

A 'Hotbed' of Digital Empowerment? Media Criticism in Kenya: Between Playful Engagement and Co-option

Toussaint Nothias, Center for African Studies, Stanford University, USA

and

David Cheruiyot, Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Sweden

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A “hotbed” of digital empowerment? Media criticism in Kenya between playful engagement and co-option

Toussaint Nothias (Stanford University)

David Cheruiyot (Karlstad University)

tnothias@stanford.edu /david.cheruiyot@kau.se

ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the production and textual features of international media portrayal of Africa, but very little about how audiences within the continent perceive such coverage. We fill this gap by investigating a campaign led by Kenyans on Twitter to challenge CNN’s portrayal of their country. Our analysis of the most prominent tweets, images, and users, reveals the various strategies adopted by Kenyan audiences to criticize Western representations. This criticism, we argue, constitutes a form of metajournalistic discourse, which should not be reduced to single story of digital empowerment. While contesting long-standing stereotypes and inequalities shaping global narratives, this criticism recreated an image of Kenya aligned with a corporate project of nation branding that essentially uplifted the voices and perspectives of digitally connected Nairobi-based elites. In conclusion, we call for greater consideration of the interplay of global and local power relations in which such digital practices are embedded.

Keywords: Kenya; media representation; digital empowerment; media criticism; metajournalistic discourse; Twitter; nation branding.

INTRODUCTION

“The hashtag I started #SomeoneTellCNN is now trending worldwide!!! Yes I AM A KENYAN WITH A VOICE!” (@winmitch, March 11, 2012). These are the words of Winnie Michelle Kenduiywa, a businesswoman from Nairobi (Tully & Ekdale, 2014, p. 72). Her statement followed CNN’s decision to apologize for framing Kenya as a country in turmoil following an attack in Nairobi that killed six people. Kenduiywa’s celebration and expression of vindication should be understood in the broader context and history of Africa’s portrayal in international media. For decades, Western institutions and voices have dominated the framing of African news stories in international media. Many scholars have criticized the propensity of Western media to create reductive, negative and stereotypical portrayals that reinforce a single story of Afro-pessimism. However, with the advent of social media, such narratives in international media do not remain unchallenged in the global media sphere. Indeed, Kenduiywa’s tweet is a triumphant example of how social media can allow populations long perceived to be at the global periphery to take center stage and thus challenge, in the terminology by Spivak and Morris (2010), the silencing of the “Subaltern”. Beyond

this individual case, the regular criticism of CNN's coverage by the Kenyans on Twitter is largely presented as exemplary of the empowering affordances of digital media for African audiences to challenge Western news narratives (Adeiza & Howard, 2016; Bunce, Franks, & Paterson, 2017; Kaigwa, 2017; Nyabola, 2017; Tully & Ekdale, 2014).

Our goal in this paper is to add this emerging literature in several ways. While the discursive features and, to a lesser extent, the production of international news narratives about Africa have been routinely analyzed, how these media texts are consumed and resisted by audiences in Africa remains a remarkable gap in the literature. According to Scott (2015) who offered a scoping review of the literature on US and UK's media representations of Africa, only 3 percent of existing studies include research into the reception of media texts. In addition, existing data about the content of the SomeoneTellCNN campaign in those previous studies are largely broad observations based on a few examples of tweets. We aim to provide more solid empirical insights into the discursive and representational fabric (Hall, 1997) that makes up this social media-led counter-discourse. In doing so then, we are interested in assessing if there might be a contrast between the content of the campaign and the current understanding of the phenomenon in the literature. By answering those questions, we seek to reflect on the function of digital media criticism in Kenya to oppose misrepresentations and to make space for voices historically silenced. But we are also interested in how the dominant discourse around this media criticism is embedded in broader discourses about digital empowerment as well as in power relations within the Kenyan society. Indeed, we will argue that beyond a techno-optimist account of social media in Africa, the analysis of such phenomena should pay greater attention to the interplay of global and local power relations they are embedded in.

We start by providing background to #SomeoneTellCNN and the dominant understanding of the phenomenon in the literature. We then introduce our approach to the phenomenon, one that blends two strands of communication scholarship i.e. media criticism and media representation. Subsequently, we move on to explain the processes of data gathering and coding. The analysis is then structured in three moments. We unpack what forms of media criticism are at play through the campaign. We then look at the alternative representations of Kenya that are put forward. Finally, we look at the key voices that were most visible and influential in shaping the discourse of #SomeoneTellCNN. In conclusion, we argue that digital media criticism is entangled between, on the one hand, empowering resistance to misrepresentations and stereotypes and, on the other hand, a narrative of nation branding championed by Kenya's political and corporate elites.

BACKGROUND

#SomeoneTellCNN: Emergence and current understandings

The popular hashtag in Kenya is often attributed to Twitter users who have associated themselves with another hashtag, KOT, referring to 'Kenyans on Twitter'. KOT first

appeared on Twitter around 2011 when there was a marked increase of Twitter use in Kenya (Portland-Communications, 2015). It mostly attracted users to make jokes¹ and share strong opinions on politics. Since 2012, KOT has morphed into a ‘movement’ of sorts, as users mobilize for attacks or “twars” on institutions, nations or individuals they disagree with ("Why Kenya ‘always wins’ its Twitter wars," 2015). Local media, as well as international media organizations like CNN and BBC, have become subjects of criticism over controversial news stories.

The first use of the #SomeoneTellCNN hashtag was in March 2012 when David McKenzie, CNN East Africa correspondent reported on a grenade attack in Nairobi. Six people died and more than 60 were injured. The story was presented on CNN with the headline, *Violence in Kenya*, appearing on an animated Kenyan flag. KOT started to use the hashtag to voice their criticisms of this coverage. In the eyes of majority of the tweeters, the report misrepresented the situation and exaggerated the scale of the violence. Moreover, it implied that Kenyans were perpetrators of violence, instead of being victims of terrorism (Tully & Ekdale, 2014). As Kenyans on Twitter rallied behind the #SomeoneTellCNN to ask for an apology, it became a global trending topic on Twitter. In parallel, the debate about the Kony2012 video was still raging—the video having been published a week prior to the SomeoneTellCNN Twitter storm (Kaigwa, 2017). Very quickly, CNN journalist David Mckenzie apologized by tweeting: “Our reporting on last night was accurate, the banner used in the bulleting was not. I contacted CNN for future bulletins. Apologies to all”.

Ahead of the 2013 Kenyan general election, the hashtag reappeared in full force. Following fears of post-election violence witnessed after a 2007 general election, the country was immersed in a powerful peace narrative promoted by a range of social actors, from the local media to NGOs, religious groups, politicians, and artistes (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2016). During this tense period, CNN international correspondent Nima Elbagir ran a story focused on a so-called “tribal” militia group in the Rift Valley region of Kenya preparing violence and promising conflict. Titled, *Armed and Ready to Vote*, the news report showed men training in the forest with homemade guns. A new Twitter storm followed, and the hashtag trended globally. This prompted a new apology from CNN. In addition, the Kenyan government publicly intervened, with the Secretary in the Ministry for Information and Communications calling the story "stage-managed" and "propaganda" (Kaigwa, 2017).

Two days before Barack Obama arrived in Kenya for his first tour as US President on July 24, 2015, the hashtag SomeoneTellCNN was trending worldwide again. Obama was heading to Kenya to meet President Kenyatta and attend the Global Entrepreneurship Summit. Tweets accompanied by #SomeoneTellCNN criticised a CNN online story with the headline, *Security Fears as Obama Heads to Terror Hotbed*².

¹ One of the earliest popular hashtags associated with KOT in 2011 was #ujingani (translated as “Stupidity is...” in Swahili) and is a call on tweeters to come up with sarcastic or hilarious ending to the phrase.

² The story written by Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr and published on July 23, 2015 was edited again later with a new headline, *Obama’s trip raises security concerns*. The fresh story was accompanied by an Editor’s note: "The headline and lead of this article has been recast to indicate the terror threat is a regional (Eastern Africa) one." (Starr, 2015).

The news story—and several broadcasts that followed it—warned that terrorists could embarrass the US by staging an attack in Kenya during President Obama’s three-day visit for a conference in the capital, Nairobi (Starr, 2015). Twitter users were outraged by CNN's reports and commentary, which portrayed Kenya as extremely dangerous³ (Tharoor, 2015). This exasperation was further reinforced by the fact that Kenya is Obama father's homeland, and that his visit was largely perceived in celebratory terms as a "homecoming tour". In addition, a few weeks earlier, another hashtag #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou that sought to disrupt global stereotypes about Africa (Steeves, 2015 p.8) grew increasingly popular and attracted international attention. In a way, CNN's report epitomized what this continental campaign opposed and it is possible to imagine that this played a role in feeding the irritation of Kenyans on Twitter. In any case, they claimed that CNN reports were "inaccurate and biased" and further demanded an apology (Shearlaw, 2015).

During the summit, Obama and Kenyatta implicitly addressed the report and the reaction of KOT by wittingly using CNN headline’s word ‘hotbed’ in their speeches. Kenyatta declared that Kenya was a “hotbed of vibrant culture, natural beauty, and infinite possibility”, while Obama talked about the country as a “hotbed of innovation” (Kaigwa, 2017, p. 207).

Kenya’s Tourism Board subsequently canceled an ad placement with CNN of about 1 million USD. A month after Obama’s visit Tony Maddox, CNN’s Vice President, flew to Kenya to apologize directly to President Kenyatta. In their meeting, Maddox was quoted by local media as having said: “It (the Obama tour reports) wasn’t a deliberate attempt to portray Kenya negatively, it is regrettable and we shouldn’t have done it. There is a world at war with extremists: we know what a hotbed of terror looks like, and Kenya isn’t one” (Adeiza & Howard, 2016, p. 317; Mutiga 2015).

To observers of Kenyan society, and to scholars interested in social media in Africa, SomeoneTellCNN is now well known. It has come to be seen as quite a remarkable phenomenon that heralds potential for greater accountability in international reporting of Africa. One of the earliest people to articulate this view was Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola. She remembers writing letters to international media following the coverage of post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 to complain about their coverage. Those letters remained unanswered.

“That experience of voicelessness over the construction and dissemination of my national narrative is partly what prompted me to start blogging and writing. (...) the backlash on Twitter under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN is exemplary of the creation of an African-driven counter-narrative. (...) The powerless are able to speak out with less fear of repercussion; the powerful are

³ Video clips and their screenshots from the *Erin Burnett OutFront* show, which was hosted by stand-in Kate Bolduan, were retweeted many times. In the show, Bolduan starts the interviews with the line, “There is no doubt that President Obama is about to head to a very dangerous country...”. She also interviews, among others, former Secret Service agent Jonathan Wackrow who controversially claims Kenya is more dangerous than Iraq and Afghanistan (Karanja, 2015).

forced to react and respond to maintain the appearance of egalitarianism and approachability. (...) (Nyabola, 2017, p. 114)

This celebratory sentiment is echoed in the studies of *SomeonetellCNN* by Tully and Ekdale (2014), and Adeiza and Howard (2016), who highlight the centrality of humor for the campaign. For Tully and Ekdale (2014), this constituted a site of “playful engagement”. By playful engagement, they mean the interaction of playful form with important issues of civic engagement. Furthermore, they argue that such Twitter sites of playful engagement should be of prime interest to Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD) research as they help advance a broader conversation about social and political development within the nation; they support grassroots, bottom-up initiatives favored within participatory development; and they reflect the kinds of issues that resonate with local audiences. Tully and Ekdale advocated for the relevance of these sites for development and civic engagement in Kenya.

Adeiza and Howard (2016), for their part, analyzed the phenomenon through the lens of soft power. To describe the process at stake, they coin the concept of “social media soft power”: “By social media soft power we mean the concerted international attention and buy-in into an issues or sympathy towards a course generated by the savvy use of social media either by state or non-state actors” (2016, p. 228). Adeiza and Howard are cautious not to overclaim how impactful such campaign can be in the absence of “hard power”. Still, they largely share the enthusiasm of Nyabola and Tully and Ekdale that such counter-discourse empowers voices that have historically been silenced. Rather than approaching this phenomenon through the angle of international relations/soft power or ICTD, we are proposing to understand it at the intersection of two kinds of literature: media criticism and media representation.

Intersecting media criticism and media representation of Africa

Through social media infrastructure and its affordances today, criticism of the international news media has become more visible. The frequency and magnitude of sharing text, images, and multimedia have increased tremendously too. Audiences today constantly engage with fellow citizens, academics and even news practitioners of international media. It has, therefore, become imperative to consider criticism of international media for three reasons. Firstly, media criticism represents an unprecedented period in the history of the media where narratives *about* journalism are significant to interrogate the authority of journalism (Carlson, 2017)—in our case, the authority of international news media in Africa. Secondly, media criticism is being considered as a form of journalistic accountability and collective action against journalistic inadequacies argued as having the potential to affect journalism conduct and practice (Holt & von Krogh, 2010; Joseph, 2011; Reese & Dai, 2009). Thirdly, the audience criticism represents an “African-driven counter-narrative” (Nyabola, 2017, p. 114) with implications on the longstanding understanding of African audiences as passive subjects of Western-dominated cultural production. Fourthly, and related to the third, is how subjects re-frame the negative image on global news outlets by imposing

their own image (Gallagher, 2015) through offering alternative images of representation.

Our study proposes that through media criticism as a form of metajournalistic discourse⁴ of global news media, non-western audiences not only evaluate and assess the journalistic practices of Western media but impose a self-image of how they should be represented. By doing so, the non-Western audiences position themselves as key external actors in the production of content by news organizations that claim legitimacy as global media. Treating media criticism as ‘conversations’ or ‘narratives’ through which news journalism is “rethought, circulated, and contested” (Carlson, 2016, p. 363; 2017) offers richer contextualization and broadens the discursive framework of international news journalism.

What has not received much attention in the study of media representation of Africa, are narratives of non-journalistic actors in the global news arena and in this case, African news audiences. We thus seek to contribute to the discourse of the media representation and media criticism by highlighting the relationship between the two.

There are ample media-critical discourses surrounding the representation of Africa in Western news media (see among others, Bunce et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2015; Hawk, 1992; Kalyango, 2011). Through such criticisms, we know much about misrepresentations of Africa by Western news media, even though research has tended to focus much on US and UK media as well as major global news media (Scott, 2015). However, research has largely focused on academic criticism, which is mostly meta-criticism—critique that "deals with conflicts, structural inequities, ideological implications and negative moral consequences of media, as a part of modern culture and society" (Holt & von Krogh, 2010, p. 288). As a result of the preoccupation with "meta-critique", we argue that we often fail to identify criticism of traditional media practices of news media from other avenues such as everyday audiences.

Numerous studies of how the Western media have covered disasters such as famine in East Africa or Ebola in West Africa reveal that framing of the news perpetuates an image of a hopeless continent. The influential essay of Binyavanga Wainaina (2006), *How not to write about Africa*, and popular TED Talk by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), *The Danger of a Single Story* are a sum of descriptions of “sins” of western authors and journalists alike. The two are articulate descriptions of sensationalism, bias, inaccuracies, and unfairness against non-Western subjects. Over time the 'single African story' has had a multiplier effect for Western journalists because the dominant image influence "interpretations of African events" (Hawk, 1992, p. 5). A helpful analysis of journalistic approaches and their implication on the image of Africa are tackled in Hawk's pivotal book which addresses: "... metaphors of Africa coverage and the vocabulary and symbols the Western global media outlets employ" (p. 7). A consequence not often highlighted is how coverage of Africa by global news outlets shape inter-African relations negatively (Styan, 1999). There is a misinformed, ignorant and suspicious attitude among Africans (Author1, forthcoming)

⁴ Metajournalistic discourse accounts for discursive practices about journalism that include conversations or commentaries about the news (Carlson, 2017).

as seen in how Africans engage on social media – perhaps as a result of the images from global media that focus on wars, bizarre cultures or conflicts (Styan, 1999). What is different now, and what we argue in this research, is that Africans are actually taking the "Africa have your say" (BBC talk show) call seriously in providing alternative ways in which they should be represented.

We however need to acknowledge here the role of international news media and why it is important for news audiences of the world to care about them. Through going global the international news media, particularly the dominant American and British media, serve its local audiences in disseminating news about the rest of the world. The role of global media outlets and Western news agencies has been the subject of numerous studies in relation to global news flow and cultural globalization (see among others, Chouliaraki, 2008; Schorr, 2011; Thompson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999). Previous studies have shown international media as vehicles of cultural imperialism—in spreading neoliberal values of freedom or demonizing the 'axis of evil' (terrorists' enclaves, tyrannical or communist regimes) in non-Western regions. They are media through which nations spread their soft power, or a genuine or false mission of 'informing the world'. For instance, some Western authors harbor the notion that US journalism is very essential for world. Winship and Hemp (1992) even claim: "Without American journalism, the world—and this includes Africa—would be far more ignorant place" (p.239). International media are further seen as vital in promoting national images (Hawk, 1992)—whether through news and advertising—and their coverage matters to the extent that some African governments spend millions of dollars on PR firms to counteract or reinforce the image portrayed by the global media. Indeed, the international media further seek to tap advertising revenues from different parts of the world. As mentioned previously, Kenya, for example had a one-million dollar advertising deal with CNN in July 2015, which came to play a role in the unfolding of the Twitter storm (Murumba, 2015).

Indeed media criticism, shaped by the use of social media, spotlights news production and practice of the international news media in showing how these Western news media fail to abide by journalistic norms and values through which they legitimize themselves. They further impose what they think should be journalistic quality and standards for international news media. In sum, therefore, three main points underpin our approach:

1. The expressions of media critics of what international news media should portray about Africa are important. The "self-image" (Gallagher, 2015) can be considered as what is constructed through conversations/narratives about the journalism practices of international news media.
2. Through media criticisms, specifically on social media today, there can be a sense of real or imagined power – through which audiences in the Global South collectively challenge narratives of dominant centres of cultural productions.
3. It is important to consider *how* the criticism is done – the strategies or mechanics, the issues criticized and voices they represent. By taking this call to analyze media criticism rigorously, we aim to understand how such a cultural practice is

shaped by peculiar social, historical, political and economic contexts, and it is entangled in both the exercise of power and resistance to it.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

To interrogate the issues raised in the previous section, we empirically analyzed the content of a #SomeoneTellCNN campaign to answer the following three questions:

Q1. What forms does digital media criticism of international media take?

Q2. What alternative representations are constructed through the criticism?

Q3. What voices are uplifted and most visible in the process?

#SomeoneTellCNN represents a case where media was criticized consistently and eventual steps taken by the global news network to make amends, including the apology of CNN to Kenya's president (Kaigwa, 2017). #SomeoneTellCNN itself received global visibility because it was a global trending hashtag, at least according to Twitter metrics. Kenya is a special case for several reasons. It is a frequent subject of international news media (Wahutu, 2017) and is a key hub for international news production with many African foreign correspondents from the West and East based in Nairobi. Further, the rise of KOT, as a form of collective action, has been acknowledged in existing studies as an interesting case of the citizen experiment of social media as a discursive space in Africa (Ogola, 2015; Tully & Ekdale, 2014).

We focus our content analysis on the third wave of #SomeoneTellCNN (where CNN was criticized over reports about Obama's visit). **Figure 1** provides an evaluation of the popularity of SomeoneTellCNN as a search term between 2010 and 2017. This third wave was the most significant in terms of global visibility, hence our focus.



Figure 1: Popularity of the search term "SomeoneTellCNN" between 2010 and 2017 (Google Trends).

To retrieve the tweets, we used a tool called Mecodify. Mecodify is an open-source tool developed as part of the Mecomem project (Media, Conflict and Democratisation) during the ICTs and democratization conflicts work package. Al-Saqaf (2016) offers a detailed explanation of how the platform precisely extracts Twitter data using both Twitter's API for results less than 7 days old, and the web search method for older results. To run a

query, Mecodify requires a timeframe as well keyword(s) for the search. We searched for all tweets that used #SomeoneTellCNN between July 21 and July 25, 2015. Accounting for all tweets and retweets, there was a total of 193,402 items; without accounting for retweets, the total was 51,208.

In order to develop a sample manageable for our analysis, we decided to focus on the most retweeted tweets. Retweets constitute a significant part of the “conversational ecology” on Twitter and can provide an apt prediction of the reach of the feeds (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010, p. 1). It is also the most popular forms of engagement on the platform before “Reply” and “Favorite”. We created two samples. The first sample included the top 100 most retweeted tweets. In comparison to the overall number of tweets, this may seem very small. However, when accounting for the retweets, those top 100 tweets constitute 56,693 posts (tweets+retweets). This represents 29% of the overall number of tweets and retweets (193,402). The second sample focused on the top 100 most retweeted images. These top 100 most retweeted images accounted for 43,979 posts (tweets+retweets), which represents 50% of all tweets and retweets that contained images (88,490). To put it plainly, the first sample is representative of 29% of all the tweets circulating on the platform in our timeframe, and the second sample is representative of 50% of all the tweets that included images.

We employed a detailed textual analysis in examining and interpreting our sample of tweets. Our objective was to offer a careful deconstruction of the discourse that made up the #SomeoneTellCNN Twitter storm. The development of the coding categories was a multi-layered process. We started with categories that were derived from our research questions. We then immersed ourselves in the data independently to see what discursive aspects of tweets we were missing, and to see what categories worked and did not. For instance, after several attempts, we decided not code the “tone” of the tweets in any systematic way as we found the category to be too subjective and unable to capture the discursive richness at play. In the end, we settled for a coding approach that was relatively flexible and aimed to balance prior questions with information emerging from the data. All tweets were coded in an excel spreadsheet. Some of the categories were largely unambiguous and could lead to quantitative results. Other coding categories were open-ended, for instance, when we assessed what kind of alternative representation of Kenya a tweet gave. These led to more qualitative observations about discursive trends. Our analysis thus combines both types of insights with the view to capture the richness of media discourse. Throughout the subsequent analysis section, we provide more information about the specific categories used.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the unfolding of the Twitter storm over two days. In blue, we see the total number of tweets and retweets per minute. At its peak, this reached 4,209 tweets and retweets in one minute. In contrast, the green shows the total number of tweets (without counting retweets), which peaked at 124 tweets in one minute. The chart shows that it is the retweeting that gave the campaign its momentum and global visibility. In other words, the power of KOT to make #SomeoneTellCNN trend worldwide relied on a critical mass of Twitter users retweeting more than tweeting.

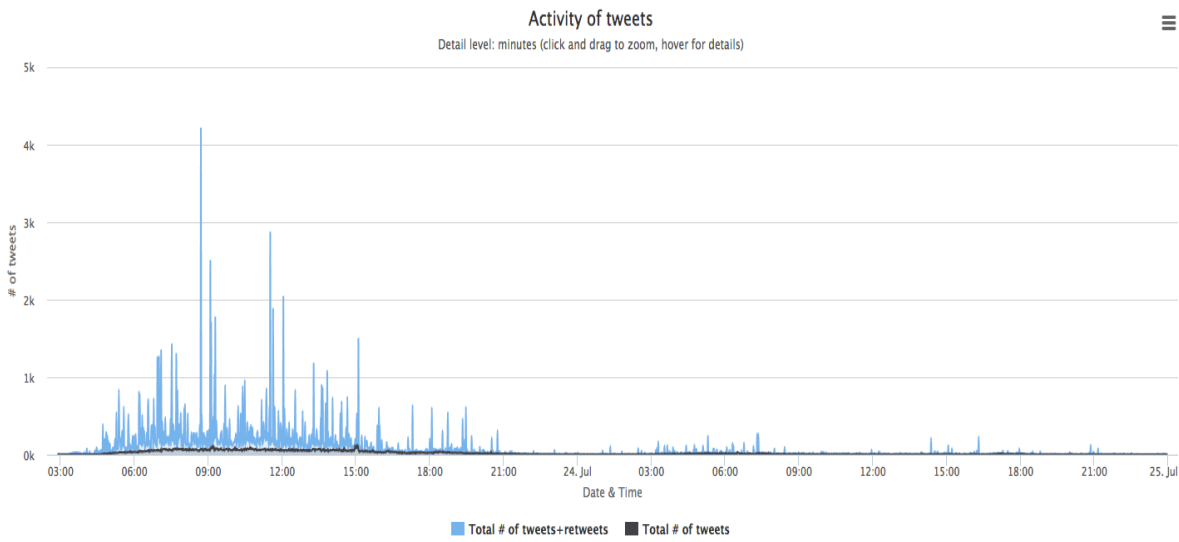


Figure 2: Overview of the activity of tweets using #SomeoneTellCNN (July 23-25, 2015)

FINDINGS

1. Media criticism

We start our analysis by looking at the nature of the media criticism at play: what exactly did KOTs oppose? What criticism strategies did they use? What was their call to action?

Most of the tweets were directed at CNN, its reporters and news anchors (see **Table 1**). The *Washington Post* and *Politico* in the US, as well as BBC, were mentioned. Tweets further referred to general descriptive terms of the media as follows: 'global media', 'local media' (referring to Kenyan media), western and all media (referring to media based in North America in Europe). Overall, however, it is possible to say that the tweets precisely targeted CNN, with relatively little conflation to other Western media or Western media as a whole.

Table 1: Number of times groups of media or journalists were mentioned

<i>Group mentioned</i>	<i>No. of mentions</i>
<i>CNN</i>	87
<i>General audience</i>	8
<i>KOT</i>	2
<i>US journalists</i>	1
<i>Western media</i>	1
<i>Global Journalists</i>	1

Forms of criticism

To analyze media criticism as manifested through #SomeoneTellCNN, we borrow from Stephen Cooper's typology of criticisms of news journalism. These are accuracy (factual evidence in reporting), framing (interpretation or meanings of facts and events), agenda setting/gatekeeping (questioning news judgment or newsworthiness), journalistic practices (news gathering, writing, and editing) (Cooper, 2006, pp. 18-19).

The highest number of tweets (43%) were about how news was framed, 8% of the tweets in our sample raised issues relating to the accuracy of CNN's news reports, 6% focused on journalistic practices while 3% raised gatekeeping questions (see Figure 3). In relation to framing, the key issues raised through criticism of CNN news reports were, the lack of context for stories, biased coverage, negativity in reporting, sensationalism, and bias in the news. Tweets that raised issues relating to accuracy pointed out factual errors in CNN's news and the incompleteness of the news stories. On gatekeeping, tweeters questioned the news judgment and perceived ignorance of journalists and editors concerning news selection. As for journalistic practices, the issues raised related to poor storytelling/reporting, fact-checking and journalistic research skills.

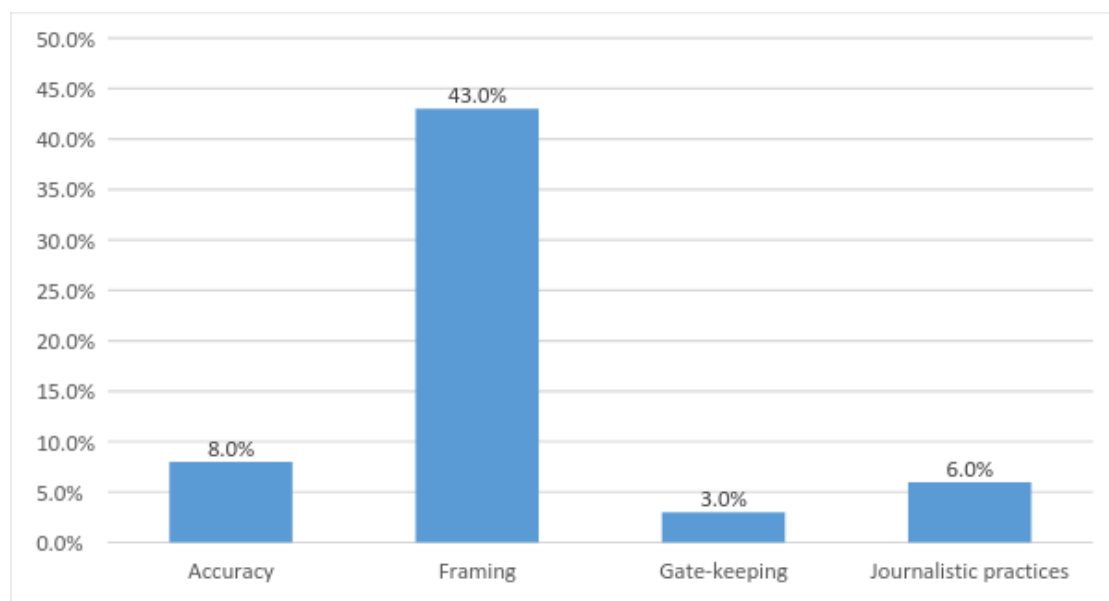


Figure 3: *Types of criticisms in #SomeoneTellCNN tweets*

Criticism strategies

Tweeters used a variety of strategies in responding to CNN's news reports about President Obama's visit to Kenya. They included reverse rhetoric, humor, taunts, mockery, direct condemnations, corrections, counter-statements and threats (See **Table 2** for a typology). Tweeters used humor and sarcasm to mock CNN and its reporters and anchors. For instance, CNN was routinely described with the playful pun "hotbed of

errors” in response to the CNN headline that started it all (titled, *Security Fears as Obama Heads to Terror Hotbed*). But our typology implies that humor was far from being the sole device through which KOTs expressed their exasperation.

Table 2: *A typology of criticism strategies used with #SomeoneTellCNN*

Strategy	Example of tweet
<i>Condemnation</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN they have their own agenda in bringing Africa down. If you have nothing to report we'll help you. You won't derail our vision. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Correction</i>	Dear CNN, It would be prudent to note that we are not a backward banana republic but a highly informed & analytical nation. #SomeoneTellCNN. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Counter-Statement</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN that Kenya is a blessed land and is the cradle of mankind. #MagicalKenya #GES2015Kenya #KaribuKenya. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Humor</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN that the last time a Kenyan made a bed hot, it produced a US president ⁵ . (July 23, 2015).
<i>Mockery</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN Here is the real terrorist that has 'terrorised' you for decades, our heroes ⁶ ! The athletics. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Questions</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN OPINION - MURIMI: Is CNN's Barbara Starr ⁷ a 'hotbed of ignorance'? (July 23, 2015)
<i>Reverse rhetoric</i>	As a black man, Obama is statistically more likely to be shot at in the US than in Kenya #SomeoneTellCNN @CNN. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Sarcasm</i>	RT @A_Musungu: #SomeoneTellCNN the only hot things we have in our beds are our women. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Taunt</i>	#SomeoneTellCNN Our wild animals are friendlier than them. (July 23, 2015)
<i>Threat/ Ultimatum</i>	Dear CNN, You are accountable to a wide global audience & sensational/irresponsible headlines will be called out. #KOT #SomeoneTellCNN. (July 23, 2015)

Demands to CNN

More than 11% of the tweets contained demands in response to CNN reports. More precisely, those tweets asked CNN to apologize for its reporting, change the headline,

⁵ Reference to President Obama having been the 'product' of a marriage between Barack Obama Sr, a Kenyan economist, and American anthropologist Ann Dunham in the US in 1961.

⁶ The tweet is accompanied by an image of a Kenyan athlete standing while exhausted while fellow competitors are either seated or lying down on the racing track after just completing a race.

⁷ Starr was one of the CNN correspondents who had released a report on Obama's impending tour to Kenya.

address the questions and criticisms raised by the KOTs, and, more generally, for the channel to improve its journalistic standards:

#SomeoneTellCNN they need to change their strapline. Poor in storytelling..extremely poor in Geography! (July 23, 2015)

Dear #KOT RT this until @CNNAfrica apologises for this stupid /ratchet headline about Kenya. (July 23, 2015)

Kenyans wont give up. I am still waiting for CNN Apology

#SomeoneTellCNN. (July 23, 2015)

2. Media Representations

We now approach the data in relation to questions about media representations, and ask: What kinds of alternative representations did the movement construct?

Indeed, a very significant discursive dynamic at stake throughout the #SomeoneTellCNN campaign was the promotion of alternative representations of Kenya. We found that 31% of the 100 most retweeted tweets and 48% of the 100 most retweeted images contained elements of the alternative representation of Kenya. Looking through those, we identified three clusters of themes.

1) The first is that of *Kenya as a place of wonderful wilderness, landscape, and wildlife*. From pictures of giraffes in front of the Kilimanjaro to white tourists in jeep encountering leopards and to luxury resorts, these tweets rely on and reproduce a well-known image of the country as an ideal tourist destination, most notably for a safari. Testifying of the pervasiveness of this theme, we found images, pictures or reference to wildlife in 17 of the 100 most retweeted tweets and in 20 of the 100 most retweeted images.

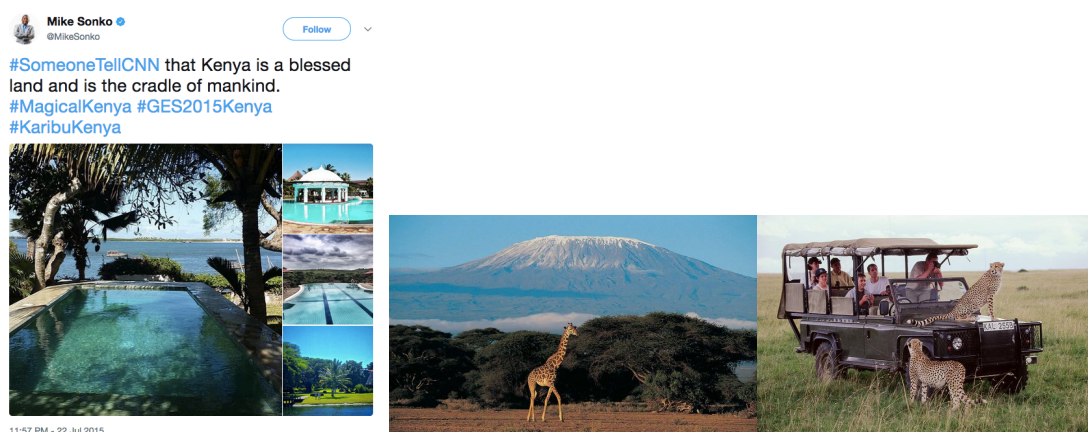


Figure 4: A collage of the most retweeted images, including one (left) showing a Coastal resort in Kenya, posted by the then Nairobi City Senator Mike Sonko.

2) The second cluster concerns *Kenya as a place of modernity*. This was communicated through a range of references to Kenya as the “Silicon Valley of Africa”, as a “hotbed of investment opportunities” (a linguistic subversion of the “hotbed” expression initiated by Chris Kirubi and subsequently reused by President Kenyatta and Obama at the Global Entrepreneur Summit respectively describing Kenya as hotbed “of vibrant culture, spectacular natural beauty and wonderful people” and “of innovation”) and through images of urban landscapes, including new roads, suburban housing and airport.

Also contributing to this theme were references to KOTs and their ability to call out CNN publically on the global digital sphere, an idea notably communicated through a widely shared map showing Kenya as a key hub of connectivity (see **Figure 4**).

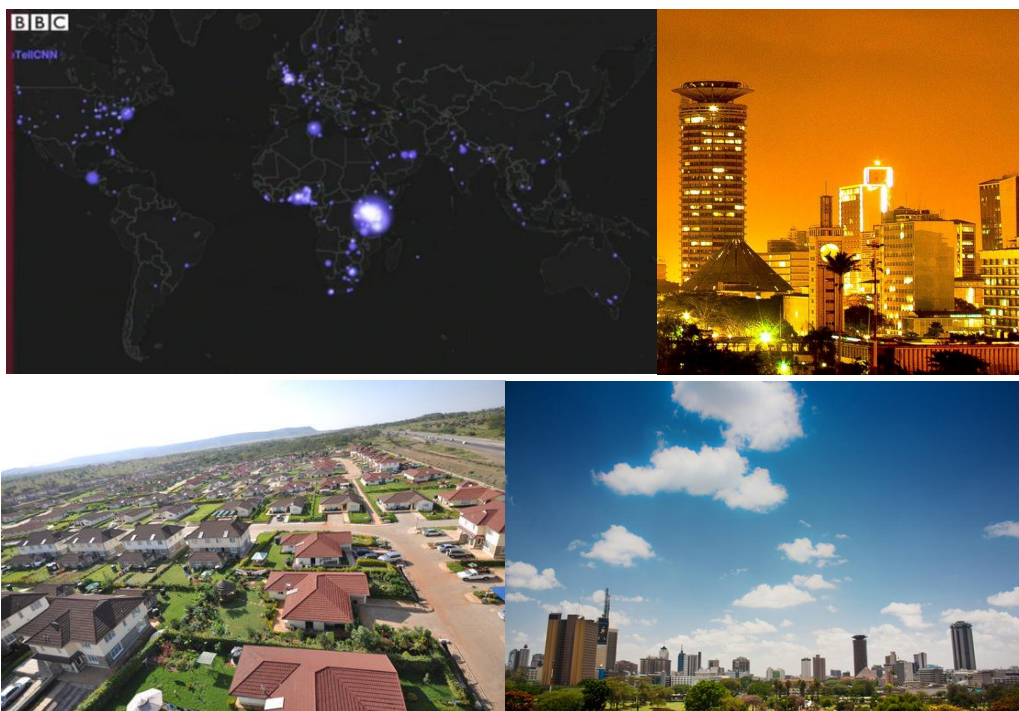


Figure 4: A collage of the most retweeted images of ‘beautiful’ Nairobi, with modern housing and city landscape resembling that of a Western capital. The top, left image is a BBC global map showing the spread of geolocated tweets using #SomeoneTellCNN, the dense spot being Kenya – hence used by most tweeters to ‘showcase’ the power of KOT.

3) The last cluster blends various themes contributing to a sense of *national identity around values of success, solidarity, and peace*. This include for instance references to Kenya’s success in athletics sport, as communicated through several pictures of athletes or TV screenshots of ranking of athletics competition (see **Figure 5**).



Figure 5: These are some of the most retweeted images of Kenya's prowess in athletics – to display its performance at global championships such as that of the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) or passionate stories of athletes themselves showing Kenyans' kind spirit.

A widespread picture was that of Kenyan runner helping a disabled Chinese runner drinking water, an action that led her to slow down and to losing the first position and a \$10,000 cash prize (see **Figure 5**). This picture – the third most retweeted one – was used by Twitter users (including show business celebrity Christopher Kirwa) to showcase Kenya as a nation that favors solidarity and “kindness in midst of competition”. This notion of a charitable nation was further reinforced by references to Kenya as a religious land: “Nest of God”, “God’s chosen nation” and “blessed land”. The Kenyan flag was also a significant signifier in communicating a sense of nationhood and was notably found in pictures of models wearing Kenya branded clothing (image).



Figure 6: A collage of some of the most retweeted images showing passion for the Kenyan flag.

Finally, against CNN's description of the country as a hotbed of terror, several twitteratis argued that Kenya was peaceful and perhaps more than the US. The famous Kenyan journalist Julie Gichuru, for instance, tweeted: “#SomeoneTellCNN For over 20 yrs Kenya has brokered regional peace deals & been a safe haven for hundreds of thousands fleeing insecurity” while Nairobi lawyer Donald B Kipkorir wrote:

“SomeoneTellCNN that there more killings in one day in NYC (New York City) than the whole year in Nairobi, and our Police don’t kill blacks for sport!”

Finally, we had in our coding an open-ended category for “alternative local issues”. We were interested in finding out to what extent the visibility gained by the backlash was used to divert the attention towards pressing social issues that may matter more to and for Kenyan audiences. On one level, the entire ethos of the Twitter storm is a struggle for recognition of a local concern, namely that Kenyan audiences will not stand for misrepresentation of their country and that this should be heard. We recognize that this already constitutes an intervention that made its way into global media coverage and altered the media narrative.

But we wanted to go even further and see if this energy was used to say, in substance, “instead of misrepresenting us, these are other things that matter to us and should be discussed”. These could include a range of issues – from politics to development, economy, inequalities, health or environment – and we approached the coding with this in mind. In our sample, no tweets fitted this category. This suggests that the impact of the Twitter storm was, essentially, to denounce CNN’s coverage and counter it with positive images of the country. It opened the digital media space for discussing issues of representation and media accountability but did not significantly contribute to bringing attention to other local, pressing social issues.

3. Voices

In this final section, we turn to the digital actors that shaped the campaign, in particular, to understand which voices were most influential and publicly elevated through and by the movement.

Influence and activity

Mecodify data analysis tool can be used to examine influence through different variables (Al-Saqaf 2016). Here we were interested in the participants in the #SomeoneTellCNN tweet storm and their contribution to the pool of text and images that defined the response to CNN in 2015. In the analysis of the most retweeted tweets, our findings showed that among the users whose tweets were retweeted the most were prominent personalities and institutions with known influence in politics, business and society, mostly in Kenya. In the tweets we collected, we identified the following personalities: bloggers, news anchors, PR practitioners, businesspersons, politician, and conservationists. The organizations that were most retweeted were mainly local media and global news networks, among them: BBC, Daily Nation, and Nation FM.

To examine closely the influence of the tweets through the participants of #SomeoneTellCNN tweet storm, we employed the Mecodify analytical tool for data related to users and various insights into the activity of the tweeters. An analysis of the most retweeted personalities and organizations out of the total of 9,213 users, showed prominent personalities in Kenya with influence in media and business were the most retweeted (see **Figure 7** and **Table 3**).

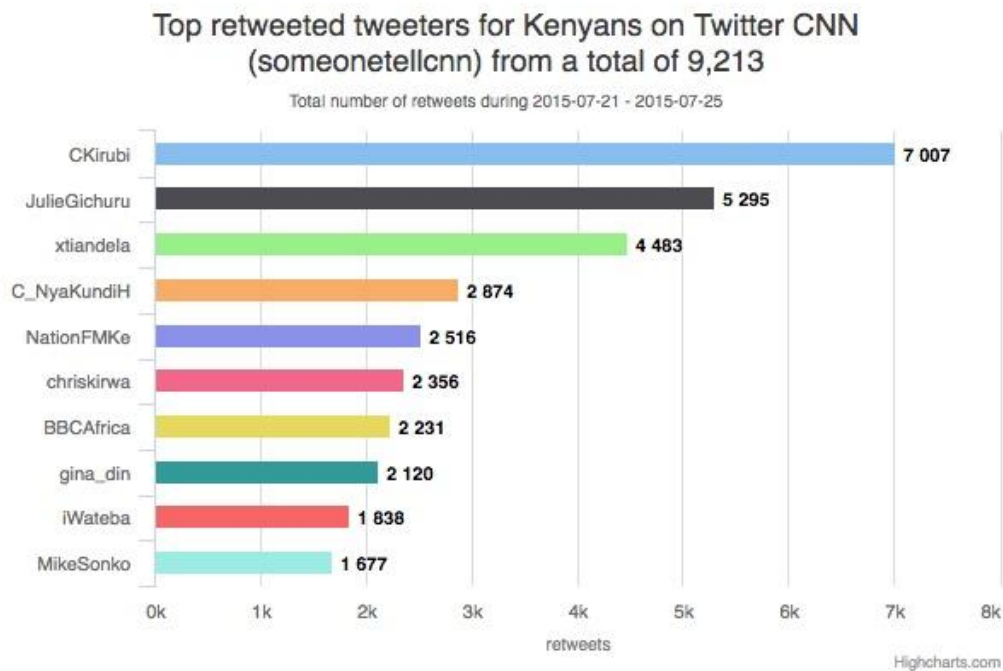


Figure 7: The distribution of retweets of the top 10 most retweeted Twitter users. (Source: Mecodify)

The most retweeted was Kenya media owner Chris Kirubi with 7,007 retweets, followed by former news anchor and corporate executive Julie Gichuru (5,295). The other individual with influence in media and business was Gina Din, who owns a leading PR company in Kenya (retweeted 2,120 times). Kenyan bloggers, Thee Trend Setter (retweeted 4,483 times) and Cyprian, Is Nyakundi (2,874 times) were also among the key figures in the list, showing that participants with social media influence attracted the attention of most tweeters using #SomeoneTellCNN. Among the most retweeted were mainstream media organizations such as Kenya's Nation FM (2,516 times) and BBC Africa (2,231 times). A politician, Nairobi city's Senator Mike Sonko was also among the most retweeted (1,677 times).

Table 3: Top 10 most retweeted tweeters (source: Mecodify)

	Username	Retweeted	Name	Bio	Influence	Place	Followers	Verified	Source of tweet
1	@CKirubi	7007	Chris Kirubi	Media owner	Media/business	Nairobi	632837	Yes	iPad
2	@JulieGichuru	5295	Julie Gichuru	Afro-optimist	Media/business	Nairobi	824394	Yes	Android
3	@xtiandela	4483	Thee Trend Setter	You-tuber	Social media	Nairobi	1039144	Yes	iPhone
4	@C_NyaKundiH	2874	Cyprian, Is Nyakundi	Blogger	Social media	Nairobi	1189059	Yes	Hootsuite
5	@NationFMKe	2516	Nation FM	FM radio	Mainstream media	Nairobi	217600	Yes	Twitter web
6	@chriskirwa	2356	Christopher Kirwa	Corporate leader	Social media	Nairobi	15056	No	Twitter web
7	@BBCAfrica	2231	BBC Africa	News Network	Africa media	London	1684859	Yes	SocialFlow
8	@gina_din	2120	Gina Din	PR Executive	Media/business	Nairobi	244963	Yes	Android
9	@iWateba	1838	Wateba 2.5	N	N	Nairobi	17560	No	Tweetdeck
10	@MikeSonko	1677	Mike Sonko	Senator	Politics	Nairobi	184064	Yes	Android

To gain further insights into the influence the most retweeted group had, we further relooked at the Mecodify data for the tweeters with the highest number of followers and their contribution to the tweets with #SomeoneTellCNN. **Figure 8** shows the tweeters with the highest followership who participated in the #SomeoneTellCNN conversation.

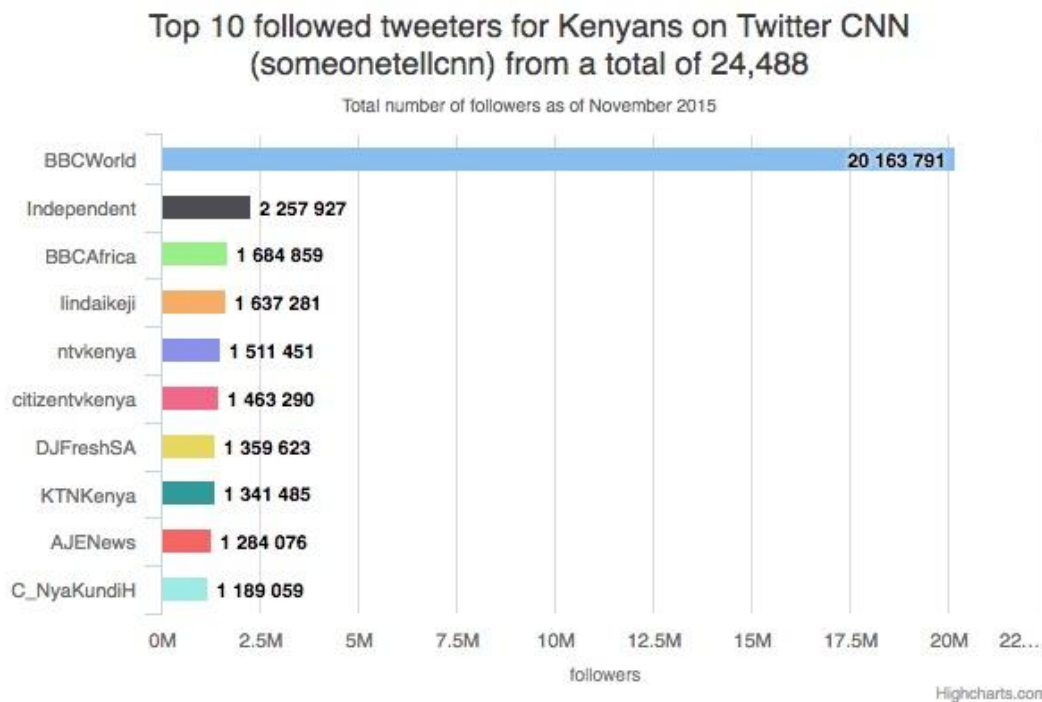


Figure 8: *The tweeters with the highest number of followers who used #SomeoneTell CNN. (Source: Mecodify).*

This group consisted mainly of the top global and local news organizations (see **Table 4**). The three global or foreign news media organizations in this group were, BBC World (20,163,791 followers), the UK *Independent* newspaper (2,257,927) and Aljazeera news network (1,284,076).

Table 4: *The users with the highest number of followers and the retweet count*

Username	User description	Followers	Retweets by others
@BBCWorld	BBC World	20163791	303
@Independent	UK Independent	2257927	155
@BBCAfrica	BBC Africa	1684859	2231
@lindaikeji	Nigeria blogger	1637281	36
@ntvkenya	Nation TV (Kenya)	1511451	171
@citizentvkenya	Citizen TV (Kenya)	1463290	1172
@DJFreshSA	S. African radio DJ	1359523	11
@KTNKenya	Kenya TV Network	1341485	272
@AJENews	Aljazeera News	1284076	198
C_NyaKundiH	Kenya blogger	1189059	2874

Local news media were also most visible here with Nation Television (1,511,451 followers), Citizen Television (1,463, 290), Kenya Television Network (1,341,485) having their #SomeTellCNN tweets retweeted between 171 and 1,172 times. Bloggers were also most active in the #SomeneTellCNN conversation with Nigeria's Linda Ikeji (1,637,281 followers) and Kenya's Cyprian, Is Nyakundi (1,189,059) being the most visible.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to shed light on a key gap in the literature on representation of Africa: how audiences within the continent react to global media narratives that involve them. Our analysis reveals the range of discursive strategies used by KOT to express their discontent with CNN's framing of Kenya. We argued that these strategies should be understood as constitutive of a metajournalistic discourse through which non-journalistic actors construct and challenge norms of journalistic practices and values. As highlighted by the nascent literature on KOT, this phenomenon is enabled on a global scale like never before through the affordances of digital and social media. Moreover, it is starting to impact norms and practices of international journalists and global news organizations that are growing more aware of globalizing audiences (Franks, 2010), in this case, to the point of flying a senior executive to officially and publicly apologize to state representatives.

Our analysis, however, also challenges a reductive and one-sided optimistic account of social media empowerment. In fact, the careful analysis of the tweets revealed a significantly more complex and ambivalent picture. While humor was part of the discursive strategies used for this media criticism, KOT also widely expressed their dissatisfaction with anger, exasperation, and condemnation. Although relevant to the framing of Africa in Western media more generally, the campaign was largely and explicitly focused on the specific Kenyan context. Indeed, a very significant part of the content aimed at recreating an alternative image of Kenya. This positive image presented Kenya as a place of wonderful landscape and wildlife; as a place of modernity, entrepreneurship, and innovation; and as a place with a strong sense of national identity characterized by moral values of resilience, solidarity, and peace.

These representations echo very precisely an image of Kenya championed by the country's political and corporate elites. It is telling, for instance, that the hashtag most widely used in conjunction with #SomeoneTellCNN and #KOT was #MagicalKenya, the official tagline of Kenya's Tourism Board. In that sense, we find digital media criticism to be entangled with what (Tuwei & Tully, 2017) describe as "commercial nationalism". They analyzed the promotional material used by Safaricom – the flagship mobile phone operator in Kenya – and found that it produced an image identical to the one we found in #SomeonetellCNN: Kenya as peaceful and safe for tourism, vibrant culturally, digitally connected, economically growing and conducive to investment (2017, p. 34). This commercial nationalism, they argue, constitute a banal yet powerful way to contribute to the construction of a national brand that ties Kenyan identity to consumerism and economic development, and which ultimately resonates

with broader neoliberal discourses of Africa rising. Seen in this light, our results about the voices are less surprising: those that were uplifted and that set the discursive agenda were that of digitally connected and economically advantaged Nairobians.

In sum, such digital media criticism has two sides that ought to be understood dialectically. On the one hand, it contributes to challenging the unequal distribution of power in shaping global media narratives. On the other hand, this criticism is implicated in broader discourses of nation branding, consumerism and nationalism that cement peculiar political and economic hegemonies within the Kenyan context. Such dialectic is reminiscent of Willem's (2015) analysis of Zimbabwe and British media, whereby former President Mugabe would, on the global scale, demonize British media to reinforce his hegemonic position nationally. In any case, the entanglement of these two aspects calls for reconsidering narratives of digital empowerment that have become particularly fashionable vis-à-vis the African context. We hope this research will inspire future studies to engage more deeply the dialectics of digital empowerment and to understand more rigorously the interplay of global and local power relations in which digital practices are embedded.

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