverage most strongly associated with negativity and positivity. Stories that reference conflict, government, and specific African countries account for a significant portion of the negativity in our corpus. Conversely, stories related to culture and education constitute a subset of positive articles. Overall, our analysis not only sheds light on an ongoing debate about the tone of coverage of Africa, it also provides a better understanding of prevalent negative and positive thematic coverage in four major US newspapers.

KEYWORDS

Africa; big data analysis; computer-assisted coding; media; newspapers; United States

Is media coverage of Africa negative, positive, or somewhere in between? Some scholars argue that Western reporting on Africa tends to be exceedingly negative. This can contribute to a sense of “Afro-pessimism” that suggests the African continent is unsuitable for social, political, or economic progress (Ebanda de B’béri and Louw 2011). Others contend that Western coverage of Africa has adopted a more positive outlook in recent years. Proponents of an “Africa Rising” narrative point to economic and technological booms in various African countries as the source of this shift (Bunce 2017, 17). Yet each of these perspectives has been called into question. In particular, Scott (2017) and Nothias (2018) view existing media analyses of Africa as empirically insufficient to the point that they risk leading to inaccurate conclusions.

We contribute to this ongoing debate by analyzing 139,012 newspaper articles drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* over the 25-year period between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 2018. Our corpus includes

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every story that contains the words Africa, African, or Africans in the headline or body of the article. We use computer-assisted techniques combined with human analysis to broaden the scope of existing research. We estimate the valence (i.e., tone) of each article, calibrated against a representative sample of randomly selected articles from the US print media. This allows us to gauge the relative negativity or positivity in coverage of Africa compared to this baseline and to track shifts in tone across time. In addition, this process permits us to connect debates about coverage of Africa to gatekeeping theories that focus on the propensity of the media to emphasize negative stories and that suggest that foreign aid, investment, and trade can also drive coverage (Wu 2000; Golan 2010; Soroka 2012).

Looking beyond the tone of articles, our methods also allow us to address a second key question: when coverage of Africa is negative (or positive), what is it about? Research on negative Western media portrayals of Africa has focused principally on themes of conflict, political problems, disease, and poverty (Scott 2009; Bunce, Franks, and Paterson 2017; Nothias 2018). Conversely, scholars have primarily touched on business and economics, sports, and culture as positive themes of coverage (Scott 2009; Bunce 2017). We examine these negative and positive themes, and then supplement this deductive analysis with an inductive approach that isolates recurring clusters of words across all articles; this helps identify additional potentially meaningful themes of coverage within our corpus. We assess which among the deductively and inductively derived themes are most powerfully associated with negativity or positivity in US newspaper coverage of Africa.

Our analysis reveals greater evidence in favor of the Afro-pessimist perspective than the Africa Rising narrative. Articles about Africa are more likely to be negative than positive in our corpus. While the average article about Africa is only modestly negative, periods of intense coverage of the continent are likely to be even more negative, suggesting the continued relevance of gatekeeping theories that emphasize the perceived newsworthiness of negative coverage (Shoemaker 1996, 36). In addition, there is no upward trend in the tone of articles over the 25 years, though there have been periodic fluctuations over shorter periods of time. Stories that reference conflict, government, and specific African countries make up a subset of articles that account for a significant portion of the negativity we identify. On the other side of the ledger, stories that include elements related to culture and education are prone to be positive. Overall, our analysis not only helps shed new light on a longstanding debate about the tone of coverage of Africa, it also provides a better understanding of prevalent thematic coverage in major US newspapers.

The State of the Debate

Scholars have long argued that Western coverage of Africa has been inadequate, inaccurate, or otherwise problematic (Hultman 1992; Zein and Cooper 1992; Golan 2008; Ebanda de B'éri and Louw 2011). On one level, studies from across the last two decades suggest that the media tend to depict Africa as a unified whole, while neglecting ethnic, cultural, and historical nuances within the continent (Schraeder and Endless 1998; Mahadeo and McKinney 2007; Ebanda de B'éri and Louw 2011). This homogenization is often viewed as a central factor associated with the stereotypical and negative image of Africa in the Western media (Brookes 1995; Bonsu 2009; Wa'Njogu 2009; Ebanda de B'éri and Louw 2011). In addition, many researchers observe that reports on Africa are typically negative and are disproportionately replete with stories of crisis (Ebo 1992; Zein and Cooper 1992;

Fair 1993; Mahadeo and McKinney 2007).¹ This is consistent with gatekeeping theories that emphasize how negative information drives both editorial selection as well as reader attention (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Golan 2010; Soroka 2012). Such coverage perpetuates what academics have identified as “Afro-pessimism,” referring to the Western perception that Africa lacks positive prospects (Schraeder and Endless 1998; Ebanda de B'éri and Louw 2011; Nothias 2012; Bunce, Franks, and Paterson 2017).

Some scholars have linked negative coverage to “colonial tropes of savagery, exotica and rhetoric of benevolence” (Bonsu 2009, 1). Fair (1993) contends that the social construction of race in the US has seeped into the institution of news media and its coverage of Africa. More recently, Wa’Njogu has followed in this vein by arguing that prevailing racial constructions characterize all Africans as black and therefore “morally, physically and intellectually inferior to white people” and incapable of positively contributing to society and the world (Wa’Njogu 2009, 77). From the perspective of the Global North, this racial dichotomy produces an Africa that “is an artificial entity, invented and conceived by colonialism” (Mayer 2002, 1). Fair contends that this Otherness is depicted through portrayals of violence as being “black-on-black” or “tribal” (Fair 1993, 11). Taken together, these authors suggest that Western media portrayals of Africa—especially when referring to the entire continent—are likely to be exceedingly negative.

Calling this Afro-pessimist view into question, a more recent set of scholars suggests that Western portrayals of Africa and Africans may not be as conclusively negative as previously thought (Ibelema 2014; Ojo 2014; Bunce, Franks, and Paterson 2017; Scott 2017; Nothias 2018). In one study of US print media coverage of Africa from 2000 to 2012, Ibelema assesses the prevalence of “tribal fixation,” which he describes as “the tendency to focus on ethnic differences and rivalries in press coverage and interpretation of Africa’s contemporary conflicts” (Ibelema 2014, 164). He finds that portrayals of Africa display reduced tribal fixation over the years, but that characterizations of Otherness nevertheless persist. In a study of Canada’s *The Globe* and *Mail* from 2003 to 2012, Ojo argues that coverage of Africa consists of a mix of positive and negative portrayals (Ojo 2014, 47). Similarly, in an analysis of six UK newspapers over a period of fifteen days in June 2007, Scott contends that media coverage of Africa is “not as marginalized, negative, or trivial as it is often accused of being” (Scott 2009, 554).

Bunce, Franks, and Paterson’s 2017 edited volume goes even further, as a number of authors explore whether Africa’s media image in the West has transitioned from the “Heart of Darkness” to one better characterized as “Africa Rising.” In a core chapter, Bunce analyzes Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, and Reuters articles from two days of each month from 1994 to 2013. She finds that there was a significant increase in coverage related to finance, business, and sports, topics typically associated with the narrative of “Africa Rising” (Bunce 2017, 20). She also notes a drop in humanitarian stories—traditionally associated with the “dark Africa” narrative—that covered famine, drought, or disease (Bunce 2017, 18). International communication theories (Wu 2000, 123–24; Golan 2010, 142) suggest that such a change in story prevalence may be correlated with patterns of increasing foreign aid and investment, which were particularly visible in Africa between 2001 and 2010,² as well as trade, which grew steadily between the United States and Africa between 2002 and 2008.³

Overall, research on portrayals of Africa has generated a pressing and unresolved question: Is Western coverage of Africa predominantly negative, mixed, or increasingly

positive? In part, this has been difficult to answer precisely because there has not been enough information upon which to base an assessment. Scott (2017, 203) argues that existing research is too narrow and largely rhetorical in nature. He conducts a comprehensive scoping review of 163 studies on media portrayals of Africa and ultimately finds that previous research “is heavily focused on a small number of countries, events, media and texts” (Scott 2017, 206). Indeed, most studies are quite limited in scope or timeline (Zein and Cooper 1992; Brookes 1995; Schraeder and Endless 1998; Golan 2008; Scott 2009; Wright 2017).

Scott thus concludes that it is simply not possible to assert with certainty that Western media portrayals of Africa are decidedly negative; for him, this view is akin to a “myth” (Scott 2017, 193). Similarly, Nothias (2018) concurs that dominant discourses about negative media coverage of Africa are not, in fact, empirically supported. After analyzing a corpus of 282 articles over a five-year period, Nothias concludes that media portrayals of Africa are neither decisively negative nor positive (Nothias 2018). He cautions that such a lack of empirical research in academic scholarship on Africa may itself be “instrumental in supporting the very system of hegemonic power it seeks to challenge in the first place” (Nothias 2018, 1115).

While recent studies such as Bunce (2017) and Nothias (2018) have expanded the scope of articles under investigation, even they are too limited in sample size to provide a comprehensive overview of coverage of Africa. What is lacking, as Nothias (2018) notes, is a larger analysis that can answer questions about broader patterns in reporting on Africa. We contribute to this scholarly discussion by examining over 139,000 articles that mention Africa in four major national newspapers in the United States across the 25-year period from 1994 to 2018.

We draw on this comprehensive corpus of newspaper articles to test propositions from the theoretical literature on gatekeeping that apply to studies of media coverage of Africa. Theories that emphasize the perceived newsworthiness of negative stories fit with Afropessimist perspectives by suggesting that the tone of Africa articles will be substantially and consistently negative. Theoretical propositions that stress the significance of aid and investment levels in driving news coverage may underpin the Africa Rising perspective’s suggestion that the tone of Africa articles will be increasingly positive. We also explore specific propositions from previous research that the most negative articles touch on conflict, political problems, disease, and poverty (Scott 2009; Bunce 2017; Nothias 2018) and that positive articles are related to themes such as business and economics, sports, and culture (Scott 2009; Bunce 2017). In addition, our methods allow us to identify other prominent negative and positive themes of coverage that have not yet been pinpointed by existing scholarship. Our overarching goal is thus to bring new evidence to bear on long-standing debates about the tone and content of media coverage of Africa and to contribute to discussions about the factors most strongly associated with editorial gatekeeping.

Data and Methods

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the tone associated with coverage, we assemble a corpus of articles from four major United States newspapers that have a national readership and influence public opinion, elite perceptions, or both. We

examine 139,012 articles drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* that contain one or more mentions of the words Africa, African, or Africans.⁴ We exclude coverage that merely mentions individual countries, because we are interested in how newspapers portray the entire continent or its inhabitants—this has been the subject of sustained attention not only by the scholars cited above, but also by journalists (Moore 2012; Kayser-Bril 2014). Our time frame comprises the 25-year period between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 2018. We begin with the same starting point as Bunce (2017), but analyze every article that meets our search specifications from each day, and extend the time period by an additional five years to bring it up to date. This time frame also allows us to examine coverage across eras of both relative stability and instability.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of articles across newspapers containing our search terms. As is apparent, some newspapers devoted more coverage to Africa than others. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* published 47% and 34% of the articles in our dataset, respectively. *The Wall Street Journal* accounts for 13% and *USA Today* merely 6% of all articles. We also examined the rate of coverage over time. Annual article totals range from lows of 3,630 and 4,253 in 1995 and 1996 to highs of 6,932 and 6,554 in 2018 and 2003, respectively. While our data are not evenly distributed across newspaper or time, no single newspaper or year determines the outcomes of our analysis.

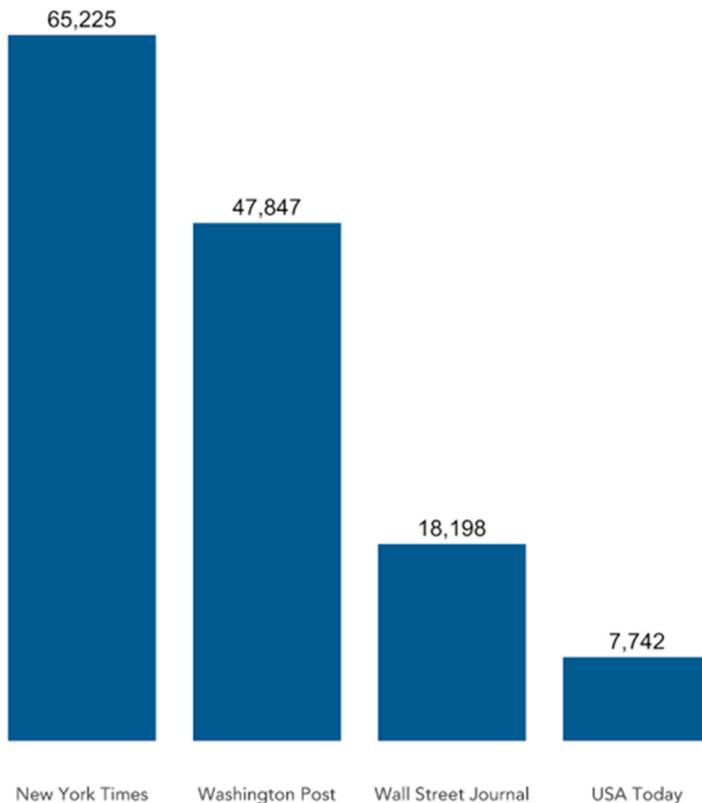


Figure 1. Article count by publication, 1994–2018.

To analyze the tone of articles, we use automated sentiment analysis, an increasingly common technique across the social sciences (Hopkins and King 2010; Young and Soroka 2012; Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Sentiment analysis aims to identify whether the valence (i.e., the tone) of a text is positive or negative. We base our analysis on eight widely used general-purpose lexica, constructed by a range of different methods for a variety of tasks, each of which lists positive and negative words.⁵ To assess the tone of an article in our Africa corpus, each word in the article is compared to the words in each individual lexicon. If the word in the article exists in the lexicon, the (positive or negative) valence score assigned by the lexicon is added to a running count. At the end of each article we divide the sum of the valence score by the total number of words in the article and average the scores for each article across all eight lexica, producing an initial valence score for each article.

Yet, even if an article mentioning Africa has a negative tone, it may be no more negative than the average US newspaper article. Gatekeeping theories as well as other research suggests that the media devote more coverage to negative stories than to positive ones, and that coverage of negative stories is more intense than coverage of positive ones (Soroka 2006, 2012; Lengauer, Esser, and Berganza 2012; Garz 2014). Therefore, we calibrate the valence measures for our Africa corpus against a body of texts that is (on average) representative of US newspaper coverage. We select a random set of articles between 1996 and 2015 from 17 national and regional newspapers, including the four we study here. This produces a “representative corpus” of 48,135 articles. After conducting automated sentiment analysis as described above, we assign the average valence of this corpus a value of 0 and standardize the valence measures so that the standard deviation of the representative corpus is set to 1. These calibration parameters are then applied to each article in our Africa corpus. This allows us to say precisely how positive or negative each article mentioning Africa is relative to our representative corpus of newspaper articles.

While article scores are continuous, it may be more intuitive to summarize the relative tone of each article in terms of segments of substantive significance. As Figure 2 illustrates, any article with a tone between -0.1 and 0.1 we consider essentially neutral. Scores of between 0.1 and 0.3 are modestly positive; those between 0.3 and 0.5 are clearly positive; and those over 0.5 are strongly positive. The mirror image holds on the negative side of the spectrum. This approach allows us to convey not only whether individual articles, subsets of articles, or corpora of articles are positive or negative, but also to communicate the relative intensity of the positivity or negativity with respect to US newspaper articles as a whole.

Our approach thus provides information not just about whether a text is positive or negative, but also about *how* positive or negative it is. Automated sentiment analysis cannot replicate more nuanced interpretive coding by trained researchers. However, it

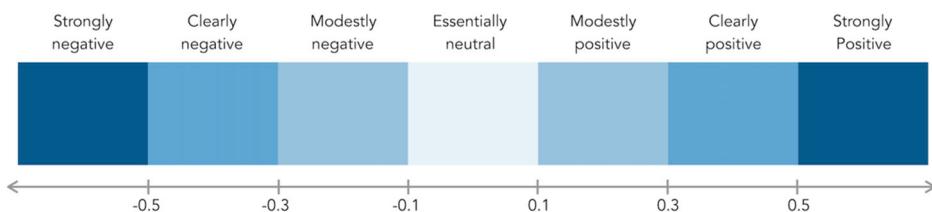


Figure 2. Tone score.

can capture underlying positivity and negativity systematically associated with large numbers of articles. Researchers have demonstrated that negative texts are linked to negative attitudes toward groups (Saleem et al. 2017; Lajevardi 2020), and that even unconscious implicit cognition can affect behavior and attitudes towards groups of people (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Freeman and Ambady 2011). This suggests the value of automated analysis as a complement to human-based coding.

After assigning each article a valence score, we identify articles that contain words associated with particular themes. We tag each article that contains a root word related to the negative and positive themes identified by previous scholarship on media coverage of Africa.⁶ We recognize that there is no perfect set of words for any given category. To some degree, each list of words may be either over- or under-inclusive of articles related to the concept. We utilize sets of words most likely to identify articles that touch on each theme. Complete lists are available in the appendix for full transparency and to provide opportunities for more detailed research in the future.

We explore four presumptively negative themes identified by scholars that constitute the type of coverage that gatekeeping theories suggest will be especially prominent in international news (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Golan 2010; Soroka 2012). These are conflict; political problems; poverty; and disease. Stories linked to conflict include words about crime, violence, tribal or ethnic conflict, war, genocide, or terrorism. Those related to political problems cover topics such as autocracy, authoritarianism, censorship, corruption, and coups.⁷ Articles linked to the poverty theme mention poverty, poor, famine, hunger, food shortages, or starvation. Those about disease use words like Ebola, malaria, tuberculosis, infection, or epidemic. In each case, we can tag articles containing these words and then gauge the degree of negativity associated with each of these themes.

Drawing on insights by scholars attuned to positive coverage (Scott 2009; Bunce 2017), we develop a parallel list of potentially positive themes embedded in reporting about Africa. Perhaps the most common positive theme for researchers working from the Africa Rising perspective is business and economics, which fits with gatekeeping theories suggesting greater coverage when foreign aid, investment, and trade become more prevalent (Wu 2000, 123–24; Golan 2010, 138–39), as they did between the US and Africa in the 2000s. To track articles associated with this theme, we search for words such as business, investment, technology, trade, or market. Sports have also been identified as a source of positivity. We thus tag articles that mention words like soccer, World Cup, marathon, or Olympics. Culture can also be a source of positive articles; for this, we include words like music, dance, art, film, literature, or museum. Once again, our goal is to understand whether the presence of any of these themes is associated with positivity.

In addition to assessing presumptively negative and positive themes identified by existing scholarship, we use topic modeling to inductively identify additional themes of coverage. Topic modeling algorithms isolate sets of words that are located near one another across our articles. We examine all 73,995 negative articles and then all 65,017 positive articles, which allows us to identify 37 potentially negative topics and 39 potentially positive topics.⁸ This method generates sets of words that cluster together. We then use human judgment to amalgamate topic words into themes that are logically and plausibly related to negative or positive coverage about Africa.

Based on these results, we identify sets of words associated with these inductively derived themes and tag articles containing those words for further analysis. For example,

reviewing the topic modeling results for articles with a negative tone reveals four themes not covered by existing scholarship: government; specific countries; the United Nations; and migration. The government theme includes generic words about government and politics, such as: ruling, president, politics, elections, and vote. The specific country theme revolves around mentions of individual countries within Africa.⁹ The United Nations theme includes the words United Nations or Security Council. Finally, the migration theme contains root words such as migrant, refugee, or asylum. There are also three potentially positive themes that emerge from our topic modeling analysis: education, religion, and travel. Education articles contain words like student, school, education, or university. Religion articles mention words such as church, God, Christian, pastor, or faith. Travel articles touch on words like hotel, cruise, travel, safari, or tourism. After identifying relevant keywords for negative and positive themes, we tag each article in our Africa corpus that contains one or more words related to these additional themes.

Amalgamating themes deductively derived from the existing literature with those inductively derived from topic modeling, we analyze eight potentially negative and six potentially positive themes. Because our themes are not mutually exclusive, we use linear OLS regression analysis to investigate whether dummy variables representing the presence of these themes are associated with negativity or positivity in the Africa article corpus, all else equal. We also check the normal language use of words associated with the most negative and positive themes by drawing on a sample of texts that contain those words. We conduct extensive KeyWords In Context (KWIC) analysis, which involves reading random samples of sentences containing keywords associated with each theme. This human review supplements and validates our predominantly computer-assisted method.

Analysis and Discussion

What is the overall tone of articles mentioning Africa in major US newspapers? The average newspaper article in our corpus of 139,012 articles is modestly negative, with a valence of -0.14 . Overall, 53% of the articles are negative and 47% are positive. Looking at the distribution estimates in [Figure 3](#), Africa articles are similar to the representative corpus when they are more positive than $+1$, there are fewer of them with a score between -1 and $+1$, and there are more with a score between -3 and -1 . In short, articles mentioning Africa are negative compared to our representative sample of US newspaper articles, but not overwhelmingly so. These findings offer modest support for the Afro-pessimist perspective on coverage of Africa.

To explore the Africa Rising hypothesis, we examine patterns over time. If articles were extremely negative in the 1990s but are now quite positive, that would constitute evidence of a long-term shift in tone that is consistent with the Africa Rising view. [Figure 4](#), however, shows that in spite of some ups and downs in valence across the years, the overall trendline is downward sloping. Roughly speaking, the pattern has been increasingly positive coverage between 1994 and 1998, between 2002 and 2010, and between 2015 and 2018. While the 2002–10 trend is broadly consistent with theories based on rising levels of aid, investment, and trade (Wu 2000; Golan 2010, 138–29), the subsequent years do not fit the predictions of the theory. The continuing increase in investment from 2011 to 2014 is not associated with a rise in tone, nor are the relatively lower levels of aid, investment, and trade from 2015 to 2018 associated with a drop in tone.¹⁰ Overall, there has been enough negative coverage to offset discrete periods of a rising tone of coverage.

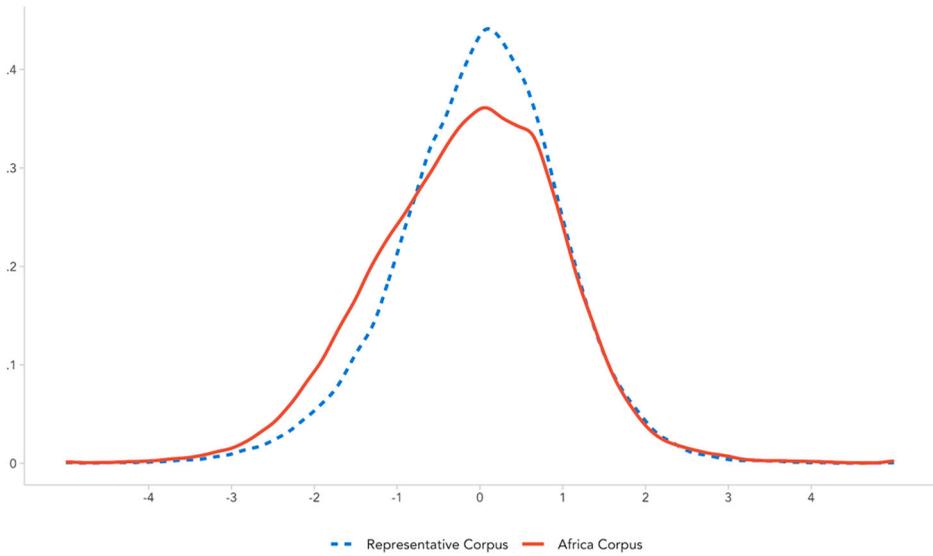


Figure 3. Full article valence distribution estimates (kdensity).

For instance, the average valence of the 4,527 articles from 1994 is -0.16 , whereas the average valence of the 6,932 articles from 2018 is only marginally more positive at -0.11 . The valence from 2018 is also more negative than the three most positive years of 2009 (-0.01), 2010 (-0.02), and 1997 (-0.04). In short, there is little evidence to support the Africa Rising argument of increased positivity in coverage of the continent over the 25-year period of our study.

Another way to assess positivity or negativity involves focusing on the peak periods of coverage. There are some months when newspapers pay intense attention to Africa; these

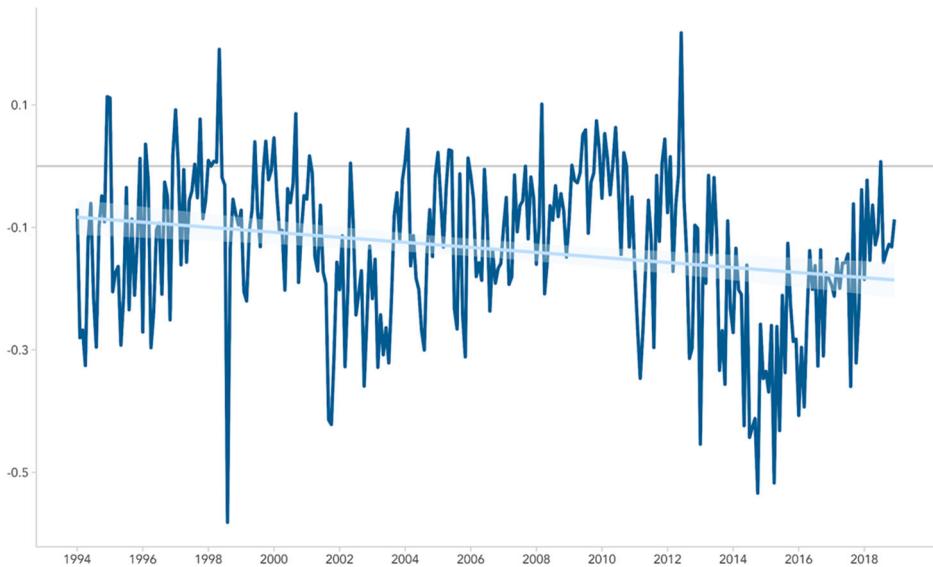


Figure 4. Average monthly article tone, 1994–2018.

are likely to make a particularly important impression on readers given the increased visibility of Africa in public discourse at those moments. Coverage that is especially positive or negative during peak months may have an outsized effect on readers' perceptions of Africa. Month-by-month variations in the quantity of coverage of Africa are illustrated in [Figure 5](#). The five months with the greatest number of stories are October 2014 (1,014 articles); July 2003 (821 articles); January 2018 (767 articles); August 1998 (705 articles); and March 2018 (701 articles).

Coverage in these months tends to be negative—sometimes intensely so. The average valence of an article in October 2014 was -0.55 , coinciding with the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. President George W. Bush's visit to a number of African countries in July 2003 heightened attention at that time; the average article valence that month was -0.32 . President Trump's expletive-based slur of African countries generated a January 2018 spike in mentions of Africa, although the average valence of -0.19 that month remained relatively close to the overall corpus average. The August 1998 Embassy bombings in East Africa explain the plethora of coverage that month, with a strongly negative average article tone of -0.58 . Finally, March 2018 had no specific story driving increased coverage, and had an average article valence of -0.16 , which is close to the average tone for the entire corpus. All in all, when US newspapers turn their spotlight on Africa, coverage is uniformly more negative than the overall average, and, at times, strongly so. This provides additional support for the Afro-pessimist perspective, especially when coupled with the tendency for people to remember negative information more than they recall positive information (Soroka 2014). It also supports gatekeeping perspectives that suggest the media are likely to focus more attention on negative than positive stories (Soroka 2012), particularly during periods of intense coverage that may rise to the level of "media storms" (Boydston, Hardy, and Walgrave 2014).

As noted above, our goal is not only to understand the tone of Africa coverage, but also to clarify the themes most closely associated with positive or negative coverage. To gauge

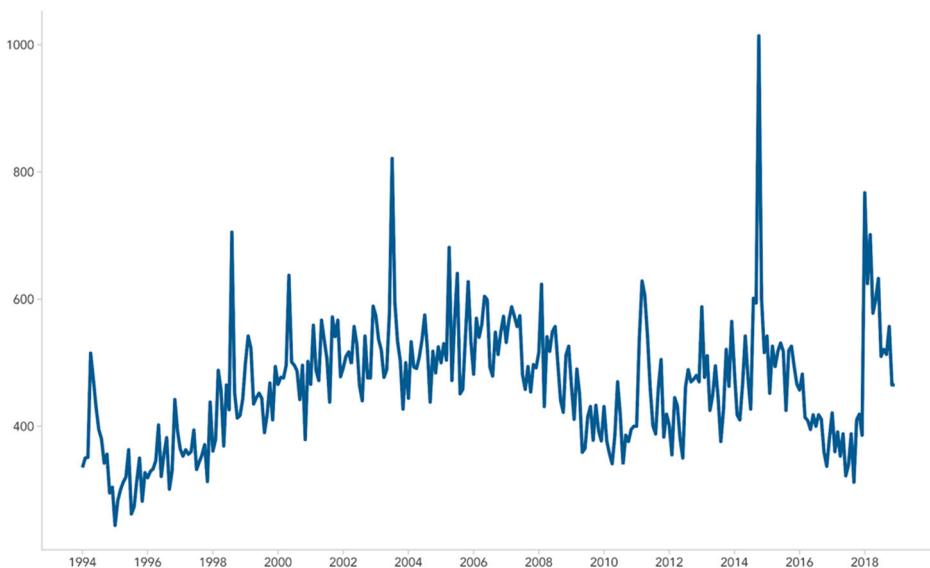


Figure 5. Monthly article count, 1994–2018.

Table 1. Prevalence of Themes.

Theme	Article Count (%)
<i>Negative Themes</i>	
Government	92,486 (67)
Conflict	92,025 (66)
Specific Country	63,394 (46)
Disease	29,764 (21)
Poverty	27,423 (20)
Migration	23,985 (17)
United Nations	22,191 (16)
Political Problems	20,873 (15)
<i>Positive Themes</i>	
Business and Economy	100,327 (72)
Culture	85,668 (62)
Education	70,673 (51)
Religion	50,958 (37)
Travel	40,561 (29)
Sports	25,614 (18)

the relative association each of our presumptively negative and positive themes has with article tone, we focus on the interaction of three key elements. First, we assess the prevalence of each theme. Some themes are present in no more than 15% of all articles, whereas others appear in over 50%. The more prevalent a theme is, the larger role it plays in US coverage of Africa, and the greater its capacity to drive negativity or positivity. [Table 1](#) conveys the prevalence of negative and positive themes in both numerical and percentage terms.¹¹

Second, to assess their actual association with a particular tone, we identify the mean valence of articles tagged for each individual theme and compare it to the mean valence of articles not containing those thematic words. The difference between these two averages provides a raw estimate of the magnitude of each theme's influence on the valence of articles about Africa. These figures are conveyed in [Table 2](#).

Although important, these raw scores risk being somewhat misleading, as there is substantial overlap between a number of the themes. To control for this potential confounding effect, we estimate a linear OLS regression with all thematic variables included.

Table 2. Impact of Themes on Valence.

Theme	Average Valence of Articles Containing Theme	Average Valence of Articles Not Containing Theme	Difference
<i>Negative Themes</i>			
Conflict	-0.37	0.29	-0.66
United Nations	-0.66	-0.05	-0.61
Specific Country	-0.44	0.11	-0.55
Government	-0.33	0.22	-0.55
Political Problems	-0.56	-0.07	-0.49
Poverty	-0.33	-0.10	-0.23
Migration	-0.30	-0.11	-0.19
Disease	-0.25	-0.11	-0.14
<i>Positive Themes</i>			
Culture	0.14	-0.61	0.75
Sports	0.23	-0.23	0.46
Education	0.08	-0.38	0.46
Religion	0.05	-0.26	0.31
Business and Economy	-0.07	-0.33	0.26
Travel	0.02	-0.21	0.23

Table 3. Tone of US Newspaper Coverage of Africa.

Negative Impact on Tone	
Conflict	-0.57 (.006)
Specific Country	-0.22 (.006)
Government	-0.21 (.006)
Political Problems	-0.20 (.008)
Disease	-0.17 (.007)
United Nations	-0.16 (.008)
Poverty	-0.14 (.007)
Migration	-0.10 (.007)
Positive Impact on Tone	
Culture	0.49 (.006)
Sports	0.31 (.007)
Education	0.28 (.006)
Business and Economy	0.24 (.006)
Religion	0.18 (.006)
Travel	0.10 (.006)
Constant	-0.16 (.008)
Adj R-Squared	0.270
Number of Articles	139,012

Note: OLS regression estimated coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.
All coefficients are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

All coefficients are statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. [Table 3](#) thus provides a third way of looking at the data that is relevant to our assessment of which thematic variables are most strongly and clearly associated with negativity or positivity.

As an initial observation based on the regression results, all factors presumed to be negative in the literature or based on our topic modeling analysis are indeed associated with negativity, and all factors predicted to be positive are associated with more positive than average tones, all else equal. Consistent with the results conveyed in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#), the regression results show that some factors are associated with greater degrees of negativity or positivity than others. To explore the themes in more depth and to put the information from [Tables 1–3](#) in a broader context, we now turn to a closer analysis of the factors associated with negativity and positivity.

Prominent Negative Themes

Given that our findings showed some support for the Afro-pessimist perspective, we begin by identifying the main sources of negativity in our corpus. Although all eight presumptively negative themes are meaningful, combining our three different measures suggests that migration and the United Nations are somewhat less influential than the others. We

therefore focus our discussion by starting with poverty, disease, and political problems, which occupy a middle ground in terms of their association with a negative tone. Even more significantly, both individually and especially in combination, stories referencing government, specific countries, and conflict are most strongly associated with negativity in our articles.

Two common factors highlighted in the scholarly literature—poverty and disease—are associated with less negativity than we anticipated. Just under 20% of all articles mention a word related to poverty, including 12% that mention “poor” and 5% that discuss famine. Yet the presence of the poverty theme, all else equal, is associated with only 0.14 more negativity than articles that do not mention poverty, with famine being the strongest source of negativity within the general poverty theme. Thus, although a notable portion of articles touch on poverty, such articles do not dominate coverage and their tone is not substantially more negative than the average article about Africa, all else equal.

Articles about disease are similar in their prevalence, as they are present in 21% of all articles. Compared to articles without them, however, those containing disease words are only 0.14 more negative. In addition, controlling for other factors, disease articles have a predicted valence that is only 0.17 more negative. This relatively modest negativity may seem surprising, as many stories do touch on the unfavorable outcomes associated with disease. Yet they often use a clinical tone, such as this September 2008 *New York Times* article on malaria:

Big improvements will be needed before precise data can be gathered in Africa, Dr. Otten said. For example, hundreds of millions of rapid diagnostic kits that can detect malaria in a finger-stick drop of blood will have to be distributed. Right now, most diagnosis is done by a technician looking through a microscope.

As a result of articles that focus on research labs or global health organizations, stories containing disease-related words do not necessarily have a strongly negative tone.

While articles about disease in general are not overwhelmingly negative, those that mention Ebola are a noteworthy exception. Ebola articles do not form a large portion of the dataset—they account for under 2% of our corpus—however, they have an average tone of -0.98 and dominate coverage during epidemics. In October 2014, for example, the month with the most articles in our 25-year period and at the height of coverage of the 2014 epidemic, 58% of all articles about Africa mentioned Ebola. Moreover, when articles mention Ebola, they repeat the word frequently. Articles that touch on Ebola name the virus an average of 6.5 times. For comparison, articles that discuss malaria include it an average of 2.9 times and those that mention tuberculosis do so an average of 1.8 times. Ebola articles thus constitute an especially and intensely negative subset of disease-related stories in our corpus.

Discussions of political problems, from authoritarianism and dictators to coups, oppression, and corruption, are a somewhat greater source of negativity within the overall corpus. While such articles represent a relatively modest 15% of our corpus, when these problems are touched upon, articles are 0.49 more negative on average than when they are absent from an article. When controlling for all other factors, however, they are only 0.20 more negative. Within this category, as may be expected, stories containing the words “coups” and “dictators” tend to be the most negative, with average tones of -0.76 and -0.66 , respectively.

If articles about political problems are noteworthy sources of negativity, ones about government in general are both far more plentiful and are associated with even greater negativity. Roughly 67% of articles mention generic words related to governments or politics, such as election, vote, or president. Those containing no references to government have a quite positive average tone of 0.22. The regression coefficient indicates that the predicted tone of an article mentioning government words is 0.21 more negative than an article with no reference to government or politics, even controlling for articles containing references to political problems or conflict. What are articles touching on government about, and why are they so negative? A 13 December 2016 article from *The New York Times* about future Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's legacy as Exxon CEO helps to illustrate this negativity:

Under Mr. Tillerson, Exxon Mobil has struck lucrative deals with repressive governments in Africa, clashed with China and befriended Vietnam over disputed territory in the South China Sea, learned from hard experience in Venezuela, and built a close rapport with Russia at a time of deepening mistrust between the Kremlin and the West.

As this example demonstrates, even when articles do not refer to specific political problems like coups or dictators, discussions of Africa and government still tend to be negative, in part because of associations with general repression.

Mentions of the specific countries and regions that emerge from our topic modeling analysis are also substantial sources of negativity. This was somewhat surprising given the criticism that Western media often make sweeping generalizations about the continent and are not attuned to country-level differences (Schraeder and Endless 1998; Mahadeo and McKinney 2007; Ebanda de B'éri and Louw 2011). In fact, nearly 46% of all articles in our corpus also mention particular countries. South Africa garnered the largest amount of coverage, appearing in 11% of all articles; Eastern Africa (which includes Kenya and Ethiopia) was next with 11%, followed by the Great Lakes region with 9% (which includes the Democratic Republic of Congo/Zaire, Burundi, and Uganda), and Nigeria with 8%. Mentions of one or more specific countries identified by our topic modeling analysis generated one of the largest effects, both in terms of the raw difference in article tone (−0.55) and in the regression coefficient (−0.22). Given how frequently specific countries are mentioned, this theme constitutes a significant source of negativity in US articles about Africa.

Overall, coverage of conflict is by far the biggest driver of negativity. Almost two-thirds of all articles mention one or more conflict words, which, unlike the similarly prevalent government theme, are quite likely by their nature to entail a negative tone. In fact, articles containing conflict references are far more negative compared to those without them—indeed, the 34% of articles with no conflict words have a strikingly high average valence of 0.29. Even controlling for all other factors, the conflict theme is associated with a −0.57 impact on predicted tone. Within the conflict theme, one of the most strongly negative subsets of articles touches on crime and punishment. These stories include words related to specific crimes or to law enforcement (such as criminal, murder, police, or trial), and make up 40% of our corpus.

While articles containing conflict words are strongly more negative than those without them, there is a particular cluster of articles involving multiple negative themes that is both prevalent and substantively meaningful in our corpus. Nearly 30% of all articles—41,043 of

the 139,012—contain words that touch on all three themes of conflict, government, and specific countries. These articles have an average tone of -0.67 , which is strikingly negative. This excerpt from the 5 January 1994 *Washington Post* offers a prototypical representation of this type of article:

Violent anti-government campaigns by Islamic fundamentalist groups in North Africa, particularly in Egypt and Algeria, as well as the presence of an activist, hard-line Islamic regime in Sudan, have raised fears that the stirrings in the Horn presage the region's emergence as the new battleground for Islamic radicals, according to dozens of sources around the region.

Overall, then, articles containing a combination of words related to conflict, government, and specific countries form the single largest source of negativity in US newspaper reporting about Africa.

Prominent Positive Themes

US coverage of Africa is not as relentlessly negative as some authors suggest, even if there is little evidence to support the Africa Rising narrative. In fact, 47% of articles in our corpus have a positive valence. It is therefore important to understand what may account for positive portrayals of Africa in US newspapers, as well as to estimate which among our six themes are associated with the greatest degree of positivity. Travel and religion are of comparatively less importance and thus will not be discussed here. The theme of business and economics is quite prevalent, but less powerfully associated with positivity than sometimes assumed. Sports, education, and, especially, culture emerge as the most significant sources of positivity in our corpus.

The Africa Rising perspective places particular emphasis on business and the economy as positive topics. A large number of articles (72%) include words related to this broad theme. Business and economy articles are 0.26 more positive than those containing no reference to these terms, which closely mirrors the 0.24 predicted effect of the regression coefficient. Yet, the average article touching on business or the economy remains negative, with a valence of -0.07 . This indicates that simply mentioning business or economy words does not ensure that articles have a positive tone. Looking more closely within this broad category, there are two types of articles that are, in fact, associated with positive coverage. The 29,086 articles that mention the word “market” have an average valence of 0.12, while the 13,313 articles that use the word “technology” have the most positive average tone of any subset of our business and economy theme at 0.29. A *New York Times* article from 20 July 2008 entitled “Inside Nairobi, The Next Palo Alto?” epitomizes the positivity of market and technology-related stories:

“When I interview people for jobs in this office,” explains Chris Kiagiri, a Google technology officer in Nairobi, “I ask them, ‘What would you like to see Google do in this market that it has not attempted anywhere else in the world?’”

The bottom line, however, is that business and economy articles taken as a whole do not account for the greatest degree of positivity in stories about Africa.

Sports and education are associated with substantially more positivity within our corpus. Scholars such as Bunce (2017) have cited sports as a driving force in positive portrayals of Africa. As a category, sports encompasses words such as soccer, the World Cup, the Olympics, athlete, marathon, and champion. While the sports theme is present in less

than a fifth of all articles, stories containing sports words are 0.46 more positive than those without them. Moreover, our regression results show that, all else equal, an article containing a sports term is predicted to be 0.31 more positive than an article without one. In addition, the 25,614 articles tagged with sports-related words in our corpus have an average valence of 0.23. Taken together, this evidence shows that sports articles are a source of significant positive coverage, even if they are not among the most common type of article.

Stories containing education words are much more prevalent: there are 70,673 of them, or 51% of our entire corpus. Education-related articles are 0.46 more positive than non-education articles, and, controlling for all other themes, the predicted effect of education is a 0.28 increase in positivity. What are these articles about? They typically include coverage of prominent academics engaged in research, of institution-building around African studies and curricula, or of educational efforts related to or on the continent. Typical sentences reflecting positive education stories include "Later she joined the African team of the foreign area studies group, a think tank at American University, where she contributed to 14 books" (*Washington Post*, 27 June 2004); "He and his siblings attend Sankofa Institute, an African-centered private school in Northwest where their mother teaches preschool" (*Washington Post*, 20 March 1999); and "Smith is a professor of medical law who was raised in Africa and taught at the University of Botswana" (*USA Today*, 20 March 2004).

Among all of the themes we examined, culture stands out for its positivity. Culture articles are 0.75 more positive than articles not including a culture word, by far the biggest difference we observe. Even controlling for all other themes in our analysis, culture articles are predicted to be 0.49 more positive than non-culture articles, making it the single most significant positive theme in our analysis by this measure as well. Moreover, culture articles are not rare. Words such as museum, art, music, or film are present in almost 62% of all articles in our corpus. US newspapers thus consistently reference cultural elements when writing about Africa.

While culture stories tend to be positive on their own, when combined with references to education, these articles constitute a large and positive subset of articles with an average valence of 0.25. There are 53,357 articles that contain both culture and education words, amounting to 38% of our corpus. A prototypical article includes references to both educational institutions and the arts. This excerpt from a 10 October 2014 *Wall Street Journal* article is a prime example:

"The festival is unusual for bringing a broad swath of South African music onto one of the world's most hallowed stages and commendable for going beyond black and white and including the mixed-race choirs of the Cape Malay community," said Carol Muller, a University of Pennsylvania ethnomusicologist who was born in South Africa.

In short, stories that lie at the intersection of culture and education are prevalent in US newspaper coverage of Africa and are highly likely to be associated with positivity.

Conclusions

In his review of US and UK representations of Africa, Scott concludes that scholarship has focused on relatively few "countries, events, media, and texts." For Scott, this provides "an insufficient basis for reaching any firm, generalisable conclusions about the nature of media

coverage of Africa.” He sees little evidence for Africa Rising narratives in his sample, but also states that “the widespread belief in the dominance of Afro-pessimism in the Western media ... is not currently substantiated by the existing evidence” (Scott 2017, 206).

We directly address Scott’s call for more information by undertaking a computer-assisted analysis of over 139,000 articles in major United States newspapers between 1994 and 2018, a research strategy that also allows us to assess the relative influence of gatekeeping theories that stress the prominence of reporting on negative events compared to those that highlight how increasing aid, investment, and trade may influence coverage of foreign locations. Overall, our results provide some support for the Afro-pessimist perspective and little to no support for the Africa Rising narrative. Articles mentioning Africa are modestly negative on average, and during the months of particularly intense coverage, the tone has been even more negative than in other time periods. Importantly, there has not been a marked or sustained rise in the tone of articles over this 25-year time period. This suggests the enduring importance of gatekeepers’ selection of negative events for prominent coverage, even if such stories do not completely overwhelm attention to positivity in coverage of Africa.

We deepen the understanding of newspaper coverage of Africa by examining the most prevalent themes associated with negativity and positivity. We draw on known themes from the existing literature, and also deploy topic modeling analysis to isolate themes of coverage based on clusters of words found in our corpus. In the end, a combination of themes identified through deductive and inductive approaches most strongly correlates with negative and positive coverage. In particular, articles about conflict and government that mention specific countries constitute a particularly common and powerfully negative subset of articles about Africa. Conversely, articles about culture and education (and to some extent, those about sports) are associated with a great degree of positivity.

Overall, our analysis contributes to longstanding discussions about Western media coverage of Africa. We do so by using computer-assisted methods supplemented by human analysis of article excerpts. Our approach cannot replace the more in-depth and detailed reading of smaller samples of articles. It is intended to complement existing work by contributing a broader overview than human analysis alone can provide. Bringing new evidence to bear on debates about media coverage advances our understanding of how Africa and Africans are depicted in the US media, while also providing support for gatekeeping theories that emphasize the prevalence of negative coverage, particularly in foreign settings. Given that US newspapers influence readers’ perceptions and government policy toward the continent, finding the continuing prevalence of negative stories that support the Afro-pessimist perspective remains as troubling today as ever.

Notes

1. Serwornoo (2019) finds this is true not only of Western reporting, but also of coverage in Ghanaian newspapers.
2. Following 2010, US foreign aid was flat through 2012 and then declined modestly through 2018. US foreign investment in Africa increased between 2010 and 2014 and then declined through 2018. Data on aid from USAID (<https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html>, accessed 25 March 2020). Data on foreign investment from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/188594/united-states-direct-investments-in-africa-since-2000/>, accessed March 25, 2020).

3. Trade slowly declined after 2008 before flattening out at approximately 2003–04 levels from 2015 through 2019. Data on trade from US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0013.html>, accessed April 3, 2020).
4. We download *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* articles from the LexisNexis database. *Wall Street Journal* articles are not available on LexisNexis; we therefore use the ProQuest database to assemble these articles. Our search terms were “Africa,” “African,” or “Africans;” we excluded articles that only contained references to African Americans, the US-based African Methodist Episcopal Church, or any individual African country without mentioning Africa or Africans as a whole.
5. See the appendix for more detailed information.
6. We do not attempt to analyze themes like “Otherness,” which cannot be captured through discrete sets of identifiable terms.
7. We recognize that some of these categories overlap. For example, tribal and ethnic conflict, war, genocide, or terrorism may be viewed as political problems, and coups involve conflict. We categorize these as we do because the former always involve conflict but are not always aimed at the government, whereas coups at their core are political problems for the government in power.
8. We use the non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) algorithm as implemented in the scikit-learn package in python, and iterate between 20 and 40 topics to pinpoint the number of topics with maximum coherence. A full list of topics is available in the appendix.
9. Not all individual countries appeared in our topic modeling analysis. See the appendix for full results.
10. Data on foreign investment from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/188594/united-states-direct-investments-in-africa-since-2000/>, accessed March 25, 2020). Data on aid from USAID (<https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html>, accessed March 25, 2020). Data on trade from US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0013.html>, accessed April 3, 2020).
11. As articles can contain words associated with more than one theme, the sum of the percentages exceeds 100%.

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