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AFRICA IN THE CLICK STREAM: AUDIENCE METRICS AND FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies have transformed the relationship between news outlets, journalists and their audiences. Notably, editors can now monitor their websites and discern the exact news preferences of their readers. Research suggests that some editors are using this data to help them produce more popular, 'click friendly' content. To date, research on this phenomenon has focused on journalists working within newsrooms. This article adds to the literature by exploring the relationship of foreign correspondents in Africa with their audiences, and asks whether readership metrics are influencing the journalists' selection and development of news stories. Drawing on 67 interviews with foreign correspondents in East and West Africa, the article identifies three different approaches to audience metrics: correspondents that are 1) data-driven; 2) data informed; and 3) data denial-ists. The article discusses the implications of these approaches for the media image of Africa that is distributed around the globe.

Today's news editors operate in a near-perfect information environment. Monitoring their website analytics, they have access to extensive, precise information about the popularity of different stories, where readers come from, how long they spend on each page, and whether they share or comment on content. As journalist Glen Stanaway puts it, "the internet lets us measure precisely, virtually every minute, story popularity... the web forces us closer to our readership. Feedback is instant" (quoted in Este et al 2008, 17). Research suggests that news editors are increasingly using this feedback to guide their news production – for example, if metrics show that a particular story is popular, placing it prominently on the website homepage, and commissioning stories on a similar topic in the future (Anderson 2011a, 2011b; Boczkowski, 2004; Bright and Nichols 2014; Dick 2011; Loosen and Schmidt 2012; MacGregor 2007; Peters 2010).

To date, research on the influence of website analytics has focused exclusively on editors and journalists working within newsrooms (see Tubdoc 2014 for a recent overview). There has been little discussion of whether this data may be used to guide international news production, and the work of foreign correspondents abroad. This is a significant gap given the important role international news plays in shaping audiences' perceptions of foreign events. Moreover, research suggests that international news – and news coverage of Africa, in particular - is unpopular among readers in the global north (Baum 2002; DFID 2000; Carroll 2007). When surveyed, news readers often state that they want to read hard-hitting international news - but when their actual online behavior is analysed, they tend to avoid it (Thompson 2014). Thus, where editors and foreign correspondents consult audience metrics, they may be more reluctant to produce news about events and issues in Africa. Alternatively, they may be inclined to focus on high profile-events which have a demonstrated audience appeal: for example, coverage of the Boko Haram kidnapping or the ebola epidemic.

This article explores the question: how is readership data used in the production of international news about Africa? Drawing on 67 interviews with foreign correspondents in East and West Africa, it identifies three quite different

practices – or strategic approaches - to the collection and dissemination of readership data: 1) A first group of foreign correspondents are acutely aware of audience data, and base their news decisions on this information. This category includes *The Daily Telegraph* (UK), as well as the journalists at the Reuters newswire; 2) Foreign correspondents who have little knowledge of audience data, but are sometimes guided towards more popular stories by their editors who *are* aware of the data. The vast majority of foreign correspondents working in sub-Saharan Africa today fall into this category; 3) A final, very small group of foreign correspondents have no knowledge about their readers' behavior, and experience little pressure from their editors who do. This includes the correspondents working at *The Economist* and the *Financial Times* (UK)*. The discussion section explores the implications of these approaches for international news content about Africa.

WEBSITE ANALYTICS AND THE END OF THE 'IMAGINED AUDIENCE'
Website analytics are increasingly collected and consulted by editors in newsrooms around the world. A survey of 318 editors of US newspapers found that 84% monitored their website traffic regularly and 31% used audience metrics "to plan content production" (Vu 2013, 10). In an ethnographic study of three online newsrooms in the United States, Tandoc (2014) finds that editors referred to metrics when making selection (and de-selection) choices for the home pages of their websites; and they used them to test and experiment with possible wording, headlines, and accompanying graphics. The results of these experiments provide data on whether particular approaches to storytelling result in greater volumes of traffic – and this knowledge can be used to guide future production. Tandoc concludes that, "Journalists are normalizing web analytics, using audience metrics to inform their traditional gatekeeping functions. News judgments now include acute awareness of what stories did well in the past based on traffic" (2014, 572).

Large quantitative studies have confirmed the important role metrics play in news production. Bright and Nichols (2014), for example, analyze whether readership statistics influenced editors' decisions to keep articles on the front of their website's home page. Comparing 60,000 news articles that appeared on the

website of UK news sites with the list of 'most read articles' they find that being popular reduced the chance of being removed from the homepage by 20-30%. The authors conclude that "the audience is no longer the ignored quantity it was in offline journalism: it has a clear impact on journalistic practice" (2014, 178). The wider crisis in the journalism business model may create even more pressure on editors to refer to metrics, in the attempt to drive traffic to their sites. With advertising and revenue often liked to page views, research suggests that editors who feel insecure or worry about their outlet's ratings are most likely to refer to audience figures (Lowrey and Woo, 2010).

These developments concern some commentators (e.g. Currah 2009) who worry about a 'click culture' permeating contemporary news work, with editors struggling to balance the pursuit of page views with a desire to preserve traditional norms, values and professional judgment. However, these concerns must be tempered by the fact that popular news is not necessarily 'bad'. In addition to providing audiences with the news they actually *want* to read, popular journalism has the potential to focus on issues ignored by elite media, and it may provide an alternative space for public engagement (Örnebring and Jonsson 2004; Baum 2002).

Internet analytics have not been utilized uniformly across the news market (Anderson 2011a, 2011b). At the 'quality' press, editors seem to be exercising caution, with the desire to protect brand reputation seemingly acting as a counter-weight to commercial imperatives (MacGregor, 2007). At *The Guardian*, for example, Dick finds that the desire for more traffic does not trump the style guide or in-house editorial decisions. If a topic is trending, the suggestion is only made to 'move it up' the agenda if it has a perceived resonance with *The Guardian*'s readers. Traffic is "on the table" as part of the debate but protecting the brand comes first (Dick 2011, 472). This conservative approach contrasts markedly with other outlets, particularly the new arrivals *Upworthy, Gawker* and *Buzzfeed*, where readership figures are celebrated and advertised, and play a central role in news production. At *Upworthy*, for example, journalists are asked to write 25 potential headlines for every story. These are tested and a final headline chosen on the basis of one criteria: audience appeal. Co-Founder Peter Koechley describes the process: "We're maybe as good as a coin-flip at

guessing what's going to work best for our users. We rely on testing to just make better decisions" (Johnson 2014).

Noting that different news outlets use audience metrics in a variety of ways, MacGregor concludes that, "social and organizational context rather than technology alone shape the way these online professionals react to their new tool" (2007, 280). Caitlin Petre's (2015) analysis of the *New York Times* goes further to suggest that reader metrics are not used homogenously within newsrooms, either. Drawing on ethnographic work in the newspaper's headquarters, she finds that editors would sometimes withhold metrics from journalists in order to protect their editorial judgment and autonomy. At other times, however, they would deploy the metrics for strategic, managerial purposes. One example of this was telling a journalist about website traffic to a particular blog, in order to encourage them to accept an online-only commission.

To date, research on the use of audience metrics has focused on journalists based within newsrooms, who are often exposed to audience data on live screens and in news meetings (Peters 2010). Working far away from their newsrooms, foreign correspondents are potentially insulated from this information, and the explicit or implicit pressure it communicates. The distance between the correspondent and their editors may translate into less direction from above on what news should be gathered and how, and this may allow greater scope for the individual correspondent to pursue their own interests, removed from their outlet's news needs (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 91; Hess 1981; Hannerz 2004, 148). As such, it is important to question whether the news production practices observed within newsrooms will be replicated when correspondents are working remotely.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS PRODUCERS IN AFRICA

The most important producers of day---to---day English-language international news content in Africa are the international newswires. Today the "big three" – AFP, AP, and Reuters – are said to monopolize – or at least dominate – the worldwide flow of news (Williams 2011). Outside the newswires, the networks of BBC and Al Jazeera, very few news outlets have correspondents in Africa. Today only four UK newspapers, for example, have traditional, permanently

posted correspondents based in Africa: *The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian* and *The Independent* (Bunce 2013[1]). Other European countries and the US are similarly represented: a small number of 'elite' outlets tend to have one or perhaps two correspondents covering a very large, complex and expensive-to-manoeuver continent (Bunce 2013; Williams 2011). In addition to these, a fluctuating group of freelancers and casual journalists selling their work on a more ad hoc basis.

The news these correspondent produce is disseminated around the world and shapes an international audience's perception of the African continent. Although the ability of the news media to influence policy – the so---called "CNN effect" – is fiercely debated, there is some consensus that the news media, by deciding which issues to cover, partially sets the public agenda, which in turn may influence the importance citizens ascribe to certain issues (McCombs 1981). Conversely, in instances where there is no coverage, there is little pressure on citizens, elites or institutions to respond (Hawkins 2002). Theories of media framing further suggest that the news media adopts frames, which, by omitting some ideas and emphasising others, produce and reinforce a certain way of understanding and viewing an issue (Entman 1993). Representations of the "developing world" have been particularly criticized for their negative and reductive frames, and the extent to which they reinforce understandings of the "developing world" as "Other" and in need of Western help (e.g. DFID 2000; Mbembe 2001). Not only does this have quite immediate consequences for tourism and trade, but it also supports and reinforces an asymmetrical power relationship with long---term consequences for the globe (see also Mbembe 2001). Silverstone (2007) eloquently and importantly argues that these unbalanced representations preclude the "proper distance" needed to generate an empathetic and cosmopolitan concern for other citizens of the world.

Despite the importance of the international news coverage of Africa, we have surprisingly little information about the journalists who produce it. There are few production studies of foreign correspondents at work in Africa. Bunce (2015, 2013) looks at the role of local journalists in international news

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[1] In addition, outlets that are quite widely read in the UK, but aren't base there, such as the *Financial Times*, have correspondents in the region.

production, and Vincete (2013) explores the wider social demographics and background of foreign correspondents. Nothias (2016, forthcoming), however, is the first to examine the relationship of foreign correspondents with their audiences. Drawing on interviews in Kenya and South Africa, Nothias finds that correspondents are concerned about their audiences and they try to cater to their interests in a general way. He points to the important role twitter plays in holding journalists to account as well as suggesting story ideas. However, Nothias does not explore the role that audience metrics may be playing in rendering these relationships closer than ever before. This article contributes to our understanding by exploring the extent to which foreign correspondents are aware of audience metrics, and integrate these into their work selecting and developing story ideas.

METHODS

This research was conducted as part of a large project looking at international news production in Africa (Bunce 2013) and additional fieldwork conducted in 2013 and 2014. In total, this research included 67 semi-structured interviews conducted with foreign correspondents working in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these interviews took place in Nairobi and Lagos – the biggest reporting hubs in East and West Africa - with additional interviews conducted in Kampala, Dakar, and Khartoum. The sample included bureau chiefs and correspondents at the newswires AFP, AP, Reuters, Bloomberg and Xinhua; all of the correspondents working full time for UK quality newspapers (noted above); as well as a handful of global, US and European outlets, including, *The Economist*, *The Financial Time*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal, De Volkskrant* and *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. The research was primarily looking at print journalists, however, the sample also included correspondents at the networks Al Jazeera English, CNN, BBC, ABC and CBC, to generate wider context.

In the interviews, correspondents were asked to describe the story commission process; the relationship they had with their editors; the level of autonomy they experienced in their work; whether they were aware of the popularity of stories they produced; and whether editors disclosed the success of previous stories. In interviews, the journalists generally spoke 'on the record'.

Nonetheless, owing to the sensitive nature of some comments, the journalists' names are not used.

The data was gradually gathered over a relatively long period in which there was great flux in the media industry, and news organisations experimented with digital convergence and online publication of their content. Interviews were conducted with foreign correspondents in Sudan (2007), Kenya (2009), Uganda (2010), Senegal (2013) and Nigeria (2014). As such, it must be stressed that the data tells us about the role readership data *can* play in international news production, and in shaping foreign correspondents' work. That is, it explores some emerging strategies that news outlets are adopting, and ways in which news production practices may be changing, rather than providing a strict comparative study of news producers in Africa today. News organisations are highly dynamic and may adopt, innovate and discard technological processes swiftly (for an example, see Tameling and Broersma 2013).

RESULTS

The interviews suggested that there were three quite different approaches to audience metrics among foreign correspondents working in sub Saharan Africa. A first, very small group of correspondents receive direct information about readership metrics, and refer to this data in their work. This group includes the correspondent working for the *Daily Telegraph* (UK) and the group of journalists at the Reuters newswire. These outlets and journalists could be considered 'data driven' in their work.

1) Data Driven

Of the newspaper journalists in this study, the foreign correspondent working at *The Daily Telegraph* (DT) was the most guided (at the point of this interview, in 2009) in his daily work by website analytics. *The Daily Telegraph* (DT) was a pioneer in the development of digital news: it launched a website in 1994 (the first for a daily newspaper in Europe) and it was the first newspaper outlet in the UK to appoint a search engine optimization executive (Este et al 2008: 20). The outlet has built what it calls a "newsroom of the future" which is orientated around screens that display live data on its website's most popular stories (Este

et al 2008: 8). The East African correspondent is not physically present in the newsroom, but he receives frequent emails about story success rates, and informal feedback from this editor. In addition, there is a constant refrain about the need to drive website traffic, as the correspondent noted:

> We need to show that there are 23 million users going onto *The Telegraph* website, and that you're consistently one of the most found news and information sites for big stories [Interview, 4/8/2009].

The editors closely monitor news readership on the web more generally, and instruct correspondents to report on topics that are generally popular or 'hot right now':

> The editor decides what's sexy by looking at who is searching for what on Google. [...] Twice a day, there's an email that goes through to the foreign desk on the most searched terms on Google news...they get this thing in the morning. And a lot of editors would definitely respond to that...[Interview, 4/8/2009].

The *Daily Telegraph's* correspondent has built an understanding of the kinds of stories that his audience (and editors, drawing on this data) wish to read. In the interview, he identified five categories: 1. The "big stories" of the day: breaking news events that other outlets are already covering– for example, hijacking of ships by Somali pirates; 2. Stories about British people in Africa – the 'Brits in Peril' genre; 3. Local stories that will impact people in Britain – for example, events that might prompt more immigration or a rise in UK food prices; 4. Stories about celebrities (especially royalty) and 5. Stories about animals – preferably animals that are cute, unusual, or have 'unlikely animal friendships' with humans or other species.

When covering the 'big stories of the day' the *Daily Telegraph* has a clear goal: the editors want their version of events to feature prominently on web search results and, through this, bring traffic to their website. A story is considered a success if it ranks highly on a Google news search. *The Daily*

Telegraph employs a number of specific strategies for maximizing their visibility on Google News. First, they insert hyperlinks into their news stories and on the surrounding page – a common practice of news websites. The second – more controversial technique (Dick 2011) – is that editors encourage their journalists to insert keywords into their stories that a reader would likely input into Google to find the news. The correspondent describes this process in relation to a story about an attempted attack by Somali group al Shabaab in Australia:

> the big story is the terrorist arrests, so the search terms would be "terror" "Islam" "Somalia" "arrests" "al Qaeda" "army" "suicides" these kinds of words. So any story about [the attacks] needs to have those terms high up – in the intro, at the start. And that's what they [the editors] would term "sexy". [Interview, 4/8/2009].

Left to their own devices, a foreign correspondent in East Africa might draw a connection between the terrorist networks al Qaeda and al Shabaab, but it is unlikely that this connection would be prominent in the story. A foreign correspondent at the BBC in Nairobi, for example, commented: "I stay away from the al Shabaab link to al Qaeda. Because that's only a small bit. And if we say that, everyone brings all of their preconceptions straight away to the story – files it away under that terrorist file in their head" [Interview, 7/8/2009]. The *Daily Telegraph's* conventions, by contrast, actively encourage the journalist to draw this connection, as it helps the story be located on the web by potential readers.

A second group of correspondents in this research were highly aware of readership statistics, and had these passed directly to them by editors: the journalists at the Reuters newswire. The Reuters newswire is one of the leading producers of international news about Africa. Once famous for its hard news reporting, the wire has become significantly more focused on its financial clients, particularly since 2007 when the wire merged with Thomson, a global information corporation (Bunce forthcoming, 2016). One of the clearest articulations of this shift comes from Sean Maguire, former International News editor, who commented, "For a long time we were 'reporter-led'. And then we

thought, if we want to be focused, we need to be 'journalism for customers'" [2].
News production at the wire today is being made *for* clients – the vast majority of
whom work in the financial world – and subscribe to Reuters for updates on
economic and financial investment news, and related issues such as political risk.

At Reuters, editors and managers have access to almost perfect
information on the stories that these clients choose to read. This includes
comprehensive analytics on the view-count of every story published and where
these views come from. This information - the 'story play' – is forwarded to
journalists in the field. These 'play' statistics have a direct influence on the work
of journalists who referred to them when discussing and debating their story
decisions. One journalist described the omnipotence of this communication:

> We have this constant refrain – either in direct communication with the
> editor – or we have this daily note that goes out – a lot of people looking
> at what was good, what was bad. We have conference calls with the
> editors. We're constantly being told what the priorities are, and where.
> We're told where they want us to focus. And we're getting the direct
> feedback from clients [Interview 06/08/09].

This feedback from clients is provided directly to journalists, and
influences their news decisions, changing the stories they might otherwise
produce. One journalist gave the example of a political killing in Somaliland,
which did not seem obviously news-worthy to the journalist. However, the 'play
statistics' showed that it attracted a lot of reads. In this situation, writing a follow
up "day two" became an obvious course of action, and the journalist encouraged
his colleagues to "push for anything you can" on the story. Reuters journalists in
West Africa confirmed this approach; one of the wire's correspondents in Lagos
noted:

> If there has been a big story from the day before, they usually want some
> kind of update the next day, so you will be searching for something to do.

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[2] Sean Maguire, Reuters International News Editor, speaking at the Nuffield Media Seminar,
Oxford University, Friday October 15, 2010

And that's quite difficult because often there is no update, and so you are being forced to look for angles and come up with something when actually nothing has changed [Interview 31/5/2014].

In addition, the editors praise and send public emails congratulating journalists who have written stories that 'played well', further incentivizing journalists to pay attention to audience metrics, and try to pre-empt them in their future news work.

2) Data-informed news production

Outside the journalists working at Reuters and *The Daily Telegraph*, foreign correspondents in the sample were not routinely informed about readership data, and did not know about the success rate of the stories they wrote. This was the case for correspondents working for the two major newswires AP and AFP, as well as the major international newspapers *The New York Times, Guardian, Independent, The Times, The Christian Science Monitor, De Volkskrant* and *Suddeutsche Zeitung. The Guardian*'s foreign correspondent expressed the common sentiment of these producers: "I don't have to think too much about what readers are thinking about – I find the important things here and pitch those" [22/9/2009]. These journalists tended to select and pitch news stories that they felt were 'journalistically important' rather than those that would garner the most reads online. Unlike the journalist at *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, the other British correspondents in the sample did not have to appeal to strictly British sensibilities. The Times (UK) foreign correspondent commented:

What I like about *The Times*, is the story doesn't have to have a British angle, it can just say: this is a news event because it's newsworthy. I don't have to go looking for the two or so British people caught up in the fighting [Interview 12/8/2009].

This sentiment was shared by the journalists working for the newswires AFP and AP, who felt their work was primarily guided by what they referred to

as 'journalistic values', rather than the specific interests of their audience. The AFP stringer in Lagos for example, commented that at his organisation, "Nobody talks about making it work for a particular audience. It's still about 'is it news, is it relevant? Ok write it' " [Interview 29/05/2014]

Web analytics do, however, continue to play an important, indirect role at these news outlets. The foreign correspondents in this category noted that the editors pay attention to audience metrics and, in the wake of a particularly successful [high readership] story, they might ask for a 'day two' follow up. *The Times* (UK) correspondent gave the example of Lubna Ahmed al-Hussein, a Sudanese woman who was being punished by public whipping for wearing trousers. It was clear to the journalist that this was not the most important story taking place in the region, yet between August and September 2009, he was contacted and asked to write seven follow up pieces on al-Hussein for his paper:

> They loved it. I had pre-whipping, during whipping, post whipping. I had an email saying – "we need 700 words eve of whipping story". That was them telling me what to write [Interview 12/8/2009]

In addition to requests for specific stories, the foreign correspondents in this group felt that their editors analysed the metrics and discerned patterns of countries and issues that resonated with audiences. These issues / countries became, in turn, easier to secure resources to cover in the future. Describing this phenomenon, the correspondent at *The Independent* noted:

> If you want to write a story on Cameroon, it has to be the best damn story you've ever written. Whereas if you want to do a story on Zimbabwe, you just need to mention the name Zimbabwe [Interview 14/9/2009].

This followed, the correspondent felt, from the fact that stories in Zimbabwe had a proven, quantified, track record of attracting readers[3].

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[3] This is not unique to the digital era. There are longstanding linguistic, cultural and historic reasons why some countries – for example, Zimbabwe - may seem more appealing to an editor/audience, particularly in the UK. The difference is that today's metrics allow editors to test and quantify this gut feeling, by referring to previous stories' success.

All journalists had examples of topics they had been asked to cover that they did not believe were necessarily the most important from a regional point of view, but that had captured the media spotlight – a fact that was quantified in metrics, and thus beyond debate. A stringer at AFP, for example, gave the example of the kidnapping of an American sea captain in Somalia. He felt this was not newsworthy from a regional perspective. However, a great deal of resources were committed to covering it:

> Locally, it wasn't important. It wasn't a story. I mean, "An American captain has been in a lifeboat!" – that's not a story. It's not news. Twenty people were killed that day, you know [In Somalia]…[Interview 09/08/2009]

The correspondents felt that these high profile 'day two stories' were driven by the demonstrated interest of the audience' rather than professional news values. One indicator of this was that the editors did not seem to mind greatly what the substance of the day two story was, only that it touched on the general subject. A high profile example was the kidnapping of more than 200 school girls in Chibok, North East Nigeria in April 2014. In the wake of this kidnapping, editors exerted significant pressure on their correspondents for follow-up stories – even where no new information was available, and the journalists themselves were reluctant to comment because of very significant challenges on the ground of verifying information. One journalist described getting a request for a story – "Not any particulars of it - just, 'I like the story about the girls and I want to keep it ticking over'" [Interview, 28/05/2014].

Some of the foreign correspondents would push back against editorial requests for stories they did not feel comfortable reporting. Foreign correspondents in Africa are often senior, successful journalists (see also Vicente 2013). Most reported that their views were respected and valued by their news organisation. As *The New York Times* West Africa correspondent comments: "I'm here, and they are 1000-2000 miles away. So they assume that I know better most of the time, about what the story is" [5/11/2013]. This meant, in practice, being able to decline a particular story, as several correspondents did during the

Boko Haram kidnapping. One journalist's editor had seen a story about the Nigerian government refusing to negotiate with the insurgents, and wanted their correspondent to explore the angle. The correspondent recalls:

> I just said 'no'… There's a lot of politicking…Do they have an affiliation to a political party or are they just Joe Bloggs on the street? You can't always tell….which is partly why I have turned down a thing today because, you know, I'm uncomfortable with it [Interview, 28/05/2014].

Not all journalists had enough financial security or status to turn down requests for stories, however. Junior correspondents as well as freelancers and fixers - who are paid by the story or for their information or logistical assistance – might experience more pressure to provide the stories that were requested. One Dutch correspondent, for example, recalled a story early in his career:

> I was asked to do a story on white people being abducted in Nairobi, and that was rubbish. I started writing and just thought, this is totally rubbish - just clichéd, But I'd only started writing for them, so I thought I needed to say yes [13/09/2010].

'Parachute journalists' who had been flown in to cover a large story, might also experience additional pressure. One correspondent described a journalist in Nigeria who had recently "got it wrong" in the Boko Haram kidnapping:

> Probably you know, she's got a lot of pressure from the States saying, 'you need to get a story, you need to get a story, let's get something good'…and she's putting pressure on her fixer….people are kind of beginning to clutch at straws. And that's when you run the risk of people making stuff up and sensationalizing stuff just to get headlines…all the facts just go by the wayside [Interview, 28/05/2014].

3) Data Denial
A final set of foreign correspondents in the sample could be described as

oblivious to readership data; the journalists working for *The Economist* and *The Financial Times* stated that they were never informed of readership metrics nor did they feel indirectly guided by this data through their editors who were.

    The Economist has eschewed almost all of the populist developments of journalism in recent years: it has not changed its font since 1991; it has not experimented with layout since going all-colour in 2001; and, despite the rise of the internet, and the digitalization of the world's news provisions, *The Economist* remains primarily a "print first" outlet. The magazine – or newspaper, as it still calls itself - pays little or no attention to audience feedback. As Crook (2006) writes: "In my experience, the editorial side of the enterprise spends little time worrying about what readers might want." The East African correspondent notes that the editors do know the reader metrics for stories that are read. However, this information is not passed on to correspondents, nor referred to in the commissioning process:

> We have figures from our website on how many of our readers are interested in Africa. And if we reflected that – it's extremely low – we would write even less than we do [Interview 13/08/2009].

    Indeed, *The Economist* prints an unusually large quantity of news stories on Africa, compared with other publications. One of the most remarkable examples of this is that it regularly carries more stories from Africa than the Middle East, even where the is US and UK military intervention in the Middle East (Bunce 2013).. Moreover, *The Economist*'s coverage of Africa often features a number of countries that are rarely covered by other English text outlets – Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon, to name a few.

    The journalists working for *The Economist* describe their commitment to African coverage in ethical terms; the East African correspondent states, "editorially, we just believe that one billion people are important". However, these news stories also help the magazine build its reputation as an elite news product, as he goes on to comment:

Also, yes, of course, branding is important and we're high brow. It looks good to have those stories on Africa, and the marketing guys love it. You know, "here's a story about Equatorial Guinea: that's great! [Interview, 13/8/2009].

Audience data would likely suggest that a story on politics in Equatorial Guinea would do very poorly - even among the international, educated subset *The Economist* caters to. But the foreign correspondent (and the marketing department) believe that readers of *The Economist* like it when there are stories in the magazine that they have no interest in reading. These stories showcase the exclusivity of the publication; they indicate that the magazine caters to readers who are educated and cosmopolitan, with catholic interests. Or as Hirschorn (2009) writes "*The Economist* signals its gravitas with every strenuously reader-unfriendly page". Indeed, some might consider *The Economist* quite contrary when it comes to reporting 'big events'. For example, the East African correspondent noted he would not cover Hilary Clinton's visit to East Africa, as it was not anything 'new'. In a similar vein, the West African correspondent noted that she – almost alone among international news producers in Nigeria – was not asked for regular updates on the Chibok kidnapping [Interview, 31/05/2014].

The *Financial Times* was similarly dismissive of readership statistics. The East Africa correspondent felt that the newspaper did not try to pre-empt the topics, countries and issues that its audience might want to read about; nor does the paper pay close attention to web analytics to guide editorial decisions. There was no feedback loop to convey readership statistics and he noted that page hits, shares or likes are not part of commissioning discussions. In his day to day work, the FT correspondent experienced a great deal of autonomy – he scanned the newswires for stories he felt were both interesting and important, and pitched these to his editors: Indeed, the correspondent went so far as to state that, "If I had no guidance from the paper at all, I would still submit the same stories" [Interview, 21/08/2009].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research asked: do foreign correspondents in Sub-Saharan Africa use and respond to data on audience news preferences? Drawing on interviews with 67 foreign correspondents, the results identified three different approaches to audience metrics. A first set of foreign correspondents were informed of audience metrics and their work was often assessed against this data, incentivizing them to pursue stories that would prove popular with readers. In the wider academic literature, this use of audience metrics is more commonly associated with new, online-only outlets like *Gawker* and *Buzzfeed* that share celebrity news, gossip and 'viral' human-interest stories. However, this research suggests that matrics can play an important role at legacy-outlets like *The Daily Telegraph* and Reuters, which have a strong brands and a reputation for hard news reporting. These outlets have identified clear objectives for their news offerings, and they are using readership data to help them reach readers with the exact news they wish to consume.

The *Daily Telegraph* approach to news production may concern some commentators - in particular, its use of search engine optimization techniques, which sees journalists inserting keywords into stories that are only peripherally relevant. More generally, writing predictable news content can lead to news reports that support a dominant interpretation of events, with less room for counter-narratives (see also Currah 2009; Norris 2000). The approach taken by the *Daily Telegraph* may also concern media scholars who worry that less popular public-interest stories are ceding to "populist, click-friendly topics" (e.g. Currah, 2009:48). However, these concerns must be moderated by the fact that soft news on Africa is not necessarily problematic; reading African stories that are presented in an entertaining and engaging manner can have positive consequences. Martin Scott's (2009) analysis of African news coverage, for example, finds that outlets that focus on hard news often present a more negative depiction of the continent than those outlets that include more soft, human news. When the *Daily Telegraph* publishes a human interest story about a Ugandan gorilla with a Facebook page, for example, it opens up the possibility of a [literal] connection between a citizen in the global North and events in East Africa. James Ferguson (2007) has argued that the West perceives Africa as a

'shadow', an absence, a space that technology and innovation have not reached. If these views prevail among the readers of a newspaper, it is no small thing to be telling stories in which the continent is presented as wired-up and technologically savvy (see also Baum 2002:91).

A second group of correspondents – by far the vast majority of correspondents in the sample - were not directly informed of audience metrics. However, these correspondents felt that their editors were informed of the metrics, and drew on these to request occasional 'follow up stories' on prominent events that had played well with readers. A final category were neither exposed to the data, nor felt their editors drew on it; one indicator of this was that the correspondents at the *Economist* and *Financial Times*, who fell into this category were rarely asked to cover specific issues; they sometimes actively avoided topics which were expected to be popular because they were concerned with maintaining an 'elite' or, at least, differentiated position within the media market; and they felt that they had high levels of autonomy to pursue the work they were interested in, free of direction.

These findings – in particular the variance of approach to audience metrics - supports MacGregor's contention that, "social and organizational context rather than technology alone shape the way these online professionals react to their new tool" (2007, 280). Or as Jean Chalaby has written (1998) technology does not impact the journalistic field directly - but rather, its impact is mediated through the competitive struggles of the journalistic field, and the positions that outlets adopt (see also Silverstone 2007). Despite the hype around the 'click stream' - and concerns about audience metrics shaping news practice - audience data does not seem to be a significant, daily feature of news work for foreign correspondents in Africa. For most outlets in this study, news values and occupational judgment takes priority over building up traffic and metrics.

The fact that so few correspondents in the sample were directly informed of audience metrics likely reflects the elite nature of foreign news production in Africa. As noted in the literature review, there are few outlets with permanently posted foreign correspondents on the continent. Those who do prioritize spending resources on this news best are a small and often elite sub-set of news producers; these outlets do not generally have a business model based on high

audiences and traffic. As MacGregor (2007) notes, these outlets may worry about protecting their brand and reputation in a way that prevents them from placing too much attention to pursuing page views and web traffic alone.

One limitation of this research is that it draws on interview data that was gathered over time, meaning it cannot paint a picture of simultaneous, media wide phenomena. It would be helpful for future research to explore the contemporary use of audience metrics, which could explore in more detail the connection between metric use and an outlet's position within the media market. This research has also focused on foreign correspondents working in the field, and relied on these correspondents' interpretation of their editors' behavior. Future research exploring editors' knowledge and use of metrics in their management of correspondents would add to this picture.

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