Exploring Literature on Alternative Media about African Narratives

Oloo Daniel Ong'ong'a

Ph.D. Research Fellow in Communication Studies

Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing, China

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9587-6210

Abstract

While studies on African narratives have concentrated on studying mainstream media, there is still little study on studying these narratives about Africans on alternative media. This study used a systematic literature review to establish the interplay between alternative media and African narratives by exploring journal articles published between 2006 -2021 and using 15 published articles as a unit of analysis for this study. The findings from the study indicate that social media plays a crucial role as a platform for alternative media where audiences can engage with one another without fear of victimization through using the comment and reply sections on social media platforms. The results further point towards critical media theory and ubuntu as important theories in studying alternative media and African narratives. Scholars have focused majorly to study social media usage in political activities by youths in Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa as alternative media. Therefore, this study furthers the literature on alternative media and African narratives.

Keywords: Africa Narratives, Social Media, Alternative Media, Ubuntu

Introduction

Africa narrative is not a new field in the current world; the only problem that arises from this narrative is that Africa is viewed as a "country" that is poor, unstable, and less developed (Roberts & Houten, 2021). Although these stereotypes tend to allow us to evaluate ourselves as Africans to tell our stories directly, there is still a lack of information outside there about what literature talks about African narratives. This literature review intends to fill this gap by establishing scholarly articles and reports that have investigated the issues of African narratives. A narrative is a story framed in a particular angle to portray a particular thing or person in either a positive or negative way (Banda, 2006). This kind of narrative helps in shaping the person's attitudes and perceptions. When the narrative tends to be believed by the specific individuals, they control their mindset and therefore shape their ideas and how they evaluate and carry themselves. African stories, in many cases, are told by nationals and media who do not understand the culture, customs, and traditions of Africans (Olawuyi, 2014). In so doing, these media report majorly on negative stories about Africa without realizing that there is a wider scope of beautiful and promising happenings in Africa. Technological development, music, and pop culture are among the fundamental positive events in Africa in the 21st century.

On the other hand, alternative media have risen as a counter to the mainstream media in Africa. These media originated from communities who felt misrepresented and marginalised in society (Mano & Mukhongo, 2016). The only way to ensure that their sentiments listened, was through the establishment of community radio platforms to guarantee that issues in the community were discussed conclusively.

The ownership of these alternative media is the community members themselves with the intention of not making a profit but promoting their society's interests (Nygaard, 2019). With the advent of the internet, the shift changed from the radio to the digital platforms. The radio integrated into the internet and social media spaces. This space, therefore, acts as the platform for alternative media giving the audience opportunities to get information and ask questions as well as engage in two-way communications with the decision-makers. The trends in this perspective have changed, raising questions from scholars on alternative media efficacy in promoting African narratives.

Social media plays a crucial role in understanding the narrative about Africa since it offers a platform that is less regulated than legacy media. Media organisations have adopted the social media space to report their news and a source for news stories for their audience (Goldfain & Merwe, 2006). The audience, on the other hand, use these spaces to question legitimates of narratives that they believe may taint the image or that of their countries. Therefore, this study explores the interplay between the alternative media and African narrative literature to establish the gaps for future study. The article is divided into four areas by firstly introducing the study and going further to the methodology as well as a discussion while tracing the studies done on alternative media and African narratives. The next section establishes the methodology that this study adopted.

Methodology

The success of any systematic literature review should focus on identifying the relevant studies while appraising their quality and summarising their evidence explicitly (Khan et al., 2003). The systematic method distinguishes itself from the conventional method because it evaluates and interprets the available studies in their relevance to answer a specific research question. Scholars such as Barbosa and Alves (2011) have argued that the main aim of systematic literature reviewers is to evaluate a research question with rigor as well as trustworthiness that can be auditable. This study, therefore, adopted this approach to comprehensively summarise the relevant literature between 2006 and 2021 with the aim of understanding the topic of the study, which is alternate media in Africa. To get the relevant information, the study adopted a technique of searching the relevant information from academic databases such as google scholars and Mendeley. The following diagram shows the phases used for the systematic review process.

The study utilized the academic journal search that is indexed by Scopus as well as using google scholar.

Study Methodology

Phase 1 Search in Academic databases: From the period between 2006-2021, using the keyword alternative media generated 300 results that were relevant to the study and therefore were selected for further investigation.
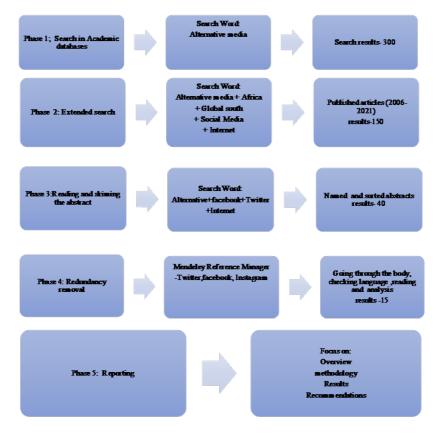
Phase 2 Extended search: After the initial search and screening, 150 articles were generated published between the study period. The search word included the combination of keywords :(Alternative media + Africa+ Global south+ Social Media+ Internet).

Phase 3 Skimming and reading through the abstract: After selecting the articles from the second phase, the next stage was to skim through the abstract and the contents of the literature. This process also involved checking, sorting, and isolating the irrelevant articles. This process generated 40 articles that were narrowed down with keywords related to the study. The keywords included (Alternative+ Facebook + Twitter +Internet + Africa).

Phase 4 Redundancy removal: After skimming the body of the literature, it was then to embark on finding the articles that were irrelevant or redundant. Some of the articles had abstracts written in English, while the entire content was in a language different from English. Such languages included German and French. Other articles used the keywords this study was investigating but tackled totally different things. Therefore, to be precise, the study modified the keywords to be more specific (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Africa, internet, ubuntu). To generate the articles, the study used Mendeley reference manager to sort out, read and extract data. Mendeley is free online software for managing references (http://www.mendeley.com/). From the above process, 15 articles were generated as relevant to this study.

Phase 5 Reporting: To categorise and report the result of the study, a table outlining the findings of the study was generated to describe the content of the 15 published materials related to alternative media and African narratives. This table was based on the narrative of the literature in terms of the overview, methodology, results as well as recommendations of those studies.

Results

From the diagram above, 15 studies out of a poll of 40 were useful and relevant to the topic of this study that concerned alternative media and African narratives. Taking a closer look at the 15 studies, 10 of these articles used a qualitative method by looking at cases, interviews, and document analysis, while the remaining ones focused on the quantitative method. Some studies also utilised content analysis to study social media and digital platforms. Only one of the studies used proposed the critical media theory as a framework to study African narratives. On the other hand, one article proposed ubuntu as a model that can be adopted to understand the narrative about Africans. The studies on alternative media about African narratives concentrated on political subjects in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. Most of the studies were published in the journal of African media, while a few were published in media and culture studies. 12 articles focused on studying alternate media in the context of Facebook, Twitter, and information communication technologies. The table below shows the categories of the main finding of the study:

Table 1 Categorization Table

1	JWa'Njogu (2009) on his seminal work argued that the image of Africa in the Global North audiences is framed by the source such as news, books and school textbooks. Most of these materials are developed by the dominant Global North authors who produce these materials from the premise of capitalism from their audiences. Because of their technological development, the authors in the Global North sphere produce a vast amount of information about Africa at a lower cost and spread them quickly through different available channels. These channels are necessitated by internet connectivity and the availability of uninterrupted electricity connections in their states. The problem cited by the scholar concerning this arrangement is that Africans do not have the vast infrastructure to openly convey their true stories.
2	Olawuyi (2014) has tried to find out the problem of misrepresentation of African stories in the Africa media. In his analysis, the scholar established that African journalists still follow the journalistic concept of the Global North. In his review, Olawuyi pointed out that African countries lacked a platform that they could use to tell their own stories. In addition, the scholar argued that the continent must develop a veritable podium to enable it to narrate its own story more directly to the masses in order to counter the negative narrative that is outside there about Africa and her people. Olawuyi recommends that journalism and the media at large should focus on developing their own curriculum which is African-centric in nature that encompasses different cultures and social norms.
3	Roberts and van Houten (2021) have conducted a study that was commissioned by Africa No Filter (ANF) on the reportage of Africa in a sampled mainstream media in African countries. In their study, the scholars established that gatekeepers in the African media sampled prioritized covering crimes and politics in the theme of dispute and conflict topics. This was because they judged these topics as more newsworthy than the rest. In addition, their study revealed that the editors confirmed that the inadequacy of funding made them use the stories from the global news agencies that were framed to suit the Global North audiences. This resulted in non-Africans setting the news agenda on behalf of Africa leading to stereotypical stories about Africa.
4	In an exhaustive study, Wahutu (2017, 2018) has claimed that African narratives often lack African voices. In his study on the African representation, Wahutu acknowledged that there was a complicated relationship between the African media and the people they represent since most of the information that was reported by the media came from government officials or aid workers who had clearly written down rules on what they should report. The rules governed the editors on what to cover and those stories that were not favorable were shelved. Therefore, these led the editors and journalists to tell stories that were skewed towards a particular direction to favor some governments and officials while missing out on the most important information that was vital to the audiences.
5	Banda (2006) has critically assessed the concept and meaning of alternative media. In his definition, the scholar notes that alternative media are media sources that are different from the dominant media. The characteristics of these alternative media include how their news is produced and distributed with a focus to influence their audience in the scenario where the mainstream media fail to do so. In his seminal work, Banda argues that alternative media are less censored and have been used by the historically underserved populations to air their views in the situation where their information and messages were censored by the dominant mainstream media. He further argues that such media adopt a community grassroots structure of bottom-up policy and are majorly owned and operated by the minority community members.
6	Nygaard (2019) has examined the trends of the emergence of alternative media. In his analysis, the scholar established that alternative media tend to emerge during the spectacular periods. These periods are characterized by economic, political social, and cultural changes in a particular time. Therefore, alternative media tend to have the aspect of democracy since its audience and news producers engage in open democratic activities that strive to help themselves and those problems of their communities. Besides the scholar contends that alternative media are not commercial and therefore they are majorly driven by non-profit motives with the ability to satisfy the needs and aspirations of its audience that are looked down on by the majority. Further, Nygaard explains that alternative media are able to organize people and therefore create a form of two-way communication that stimulates critical thinking to solve social problems.

7	Goldfain and Merwe (2006) have discussed the importance of blogs as alternative media in the internet age. The scholars contended that blogs that are political in nature or established to discuss political issues have been widely used in order to provide individuals with alternative sources of information in regards to politics. In their study, Goldfain and Merwe argued that political blogs afford additional perspective to issues and events that are important in a particular period of time and therefore offer a platform for the minorities to give their own voices on those issues. Their study revealed that the development of political blogs has given media users an opportunity to consult numerous sources for their daily news. Further, the scholars pointed out that news blogs were not in a position to replace the conventional media but if effectively used, they can help to offer a new perspective about an issue.
8	Mano and Mukhongo (2016) have conceptualized the critical media theory in Africa. In their analysis, the scholars argue that social media have enhanced and reshaped the production and distribution of information in Africa's alternative media space. Further, they argued that social media, in general, have played a critical role in the determination of the bottom-up struggles. They caution that alternative media should not be looked at as the oppositional and underground messaging that is amplified and expanded in the online space to define alternative media in Africa. In addition Mano, and Mukhongo claimed that overlooking other small and marginalized group communication is a danger. The danger originates in the situation where when the alternative media are not investigated under the lens of critical theory since there may be a likelihood of missing important issues while focusing on what media can prioritize. They also argue that social media is a laboratory where the voiceless can voice their issues and interact effectively with others to settle issues.
9	The empirical study of Tavernaro-Haidarian (2020) revealed that Ubuntu can be used to shape African narratives. In his interviews with the local communities in South Africa, the scholar established that communities play a major role in telling African stories through members' reflections on their role in improving the society while serving their community. The scholar contended that through such strategy, the communities are co-authors of their own stories instead of their stories being told by different people. Tavernaro-Haidarian argued that the current African image is portrayed through beautiful infrastructures in the city which in his view should be replaced by telling stories of entrepreneurial African spirits exhibited by local families in Africa. Furthermore, the scholar postulated that the extreme makeover-home edition project realized the power of humanness that is significant in impacting how African stories are told.
10	The article by Wachanga (2012) has discussed how Kenya invented a reporting platform by the name Ushahidi. Ushahidi provides a platform for people to report and participate in issues of national interest. The scholar argued that the internet has brought about some new culture in the information ecosystem. In his study, Wachanga explained that the Ushahidi platform enables an individual to report on issues that affect their community, therefore, becoming part of the stories that happen in the society. Besides, the scholar postulated that the new media with the example of the Ushahidi platform has become the areas where information can be crowdsourced for decision making. These important elements of such platforms have attracted mainstream media to source verifiable information for their news and reports, therefore, declining to source news from foreign agencies. Furthermore, his analysis established that Ushahidi allows people to identify themselves into a common group to understand their nations and the world around them.
11	In Kenya, Otieno and Mukhongo (2015) have examined the use of social media by young people in Kenya politics. In their study, the scholars found that the youth used social media in order to participate in civic activities. One of their findings included that youth not only participate in these civic activities but also used digital platforms as sources for entertainment and socialization. Furthermore, their results showed that there was a need to re-examine how the social media platforms can afford real change while creating new opportunities for the young people in Kenya. Although new technologies have brought about a range of opportunities, the scholars questioned the impact of Facebook and other social media platforms in their role in the formation of political interests and knowledge among the youths in Kenya.

12	The study of Mano (2020) has explored the role of the internet on alternative media in Africa. In his study, Mano pointed out that the internet has enabled alternate media to adapt to different shapes from that of the mainstream media. The scholar argued that alternate media is different from mainstream media because of how their contents are produced and distributed. He further argued that when alternative media are integrated within social media, they tend to ask questions like why, who, and how in order to engage their audiences. The scholar identified the characteristic of alternative media in the social media sphere as that which is more sensual in nature and that provides freedom of interaction in political discussions. Mano urged that there is the thin and blurry between mainstream media and alternative media social media since their prominence is gained when circumstances need a vibrant discussion and analysis from different perspectives.
13	Bosch (2013) has studied the widespread of Facebook in South Africa as a social media platform for youth political engagement. The scholar conducted a survey to investigate why Facebook was viewed as a popular social media site. She established that youth found it to be more affordable since they owned mobile handsets which were easy to operate and had access to cheap internet connectivity. The reason for young people to use social media was to connect with political information. Further, the scholar postulated that there was a decline in youth participation in political activities after the independence of South Africa. In addition, her study revealed that young people were less interested in conventional media news because they rarely consumed news publications but they showed some level of trust in radio and television news in the mainstream media.
14	Similar to the above findings, Steenkamp and Hyde-Clerk (2014) have conducted content analysis on the Facebook page of two South African political parties. In their analysis, they established that Facebook acted as an extra channel for participatory media that politicians used to interact with their supporters. Through the observation of the comment section of the two prominent South African politician political pages, the scholars contended that the comments were not replied to or answered by the page managers. Most of the comments were political in nature and merely opinionated while the audience used the platform to interact freely amongst themselves on issues that were not addressed by the political party. The scholars have advised that communication on Facebook should take the same laws as those applied to the conventional media. Furthermore, Steenkamp and Hyde-Clerk established that Facebook was not effectively used by the political actors the same way that it was supposed to be used as traditional media.
15	Namasinga and Orgeret (2020) discussed the role of Facebook in regards to the conventional journalistic style in Uganda. In their investigation, the scholars pointed out that most of the Ugandan mainstream media used Facebook to engage and obtain feedback from their consumers. In addition, their study showed Ugandan newspapers were accessed on social media while the journalist was affected by the way they sourced for their information for their reporting purposes. Therefore, the nature of sourcing information by the journalist from social media has changed the overall professional behaviors of the journalists. Further, the scholars contended that Ugandan journalists used Facebook to source news on politics and entertainment while they monitored the activities of the Ugandan politicians and government officials. Namasinga and Orgeret's study showed that users' comments were published along with the stories they sourced from social media to authenticate news.

Discussion

This study sought to find out what has been researched regarding alternative media and African narrative by closely looking at research articles and reports published between 2006 -2021. Using a systematic literature review, 15 relevant studies were analysed and presented in the form of table 1 above. These results are important since they give us a clear picture of what scholars have theorised in this field. It is important to note that there is still a growing number of literature on African narrative, with scholars from different fields investigating the topics from diverse angles (Banda, 2006). The current study shows that social media is a tool that can be used to study African narratives. This is because it allows other alternative media which are less regulated to be integrated into the digital sphere (Mano, 2020).

Regarding the methods used by the scholars in investigating African narratives, most scholars adopted a qualitative research approach. This method was widely used by looking at the contents of blogs, websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles of politicians (Bosch, 2013). Furthermore, there has also emerged the trend in analysing comments from blogs, Facebook posts, and Twitter to understand

African narratives. Only one study was surveyed to establish what and how African mainstream media reported the continent of Africa. In addition, two out of 15 studies used interviews to substantiate the narrative of Africa in the media. Therefore, this shows that although the qualitative method may be paramount in the study of African narratives, there is still a need to integrating other approaches, for instance, quantitative method which would yield quantifiable data for analysis purposes to check the trends on African narratives while strengthening the qualitative method.

Critical Media and Ubuntu as an Avenue to Explore African Narratives

Additionally, the findings from this study have revealed that there are few researchers that have gone the extra mile to theorise alternative media in Africa. For instance, only one study has proposed using critical media theory in studying alternative media in Africa. Alternative critical media theory posits that social media cannot be looked at as the only element of alternative media in Africa. For this reason, there are many other platforms that have originated from the bottom-up that can establish the narrative of Africans in media. Furthermore, Ubuntu is also a way of studying African narratives (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2020). The scholar who positions ubuntu as an alternative media argue that this kind of theory can bring African people together while using their network to support one another in their communities. As a result, ubuntu shows Africans as people that work together for the benefit of the society.

Social Media as an Amplifier of African Narratives

Unlike the above argument, the study has disclosed the scope of investigating alternative media regarding African narrative can be done through social media with specific to those that offer opportunities for users to contribute their sentiments. These platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and blogs (Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2014). In addition, this kind of platform affords their audience a platform to air their voice without fear of victimization. The audience can change and influence the policies that might hinder them from telling their stories and experiences openly. It is also important to note that political topics are favoured as a way of narrating African stories in social media. Therefore, this can be inferred that when investigating narrative, it may be paramount to look at political communication in the social media sphere. This is because most African countries that are democratic, have freedom of press and speech while political topics are motivating since they affect wider society.

Youth as the Source of African Narratives

Besides the aforementioned findings, this study has established those African narratives are investigated on digital platforms. This can be inferred that youth are a source of African narrative in the digital age. For instance, most of the studies done in this area targeted youth in the case of Uganda, South Africa, and Kenya (Otieno & Mukhongo, 2015; Wachanga, 2012; Namasinga Selnes & Orgeret, 2020). The technological advancement in these countries gives the youth space either to explore their talents or engage in political activities to push forward their ideas and what they consider as pressing issues to the government of the day.

Study Contribution to Alternative Media and African Narrative Discourse

This study aims to provide a comprehensive summary of researches conducted on alternative media and African narratives. The literature review has demonstrated that there is still a lack of literature that concentrates on social media as a platform to investigate African narratives; hence this study contributes to this grey space. As a result of the above argument, this study is among the few studies that have strived to contribute to a systematic review of literature on the African narrative and alternative media, which is currently drawing interest from different fields, including academia and media in general. The definition of alternative media is context and scope specific; therefore, when conceptualising alternative media, there is a need to look into the perspective that these factors play. On the other hand, African narratives are best investigated when they are observed from the comments and tweeter replies of audiences (Namasinga Selnes & Orgeret, 2020). This systematic review is important to individuals

and scholars who are interested in alternative media and African narratives aspect since it provides them with the background of the status of overall studies in this exciting field. Therefore, this article provides these scholars with current and useful reference points of knowledge and suggestion in this field. The result presented in the categorisation table is vital since they present the initial step for researchers who wish to explore this exciting field. To conclude, this study shall form part of the Africa No Filter report, which aims to investigate the narratives of Africa from a different perspective in the 21st century.

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Authors Details

Oloo Daniel Ong'ong'a, *Ph.D. Research Fellow in Communication Studies, Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing, China,* **Email ID**: oloodaniel2@outlook.com