

The Cartographies of Media Framing, 'Brand Africa' and the 'New' Politics of Otherness

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Africa's international media image is often constructed within a discourse of Otherness. This image is a function of several variables not least the continent's marginal position in international politics and commerce. However, there have been notable initiatives aimed at contesting this enduring frame of 'difference'. UNESCO's New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) was one such intervention although broadly aimed at correcting the disproportionate international news flows from the West to the developing world. The success was fleeting even if the initiative led to the formation of an African news agency PANA. The African Union has also come up with several initiatives including the creation of URTNA- now AUB. National governments, more particularly South Africa, set up the SABC-funded SABC News International which was part of former President Thabo Mbeki's grand plans for an African Renaissance, a project codified in the highly ambitious if modestly successful NEPAD. There have also been private initiatives including the establishment of the African Broadcasting Network (ABN) among many other similar projects to be found in various parts of the continent. Yet despite these initiatives, the international narrative around which the continent is reported remains broadly negative. Why then does this narrative of Otherness endure? This paper seeks to examine these various African-based interventions within the discursive economy of Otherness. The paper argues that a number of these initiatives begin from a problematic point of departure. In large part, most are reactionary and start off by in fact validating the very narrative they seek to contest. The internal imagination or totalizing image of a homogeneous Africa legitimises its essentialization as an undifferentiated space and culture. The paper argues that such initiatives must begin by acknowledging the continent's internal incoherence; that Africa as a geographical space is not the same as Africa as a political and cultural body. The latter is an artificial construction whose terms of interrogation must be located within a broader and much more complex matrix that transgresses current populist imaginations of the continent. The paper suggests that the deletion of internal differences undermine the very attempts to develop a counter narrative viable enough to tell the 'African' stories and that there is need to rehabilitate difference within. The paper proposes the creation of a new epistemological ground upon which these new 'brand Africa' initiatives could be located.