New Media, New Truths, New Lies: Popular Struggles in Africa and the Media*

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The bursting of citizens onto the streets of Tunisia and Egypt early in 2011 and the ensuing overthrow of the dictators Ben Ali and Mubarak attracted widespread media attention that characterized these events as the beginning of an 'Arab Spring'.[1] But during the same period, though largely ignored by the mainstream media, there were mounting protests, demonstrations and actions by citizens in a number of other African countries including Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda, Western Sahara, Zimbabwe.[2] While many of these have not (yet) been on a scale witnessed in either Tunisia or Egypt, the fact is that the events in these countries represent qualitative changes in the political and social environment. And yet these events have received little media attention. The only significant exceptions seem to be in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Somalia and Mali where Western governments have been involved in military interventions; Senegal, where mass protests, especially by the youth, prevented former president Abdulaye Wade from establishing his dynasty; and South Africa where striking miners in the Lonmin platinum mines were massacred. Even in these instances, the perspective of the media has been, I would suggest, strongly biased towards propagating the narrative of power – corporate and imperial power.

The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were, for much of mainstream media, unexpected, just as they were for the US administration, the IMF, and the World Bank who had been lauding the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak as stable allies of democracy before the uprisings began. Tunisia was even declared the most successful and stable government! While Al Jazeera provided almost 24-hour coverage from within Tunisia and Egypt during the uprisings, the majority of western broadcasting and print media, perhaps caught napping by the illusions of stability that they had been fed to them by the US administration were taken by surprise. Without reporters on the ground until much later, their primary source of information became new media, especially Twitter and Facebook. They were quick to name the events, therefore, as the Twitter and Facebook revolutions. As many studies have subsequently shown, neither of these new media outlets could be shown to have played a significant role in the mass mobilizations of citizens. Indeed in Egypt, the largest popular mobilizations occurred in the aftermath of the Mubarak regime decision to cut off access to the internet and to the mobile phone networks. In characterizing the uprisings as a function of new media alone, they revealed an apparent lack of awareness of the scale of social discontent that had been manifest and growing in both countries for some years prior to the mass mobilizations that brought down the regimes. There had been a series of worker and student strikes across Egypt in the years before, and activists had pounded their feet organizing and encouraging people to protest. The mobilisations were the result of sheer hard work by activists and trade unionists.

What also tends to be ignored are the subclinical manifestations of rising discontent that are reflected in the emergence of a wide range of social movements such as *Bunge la Mwaninchi* (People's Parliament) in Kenya, *Abahlali* base Mjondolo in South Africa, the shack-dwellers movement, landless peoples movements, peasant movements, women's movements, movements of LBGTIQ people, anti-eviction campaigns, anti-privatization movements, trade unions and many other such formations across the continent.

Such lack of awareness is, I would suggest, symptomatic of much of mainstream media's reporting on the global South where the agency of citizens is assumed to be lacking. The narrative and the perspectives of the 'wretched of the earth' is rarely seen as worthy of reporting, it is the narrative of imperial power or of corporations that tends to predominate. Or put it another way, there is tendency to see the people of the global South, and especially in Africa, as natives, not as citizens — the objects, not the makers, of history.

Where discontent has been reported upon, the explanation that is often presented, especially by the more conservative sections of the media, is that the uprisings have occurred because the growing middle-classes have rising expectations for individual freedom, mobility, money, private health and education, luxury commodities, cars, and so on. It is suggested that what is fuelling the discontent with autocratic regimes is middle-class aspiration for an unfettered market and frustration with the regimes that prevent them enjoying these benefits. To give credence to this perspective, the African Development Bank and the World Bank claim that Africa has a burgeoning middle class: apparently one-in-three Africans are today middle class, based on the ridiculous definition of that class as being those with an income of $2-$20 a day, a group that includes a vast number of people considered extremely poor by any reasonable definition, especially given the higher prices of most consumer durables in African cities. Conveniently forgotten, of course, is that 61 per cent of Africans, who are below the $2 a day level, are destitute, hardly able to keep body and soul together.

So what gave rise to the protests, uprisings and revolutions that we have been witnessing?

A common history

The discontent that gave rise to the uprisings in North Africa has causes and origins similar to the social upheavals witnessed in other parts of the continent, namely the growing impoverishment of the majority associated with neoliberal economic policies that have dominated the global South over the last 30 years.

This was a period during which there have been, especially in Africa, systematic reversals of the gains of independence.

It is important here to recognize the extraordinary achievements of post-independence governments prior to the 1990s. There were major economic and social transformations carried out by post-independence governments as part of the social contract established with the mass movements whose uprisings during the post Second World War period had brought nationalists into power. These are frequently forgotten by media, academia and the 'development' industry alike. According to a UN/WIDER report produced by Surendra Patel, over the 40 years from 1950-1990, countries of the South sustained an average annual growth rate of over 5 per cent by a population ten times larger than that of the developed world. There had been significant levels of industrialization and increasing share of manufacturing in exports; an increase in the rates of savings and investment; and an unprecedented expansion of social development, including health and education, dramatic improvements in life-expectancy (from 35 to over 60 years), literacy and unprecedented expansion of education.[3] In other words, in a relatively short period, the *underdevelopment* of the continent by European and trans-Atlantic slavery and by colonialism about which Walter Rodney so brilliantly wrote[4] was on the way to being reversed.

Such gains of independence were to be cruelly arrested beginning in the early 1980s. Almost without exception, the same set of social and economic policies – the so-called structural adjustment programmes – were implemented across the African continent opening avenues for capital expansion through the extreme privatization and liberalization of the economies. The state was declared 'inefficient' (despite its earlier remarkable achievements) and public services were first run down before being sold off cheaply to the private sector, principally to international corporations. The state was barred from subsidizing agricultural production (in the way that US and Europeans continue to support agriculture today), and prohibited from investing in social infrastructure, including capital investment in health, education, transport and telecommunications, until eventually public goods – the commons – were sold off to and taken over by international corporations. Tariff barriers to imports from advanced capitalist countries were removed, access to natural resources opened up for pillaging, and tax regimes relaxed to the advantage of international corporations and the local elite.

The effect was to reduce the state to a narrowly prescribed role in economic affairs, with precious little authority or resources for the development of social and public infrastructure. Its primary role was in effect reduced to ensuring an 'enabling environment' for international capital and policing the endless servicing of debt to international finance institutions and governments. With such narrow *marge de manoevre*, governments abdicated their role in determining economic and social policies.

Over time, privatization was extended to land, agriculture, and food production and distribution. The scale of land-grabbing that has been a feature of the most recent forms of dispossession taking place in Africa have, in general, received a fair amount of attention by the media and to some extent also by the development industries. But for the large part, land-grabbing has been portrayed as positive investment and in support of 'development', and rarely is there analysis of the price paid by the peasantry in the loss of land, livelihood and the creation of mass poverty. And rarely is attention given to the fact that the land so grabbed is to be used for the needs of the advanced capitalist countries and corporations, and not for the benefit of citizens who originally owned it.

The result of neoliberal policies was to increase the gap between the haves and the have-nots. A small minority, whose interests and enterprises were closely associated with the multinational corporations and finance, got obscenely rich, while the standard of living of the majority and value of the wage for those lucky enough to find work declined rapidly. Unemployment, landlessness and homelessness became the lot of the many. Forced to survive on inadequate nutrition, living in squalor and lacking the basic infrastructure of water and sanitation and adequate food, it is hardly surprising that the period saw a growing prevalence of diseases associated with suppression of the immune system and weakened resistance to infection.

This period witnessed not only wide scale and systematic dispossession of natural resources and wealth from the continent, but also a gradual political dispossession of citizens' ability to influence social and economic policies. African governments had in effect become more accountable to the international monopolies, international financial institutions, banks and aid agencies (most of whom ardently supported the implementation of neoliberal policies) than to the citizens who elected them.

And it is thus no surprise that we are witnessing as a result a growing disenchantment with the policies pursued by our governments, a rising anger at the widening gap between rich and poor, and a growing realization that the lot of the majority has been to continue to suffer in much the same way as – and sometimes worse than – they had under colonial or apartheid rule. It was this anger, combined with the frustration with the way in which their regimes fattened themselves through their collusion with international capital in the exploitation of their countries that fuelled the explosion of citizens on to the streets of Tunisia and Egypt. And it was the same frustrations and anger that have brought about protests and uprisings across so many African countries. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that the events we have witnessed in Greece, Spain, Occupy movements, Wisconsin, and even the Idle-No-More movements, share the same fundamental etiology.

Stereotypical perspectives

How, then, has the period of pauperization and impoverishment of the continent over the last thirty years been portrayed?

The predominant view of Africa is not a place that had been devastated and impoverished by slavery and colonialism; nor as a place that had succeeded in the immediate post-independence period in reversing some of those historical

disadvantages against all odds; nor a place where attempts to implement social policies that favoured the majority were frequently thwarted by assassinations, western supported coups d'état, threats and economic blockades, to say nothing of foreign military intervention to achieve regime change.

Rather, Africa is portrayed – either explicitly or implicitly – as a place whose natural state has always been a place of poverty.

The reality is that it has become conventional to describe Africans only in terms of what they are not. They are chaotic not ordered, traditional not modern, tribal not democratic, corrupt not honest, underdeveloped not developed, irrational not rational, lacking in all of those things the West presumes itself to be. White Westerners are still represented as the bearers of 'civilization', the brokers and arbiters of development, while black, post-colonial 'others' are still seen as uncivilized and unenlightened, destined to be development's exclusive objects.

At the heart of this construct of Africa is in effect an implicit denial that Africa's people have a history, or that if there is a history, it is irrelevant to today's challenge of 'development'. Thus, half a century after most African countries achieved independence, there are parallels with the denialism that pervaded colonial rule during which it was also assumed that Africans had no history. As Milan Kundera put it:

"The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history, Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster. … The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."[5]

Walter Rodney made much the same point about the destruction of memory under colonial rule:

> The removal from history follows logically from the loss of power which colonialism represented. The power to act independently is the guarantee to participate actively and consciously in history. To be colonised is to be removed from history, except in the most passive sense.[6]

He went on to castigate white anthropologists "who came to study 'primitive society'. Had he lived today, perhaps he might have turned his ire on development academics, professionals and perhaps even sections of the media who today perform a similar function!

The stereotypical view is that Africa is hopeless, indebted and heavily aid-dependent – a 'basket-case', as Tony Blair so delicately put it – a continent that fails to develop without the assistance of aid and the *noblesse oblige* of the development industry. That this view is unsubstantiated by the facts does not appear to deter its propagation.

According to a recent study of 33 'sub-Saharan' African countries conducted by the University of Massachusetts, these countries lost a total of $814 billion through capital flight during the period between 1970 and 2010. Taking into account a modest estimate of the interest earned on that capital, this would amount to a cumulative total loss of at least $1.06 trillion. Even without interest, the volume of capital flight far exceeds the amount of official development aid ($659 billion) and foreign direct investment ($306 billion) received by these countries over the same period, *making Africa a net creditor to the rest of the world*.[7] With rather few exceptions, such perspectives rarely get aired.

During the early years of the new millennium, many Northern governments proclaimed that aid to developing countries had grown. Through an analysis of IMF data, Abugre was able to show that the increase could be largely accounted for by the cancellation of debt to Iraq and Nigeria. Since debt relief is considered as part of aid, the repayment of interest on debt also needs to be considered as part of the equation. Taking debt servicing into account, his analysis showed that the net flow of aid from the North to the South over the period 2002 to 2007 amounted to *minus $2,785 billion*. That is to say that, the net flow of aid was not – as is usually portrayed as being in favour of the South – but rather a net flow of aid from the South to the North.[8]

Thus, despite all the evidence (and I have only cited here a few examples), prevailing wisdom remains that the North is the saviour of the peoples of the South, and in particular, that Africa cannot survive without being supported by the North.

Development pornography

It is important here to emphasize that it would be wrong to blame mainstream media for such caricatures of Africa and its people. This perception of Africa is to be found pervading, to varying degrees, business, academia, parliamentary political milieu (especially foreign policy), the arts and literature. It is to be found especially in the development / aid industry. Indeed, this perspective is at the heart of the rationale for overseas development aid, overseas volunteering, the work of many international development agencies, development courses at universities, and public responses to fundraising for 'poverty alleviation'.

International development NGOs and the aid industry tend to have a cozy relationship with the media. Governments need to justify devoting public funds to 'development'. And NGOs need to entice the public to make donations for their work in Africa. To raise funds effectively, or to justify aid, Africans are portrayed as suffering victims, starving, emaciated and pleading for help. Graphic images are used of starving children by ever growing numbers of competing charities to gain the attention of the public. But repetitive portrayal deadens the appeal. So each image depicting poverty has to be more graphic that the last to elicit responses. The spiral leads to may be characterized as 'development pornography'.[9]

It was the use of such pornography that Walter Rodney – back in the 1970s – so roundly condemned: "Oxfam never bothered their conscience by telling [the public] that capitalism and colonialism created the starvation, suffering and misery of the child in the first place." Save the Children Fund's current use pictures of the 'black child with a transparent rib-case, huge head, bloated stomach, protruding eyes and twigs as arms and legs' for fundraising might equally be blamed for failing to telling the public that it is development policies, corporations, banks and international financial institutions that created the 'starvation, suffering and misery of the child in the first place.'

That mainstream media should reflect the pervasive prejudices of the dominant ideology is hardly surprising and it would be wrong to hold it solely accountable for creating these negative stereotypes about Africa. But its power to amplify such

views makes its role clearly important in the process of propagating and legitimizing the mythology.

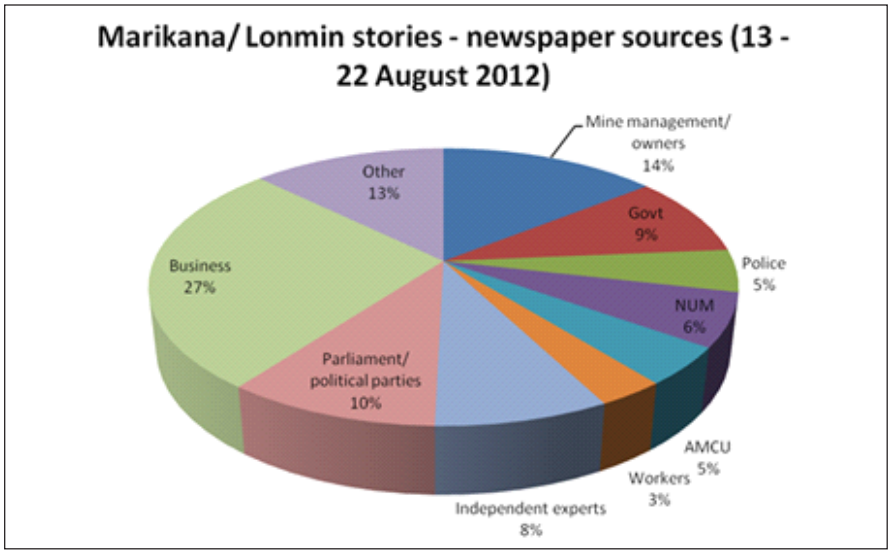
Media and social protest

The media's shortcomings however are especially revealed in relation to the reporting of protest by citizens or strikes by workers. Protests are frequently sensationalized (or sometime just ignored). It is rare to have analyses that explain to the reader what brought about the protest or strike. Instead, if the action is reported on, there is a tendency to report on scenes of violence or to portray those engaged as causing disruption to the public or to 'development'. Where there is violence, it is frequently the protestors who are condemned: the possibility that the violence might be provoked by over-reactions of the police or the decision of the state to employ heavy-handed repressive mechanisms is rarely given much credence. The result is a caricature that criminalizes protestors in the eyes of the public and the police and legitimizes state repression.[10]

To some extent, journalists are only as good as their sources. If the expert opinions they seek are primarily from governments, business, academia, international NGOs and other institutions that are imbued with the 'basket-case' perspective of Africa, that perspective will inevitably get reproduced by the media. More worrying in the long run is the related, deeper bias regarding the credibility and legitimacy of sources of information when it comes to the reporting of social protest. Thus, for example, in an analysis of more than 2000 stories in the New York Times about Nicaragua, for example, Bennett found that reporters paid much more attention to the views of political elites than to non-official forms of public opinion, such as protest groups or opinion polls.[11]

The way in which the now infamous miner's strike in the Lonmin platinum mines in Marikana, South Africa, during which more than 40 workers lost their lives, was reported (at least in the early period) is illustrative. In analysis of articles published in the period immediately following the events, it was found that media focused almost exclusively on the views of business, parliamentarians, mine owners and management, government and police, with only 3 per cent providing the views of miners themselves (see Fig 1). Worse still, "... of all 153 articles [analysed] only one showed any attempt by a journalist to obtain an account from a worker about their version of events. There is scant evidence of journalists having asked the miners the simplest and most basic of questions, namely 'what happened?'."[12]

Figure 1: Sources of information related to the reporting of the Marikana massacres[13]



The other feature of much of mainstream media on which I want to briefly comment is in relation to information that gets propagated through new media sources. There is a tendency to take at face value and report uncritically on campaigns that reinforce dominant prejudices such as seen last year in relation to *Kony2012*.

Here was a video that portrayed an American talking with his five-year-old child that sought to demonize Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA. The intent here was clearly to mobilize public opinion to support a call for US military intervention in Uganda. The video went viral, but its premise was rarely subject to any critical analysis in the mainstream media. Why was the LRA being singled out for attention now? As Mamdani points out, "The LRA is a raggedy bunch of a few hundred at most, poorly equipped, poorly armed, and poorly trained. Their ranks mainly comprise those kidnapped as children and then turned into tormentors. It is a story not very different from that of abused children who in time turn into abusive adults. In short, the LRA is no military power."

Anyone familiar with the events in the north of Uganda would already have known this. Anyone familiar with the political situation would also have pointed out how the Ugandan government uprooted local farmers in the area and interned nearly a million of them in camps. Unable to tend their farms, their lives were controlled by Ugandan military personnel, and the population became dependent for their survival on hand-outs from the development and humanitarian agencies (who equally benefit from ignoring the causes of the interning of so many people). None of that received attention from the most of mainstream media.

But in particular, what was missed by almost everyone was the involvement of much darker forces in the development of the video that caused such a stir. Investigations by Horace Campbell[14] subsequently exposed the fact that Jason Russell of "Invisible Children" and father to the 5-year-old in the video, was himself trained at the US military sponsored Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) at the University of Southern California, whose website declares: "ICT was established in 1999 with a multi-year contract from the US Army to explore a powerful question: What would happen if leading technologists in artificial intelligence, graphics, and immersion joined forces with the creative talents of Hollywood and the game industry?" The extent to which the *Kony2012* video was part of a military experiment to see how new media can be used for manipulation of the public imagination remains unknown.

But the critical point about the *Kony2012* video was that it played to the dominant prejudices about Africa, without which it

would not have gained the popularity that it did. In addition, the media focused on the phenomenon of a video that went remarkably viral, but without serious critical analysis of its content and validity.

Conclusion

That Africa gets portrayed in negative ways cannot be wholly blamed on the media. Media is after all only one of many institutions in modern capitalist societies that manufacture and propagate ideology and prejudice. As Herman and Chomsky have argued, there are considerable pressures on the media for conformity to political consensus. These include pressures from ownership of the media houses, their dependence on advertising as the principal source of revenue, pressures what information is sourced, who is considered 'legitimate' and the resources available for investigative reporting, the political and/or legal threats that media potentially face in addressing politically sensitive materials, as well as the pressures to conform with prevailing ideology and prejudices in society.[15]

The shortcomings of mainstream media, combined with the opportunities created by developments in information and communications technologies, have led to the emergence of alternative media in a way that had not previously been possible. There are today a number of significant websites that provide alternative perspectives and analyses about Africa – including the South African Civil Society Information Service (www.sacsis.org.za), Jadaliyya (http://www.jadaliyya.com), Sahara Reporters (http://saharareporters.com), West Africa Democracy Radio (http://wadr.org), and others, including Pambazuka News (http://www.pambazuka.org) which I founded. There are also a number of broadcasting networks operated by activists in the Diaspora (Africa Today on KPFA.org, Afrobeat on WBAI.org etc). Networks such as Al Jazeera have to some extent played an important role in providing a non-western perspective on news (although it too suffers from the pressures imposed on it by its owners about both what it can report as well as how particular news is reported).

To some extent, these alternative media sources perform an important function in overcoming some of the shortcomings of corporate media. But their influence on mainstream media tends to be limited as, with relatively few exceptions, their output tends to be ignored by corporate media.

To overcome some of the shortcomings of media, civic society has of course no alternative but to raise critical voices of protest against bias in the media, while at the same time supporting new media initiatives that publicize alternative perspectives. But it is important at the same time not to delude ourselves too much about the power of the media: while it is true that media tends to reinforce prevailing prejudices and ideologies, the reality is that the public is not incapable of forming their own opinions about the nature of the materials broadcast or published. The public may be fooled some of the time, but not necessarily all the time.

I believe that there is a danger of devoting too much energy to either critiquing media or trying to create alternative forms of media. In capitalist societies, especially in a period such as ours, where there is such centralization, concentration, and financialisation of capital, as well of the media, it is almost inevitable that media will reflect the interests of those who hold power. Indeed, in some instances, those interests are propagated aggressively. The power of corporate media is substantial. But that is not to say that they are not susceptible to change.

Look at how corporate media represented women in the 1950s and 1960s. That representation did not change merely because convincing arguments were provided, but because the rise of the women's movement challenged those perspectives. That is not to say that women are not exploited by the media today, but rather to say that there is unfinished business that will once again be taken up as the most oppressed and exploited reassert themselves through struggle.

To give another example, there were remarkable changes in the way in which the people of Egypt or Tunisia were portrayed just a couple of years ago. Where once they had been seen as docile, lazy and accepting, such portrayal of the people was transformed when the streets were filled with protesting, creative and courageous people seeking to take the future into their own hands!

The point is that the rise of social movements, the emergence of the struggle of the oppressed and exploited plays a significant role in changing the way in which the media propagates ideology (or constrains itself in expressing negative perspectives).

Pambazuka News is often perceived of as a news magazine / website / newsletter. But producing and disseminating news was never its purpose. The whole point of Pambazuka was a political one - to nurture, support and contribute to the building of a progressive pan-African movement. We did this in numerous ways: by commissioning and publishing articles, by producing podcasts, by participating in campaigns, by giving voice to those engaged in the struggle for freedom and justice, by enabling social movements to use it as an organizing tool, by organizing events and in some cases even by publishing books. My point here is that the driving force of building a movement was the purpose of Pambazuka. Our point, to paraphrase that well-known saying, was not to just to report on the world, but to change it.

And I think that should be at the heart of the program for the future. What can we do to support the oppressed, exploited, the 'wretched of the earth' to bring about the changes that are so desperately needed to ensure the future of humanity and the future, dare I say it, of the planet? How to we ensure that those voices are heard and how do we ensure that they can organize to bring about change.

It is applying ourselves to that goal that we will change the way in which media portrays our struggles. The media will change in response to momentum of the struggles for freedom and justice, not the other way round. That is not to say that corporate media will simply lie down and accept the changes. Media is a terrain for contestation between corporate power, the state and citizens. But whereas corporate media draws strength from the power of money and its privileged access to the state, citizens can draw their strength from struggles of ordinary people, the disenfranchised, and the exploited.

Notes

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1. Despite the fact that both Tunisia and Egypt are both in Africa, and have a long and intimate political and historical connection with the rest of the continent (both are members of the African Union).

2. For further details and analyses of these uprisings, see Manji F & Ekine S: *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* (Oxford, Pambazuka Press 2011).

3. Patel S (ed): *Technological Transformation in the Third World. Volume V: The Historic Process*. UN/WIDER 1995.

4. Rodney, W: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Originally published in 1972, the book has been republished by Pambazuka Press in 2012.

5. Milan Kundera: The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

6. Rodney 1983 *op cit.*

7. Boyce, James K and Ndikumana, Leìonce (2012): *Capital Flight from Sub-Saharan African Countries: Updated Estimates, 1970 - 2010*. Political Economy Research Institute, Amherst: University of Massachusetts, October 2012.

8. Abugre, C: (2010): Development aid: robbing the poor to feed the rich. Pambazuka News. http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/65096

9. Rotimi Sankore (2005): Behind the image: Poverty and 'development pornography' http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/27815

10. Duncan, J (2013): The stuff of investigative journalism. SACIS: http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/1535#

11. Bennet W: Marginalising the majority: the news media, public opinion and Nicaraguan Policy Decisions. Quoted in Onyedike, Emmanuel U: Re-positioning Africa: The role of African-Americans in changing media treatment of Africa. Journal of Third World Studies 13:2 (1996: Fall), p51-60.

12. Duncan, J (2012): It's not just the unions that are cut off from the people but the media too. Paper presented to the Lineages of Freedom Symposium, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, October 2012.

13. Newspapers sampled: Business Day, The Star (including Business Report), The New Age, Citizen, Mail and Guardian, City Press, The Sunday Times and Times, Sowetan, Beeld, Die Burger, Sunday Independent, Financial Mail.

14. Horace Campbell (2012): *Kony2012*: militarization and disinformation blowback. http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/80989

15. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, New York: Monthly Review 1988