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African Story Time: An Examination of Narrative Storytelling in U.S. News Coverage of Nigeria's Missing Girls as Public Interest Communications

Yewande O. Addie

University of Florida

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Abstract

News reports about nearly 300 kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls spread globally in April 2014. Ongoing updates on the tragic incident permeated social media through digital advocacy efforts. Though research on U.S. news coverage generally indicate underreporting regarding missing women of color and negative reporting on African current events, news of Nigeria's missing schoolgirls managed to make waves in U.S. media and elicit longstanding compassion and interest among readers. This study explores the use of narrative storytelling by U.S. news outlets as a way to create commonality, engage audiences in public interest communications and encourage the story's resonance among U.S. readerships.

Introduction

In April 2014, nearly 300 schoolgirls were kidnapped from a secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria. The kidnapping was believed to have been perpetrated by Boko Haram, an Islamic extremist sect based in Northeastern Nigeria (Nossiter, 2014a). The abduction instigated a global reaction of concern about their treatment and recovery. It also became a prominent subject in U.S. news media, which is not characteristic of international current events. International news coverage is a valuable resource in shaping public opinion and communicating U.S. interests (Golan, 2007). However, Zhang & Meadows (2012) claim domestic coverage of international current events has been on the decline since the 1980s. Of the news reporting on global stories, Larson's (1984) study cites a general lack of balance within international coverage and Golan's

**Please send correspondences about this article to Yewande Addie, College of Journalism and Communication, University of Florida. E-mail: yewande.addie@ufl.edu.*

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(2007) findings indicate news networks tend to focus on only a few countries. This lopsided approach to international coverage has a negative impact on U.S. public opinions of international affairs and unequally covered countries (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). According to Stevenson and Gaddy's (1984) findings, developing countries receive more coverage of negative or bad news (as cited in Wu, 1998). With respect to African countries, some describe the continental region as a space that receives narrow coverage or is largely ignored in international news stories (Golan, 2008; Paik, 2009), giving the impression that African countries hold little value in the U.S. news cycle. In addition to being accused of omitting African countries from the news agenda, Western media is also frequently criticized for primarily portraying African countries in connection with crisis and corruption or excluding them altogether (Adegoju, 2016; Bunce, 2015; Monson, 2017).

On the contrary, in Scott's (2015) comprehensive review of U.S. and U.K. produced media, he claims existing research on the representation of Africa tends to affirm Afro-pessimistic assumptions, but much of it has yet to be substantiated empirically. He contends that the myth of damaging representation continues to be proliferated by those who stand to benefit by its preservation, including researchers, non-governmental organizations, and corporations.

However, Adegbola, Skarda-Mitchell and Gearhart (2018) believe these purported misrepresentations to be a problematic reality. In their content analysis of U.S. television news coverage of Nigeria, they examined programming produced during two 5-year periods: 2005–2009 and 2010–2014. Although their results indicate a significant reduction in negative valence and marginal increase in positive valence, news stories on crime, war, and conflict remained a predominant focus among the most reported issues.

Despite the fact that coverage of African current events is not normally prioritized in U.S. news media (Ankomah, 2008), proximity being a primary reason, the story of Nigeria's missing Chibok girls would likely qualify as an exception to that standard. The real-life saga of their capture and release may have appealed to the dramatic attachment to which audiences respond (Kunelius, 2009). The promising potential of young girls being snatched into an underworld of clandestine forests and trekked through a volatile and unknown region is devastating for most to consider. That is what makes this modern tale unique.

The story clearly struck a chord in the national news agenda, likely because of the bizarre details and journalistic use of narrative. This storytelling technique is often employed by journalists to offer an explicit interpretation of news and help "make sense of a contingent world through narrative immersion in the lives of real people" (Baym, 2017, p.16).

The purpose of this study is threefold: 1) examine how U.S. news coverage of Chibok's kidnapped schoolgirls represents an anomaly with respect to how current events are typically covered, 2) use literature to contextualize sociocultural reasons why this story may have resonated with U.S. audiences, 3) and lastly support that literature using subthemes that were derived from news stories qualitatively coded with the victim-villain-hero character archetype as the guiding frame. Overall, this research posits that U.S. news outlets used a narrative technique to build issue salience through journalistic advocacy, which I argue is a form of public interest

communications (PIC). Though a bit unorthodox, this article is organized in the following manner: First is a framework section that details the concepts and theories informing this study. Next a brief literature review is provided that situates narrative elements linked to the unique nature of the story. The methods section details the qualitative content analysis process. It will be followed by a long form, blended results-discussion section that explains the subthemes in concert with victim-villain-hero literature to situate the current event as a rarity. The study then will close with a conclusion.

Conceptual framework

This research is conceptually underscored by public interest communications, narrative policy framework (Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014), and narrative storytelling.

Public interest communications

PIC is an emerging, interdisciplinary field that integrates journalism, public, relations, and marketing. The burgeoning field is defined as the “development and implementation of science based, planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization” (Fessman, 2016, p. 16).

PIC normally has at least one of two campaign goals in mind: 1) influencing changes in behavior at the individual level that are either linked to some sort of social ill and or improved social condition and/or 2) driving change through policy using public social change campaigns. Successful campaign efforts often require work in one or multiple spheres of influence: media, policy, communities of influence, the market, activism, and social marketing (Christiano, 2017).

In terms of the relationship between journalism and PIC, Fessmann (2016) indicates similarities between both disciplines because practitioners of each group function in advocacy-based roles with both creating information output on issues relating to public welfare. One does so as a representative spokesperson of specific causes relating to social good and the other through reporting on certain issues that are key to the public’s well-being. In spite of this connection, Fessman (2016) goes on to state that although there is resemblance between the role of PIC and journalism, the two are separated by the latter field’s intention of striving for objectivity.

Fessmann (2017) characterizes journalism’s role in promoting social advocacy as one in decline. He posits that the rise in PIC is connected to that downward slump. However, if the primary goal of PIC is to stimulate long-term changes in behavior on an issue of public interest (Fessmann, 2016), then the infusion of narrative in journalistic practice may be an effective plan of action toward that end. I argue that by using a storytelling approach in coverage, Chibok’s missing girls maintained sustained interest in U.S. news media. The story sparked response from communities of influence and activism circles on social media and later conjured action by

policymakers and government leadership. News coverage triggered action in several spheres of influence, which is an essential component of successful campaigns, as mentioned above. For this reason, advocacy journalism should still be seen as a viable form of PIC. Keeping audiences informed is a social good. And in combination with narrative elements, published news can function as a practical way to encourage logical and rational thinking about a subject matter through the transmission of social knowledge (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Narrative policy framework

Journalism is not the only field that employs narrative as a communication technique. A similar strategy has proved useful in the policy process. A growing body of research inquiries that analyze the process have used the narrative policy framework (NPF) (Jones et al., 2014) as a methodological tool. NPF has been previously applied to policy narrative analysis on a number of topics including e-cigarette regulation (O’Leary, Borland, Stockwell, & MacDonald, 2017), U.S. campaign finance reform (Gray & Jones, 2016), recycling policy (McBeth, Lybecker, & Husmann, 2014), and wildfire policy in Colorado (Crow et al., 2017).

The framework blends Entman’s (1993) framing theory, Agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and narrative communication as a policy advocacy strategy (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). “NPF posits that policy actors use stories (narratives) to influence the policymaking process. Policy actors do so by reducing complex policy problems into stories with settings, characters, plots, and morals that help people make sense of these problems” (Gupta, Ripberger, & Wehde, 2018, p. 120). Blair & McCormack (2016) define policy actors as political figures who have the ability to use narratives to influence policy debates on a specific issue. “Narratives can be represented in the news media as policy actors seek to communicate to the general public or decision-makers” (Blair & McCormack, 2016, p. 1). Analysis can take place across three levels (micro, meso and macro) and common narrative components in NPF include: character (hero, victim, villain), setting (space and time), plot (organized action) and the moral of the story (policy solution). Strategy and beliefs or values are embedded in the policy narrative content (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018). In the context of this research, the NPF is applied in the sense that the published narratives perform as a mechanism to understanding the real lived experiences of Nigeria’s Chibok girls, while audiences rationalize and interpret their relational meaning. This process was further catalyzed because many of the published stories on this topic were supported by the careful casting and construction of three essential storytelling character archetypes: the victim, the villain, and the hero (Hawkins, 2001).

Narrative storytelling

The use of storytelling is an age-old ritual used to transmit histories, values, beliefs, cultures, and ideas about the social world (Edosomwan & Peterson, 2016). Many African ethnic groups and global cultures have longstanding oral traditions. Historically, present-day countries such as

Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Gambia had, and in some cases still have, people designated to a griot cast; these griots/griottes (the female equivalent), or professional storytellers, committed their lives to cementing the public's memory of past events and ancestral deeds. Through praise song retellings, they preserved knowledge of genealogical ties and even advised royal families on political decisions (Lott, 2002).

With time, modern published news becomes the way in which society remembers events of the past. Before time and memory revise an issue's freshness in the public consciousness, the medium can give the issue primacy by highlighting the topic because of its perceived relevance to society's wellbeing (Peters & Tandoc, 2012). This research posits that U.S. news organizations and journalists engaged in PIC by using narrative storytelling elements to amplify interest and resonance among the audiences, encouraging empathy and activity in other spheres of influence.

Literature review: Situating the peculiarity of Chibok coverage through victim construction

U.S. news audiences are often drawn to the melodramatic tension that is a byproduct of news agencies that use victimhood as a thematic device (Zhou, Cooley, & Y, 2011). This storytelling strategy is connected to the same classic literary plot twists and cast of characters present in traditional folktales. Abduction is a common conflict motif used to frame victimhood. And "damsels in distress often radiate an archetypal innocence that beckons heroic salvation" (Zhou et al., 2011). Socially the need to protect children, notably girls, is a pillar of Western morality that is culturally embedded and reflective of the hierarchy of innocence described in Moeller's (2002) text on children in international news. Kidnapping stories involving underaged adolescents easily gain traction because the purity and goodness associated with children serves as the perfect challenger to metaphorical ills and helps "dramatize the righteousness of a cause like terrorism" (Moeller, 2002, p. 39).

Consumers of U.S. news media are likely all too familiar with the names Natalee Holloway and Elizabeth Smart. These young girls were victims of abduction and for some their stories are ingrained in America's national consciousness. This is mostly because their stories appeared pervasively within news coverage. A Proquest News and Newspaper query of their names as keyword search terms resulted in over 4,000 published stories from U.S. outlets on both Smart's abduction, captivity, and release and Holloway's untimely disappearance and assumed demise (as of October 2019). These individual abductions received nearly 70 percent more coverage in U.S. media than hundreds of missing girls.

Ordinarily, about 750,000 missing persons are reported annually in the United States (Kepple, Epstein, & Grisham, 2014). Roughly 50 percent of those reported missing are white females. And though blacks only make up 14 percent of the national population, they represent more than 30 percent of those cases. In fact, blacks in the United States are statistically overrepresented among the missing (Kepple et al., 2014) and often underreported in news media

(Min & Feaster, 2010). Black missing persons (and generally missing men) normally gain less attention or media coverage. When coverage of their missing status is featured in news programming, the coverage is sparse and of a more minimized intensity in comparison to their white, female counterparts (Sommers, 2016). In their 2010 study on nationally televised news coverage of missing children, Min and Feaster (2010) cite racial bias and well-documented favorability toward whites as a reason for African American underrepresentation in televised news coverage. Other scholars who have observed this phenomenon have coined the phrase “Missing White Woman Syndrome” or MWWS to describe it (Liebler, 2010; Moss, 2019; Sommers, 2016; Stillman, 2007). Because there are limited theoretical contributions and little empirical data to explain the perceived disparity in coverage, MWWS has been used to rationalize the disproportionate dominance of young white women in U.S. news coverage of abductions (Sommers, 2016). Regarding the racial implications of MWWS, Bonilla-Silva (2012) describes the inequity in coverage as an inconspicuous norm that reflects white supremacy.

Previous studies on abduction suggest gender may also be a primary influence on how the missing are covered in news. Stillman (2007) argues that news stories that focus on missing women rely on the damsel in distress trope. This metaphor illustrates women and girls as helpless and in need of saving by men. And although women are normally underrepresented in news coverage (Lens-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson, & Yoon, 2005), when women are included, “they are frequently framed as victims who are passive and dependent” or fragile in nature (Min & Feaster, 2010, p. 209). This could be a reason why Nigeria’s missing Chibok girls had great resonance in U.S. news media. Both gender and age represent unique attributes regarding the Chibok kidnapping. In news, children are generally framed as being more vulnerable than adults (Min & Feaster, 2010). Media obsession with the youthfulness and sexuality of young girls (Hartley, 1998) also plays a role in mass media systems subconsciously eroticizing girlhood (Min & Feaster, 2010). The objectification of young girls has origins in the 1955 novel, *Lolita*. After the novel’s debut, the name *Lolita* became culturally synonymous with seductive characterization. The book’s title and plot also gave rise to: *Lolita Syndrome* and *Lolita Complex*, “the first denoting the secret longings of middle-aged men for young girls, the second denoting a pathologic desire for underage girls” (Murphy-Keith, 2013, p. 87). Many of the relevant headlines and stories on the subject matter explicitly describe them as girls, schoolgirls, and kidnap victims. This premise also might explain the limited coverage on a group of boys who were also victimized by Boko Haram. In February 2014, several months before the Chibok girls were kidnapped, the extremist group raided a boarding school and murdered 40-59 students aged 11-18. Rothman (2014) describes the gruesome details around their torment: “Some of the students were gunned down as they attempted to flee. Others had their throats slit. In some buildings, Boko Haram militants locked the doors and set the building alight. The occupants were burned alive” (para. 7).

Months after the Chibok girls were kidnapped, Boko Haram kidnapped over 300 boys from a town called Damasak. They were held hostage in a school, driven away from their parents and have yet to be recovered (Hinshaw & Parkinson, 2016). Two years after peak coverage on

Chibok's missing girls, reports surfaced from the Wall Street Journal about the group's involvement in abducting 10,000 boys over the last several years (Hinshaw & Parkinson, 2016). The boys were recruited, trained, starved, drugged, tortured, and sent out to fight. In the previous examples, the double standard of gender alludes to the idea that young boys are not in need of saving and, therefore, their killings and abductions are not as newsworthy. Not even their vulnerable status as children created opportunity for an exception.

Methods

Data source

A Proquest news and newspaper database search using the words "Nigeria" and "Kidnapped girls" yielded iterations of Chibok coverage and kidnapping updates in more than 2,000 stories among several U.S. daily newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Though an issue of strong debate, *The New York Times* has a long history and reputation of being considered a paper of record (Zelizer, Park, & Gudelunas, 2002). Because of the outlet's numerous awards and reputation as a paper of high quality (Kim & Chung, 2017), reporting in this newspaper drives the national and international news narrative (Van Belle, 2010); thus, analysis will focus on news stories published in *The New York Times*.

Stories about the Nigerian kidnapping first emerged in *The New York Times* on April 16, 2014 (Nossiter, 2014a) and the coverage continued even after semi-successful rescue efforts. As of October 2019, the last story on the girls to appear in the publication was April 15, 2019 (Searcey, 2019), five years after the abduction. After conducting the Proquest query mentioned above using search dates that spanned from April 16, 2014, to April 16, 2019, the result included 120 articles. Of those articles, 10 were excluded because they were completely unrelated to the topic, an additional four short briefs were removed, and tangential story types that used the Chibok kidnapping as more of a footnote to highlight more broad issues (i.e., investing in global education for girls and fanatical terrorism) also were removed. The final analysis included 92 stories.

Approach to data analysis

This study employs directed qualitative content analysis to identify subthemes that emerge from the news coverage (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Generally, a directed approach to qualitative content analysis requires the researcher to select a conceptual or theoretical framework to inform data analyses. This helps broaden said framework by applying constructs or concepts through the systemic application of an analytic strategy. Therefore, to evaluate how narrative elements are reflected in the designated news coverage, the researcher used the villain-victim-hero narrative

components commonly used in NPF as a coding frame to assess stories for evidence of narrative storytelling strategy.

Results and discussion

Analysis focused on characteristics linked to three previously selected narrative character components (victim, villain, and hero) generated the following subthemes: the victim (the perfect casualty, familial angst); the villain (the triad of terror as a global evil); and the hero (American Superpower, Hashtag Hero, Black Girl Martyr).

The perfect casualty: Primed for victimhood

International development policy has influenced U.S. attitudes toward girls in foreign countries. Over the last 40 years, practitioners and institutions in the development world have positioned “advocacy efforts that seek to enhance the well-being of girls” (Khoja-Moolji, 2017, para. 2). Policy narratives around the value of investing in girls’ education were a major focal point in some of the New York Times coverage since educating girls is seen as a practical solution to expansive issues such as poverty and terrorism (Khoja-Moolji, 2015b).

In 2012, the United Nations began observing International Day of the Girl Child to raise awareness of gender inequities young girls face worldwide, including child marriage, but most notably access to education (Bailey, 2016). Professionals in the development sector believe educating girls is the solution to eradicating global poverty (Paddison, 2017). No matter the socioeconomic background, education can serve as a way to escape poverty and lead to self-made opportunities (Mugabe, Brug & Catling, 2016). In a 2014 report from the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, girls’ education in over 30 foreign countries was described as being under siege and constantly threatened by violence and oppression (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2014). Because scholarship and learning are viewed as valuable, educational institutions are held in high regard as sacred institutions (Meyer, 1977). The fact that the Chibok girls were kidnapped from a school is symbolic of the vulnerability girls face globally in the quest for education. It also connotes the uncivil qualities ascribed to an organization (Boko Haram) that would ignore the hallowed nature of safe spaces. The idea of education as a path toward social mobility is directly connected to the metaphorical bootstrap ideal, which alludes to people’s ability to improve their own lives. This ideology is a hallmark of U.S. culture (Grove & Montgomery, 2003). But in the context of Boko Haram, education is emblematic of Western imperialism. And in spite of being based in an economically depressed area of Nigeria (Agbiboa, 2013), one of the group’s primary interests is challenging Western cultural invasion (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012). The term Boko Haram is a roughly translated Hausa phrase meaning “Western education is forbidden/a sin.”

Familial angst

Though it is natural to focus on the girls, the less obvious victims in this story are the girls' family members. There are stories that describe a pain that persists from uncertainty (Searcey & Akinwotu, 2018). Through it all, the parents rejoiced over long-awaited reunions (Associated Press, 2017), or they consoled themselves while waiting for lists, photos, or any indication that their daughters were dead or alive (Searcey, 2017a). Those who did have the fortune of their children being returned were again jolted by their daughters being snatched into government custody for weeks of debriefing and counseling (Searcey, 2018). The five-year timeline encapsulates the deep ups and downs: their teary-eyed dismay over taunting threats by Boko Haram videos, moments of renewed faith (Sawab & Searcey, 2017) in the Nigerian government, and emotional atrophy (Nossiter, 2014b). This anguish is further complicated by an interjection of numerous first world heroes they assume will swoop in and save the day. The parental despair is summed in a devastating quote: "Honestly, I am so desperate, if the Americans were to colonize, I say so be it," one family member said. "Our people are dying like flies" (as cited in Nossiter, 2014b, para. 29).

The Triad of Terror as a global evil: Villain construction

In the context of this complex and ongoing epic, Boko Haram, Islam, and terrorism function as a villainous trifecta. Published articles describe all three in ways that insinuate barbaric and savage notions. Authors used words such as Islamic Extremists and militant insurgents to portray them. There are also quite a few references to the forbidden wildness of the Sambisa forest, where the group set up camp. In fact, a description in *The Wall Street Journal* (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017) of Boko Haram's leader and this story's symbolic antagonist nearly reads like a work of fiction:

Abubakar Shekau, a bearded and bellowing cleric, burned with anger and wrath, propagating an apocalyptic vision...Shekau redirected Boko Haram into the countryside, shedding its reclusiveness in favor of a full-blown insurgency. His army commandeered tanks and anti-aircraft guns from the military and exacted revenge on communities that resisted them. (para. 36)

Stories about videos from Shekau mention him vowing to sell the girls into slavery and or marry off girls as young as 12 to members of Boko Haram (Searcey, 2017b). Language of this kind perpetuates a mythologized status of evil synonymous with a villain.

For U.S. audiences, the War on Terrorism became etched into national memory after the September 2001 attacks at the U.S. World Trade Center. These attacks symbolize a watershed moment in U.S. history and mark a drastic shift in U.S. attitudes and policy narratives regarding global terrorism; these changes signal an increased sensitivity to acts of terror (Cho et al., 2003). The attacks exposed the emergence of Al Qaeda and a collaborative network of terrorism across many countries including Sudan, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Yemen. As a result of this disclosure, policy makers embraced diverse perspectives in coverage of international news to

satisfy a more obvious public need (Wanta et al., 2004). Groups and individuals responsible for terroristic acts exist as a threat to the United States' theoretical ideal of freedom and democracy (Tilly, 2004). For some, Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden are synonymous with Islamic extremism and coordinated efforts of senseless violence. Bin Laden and the organization were accused of stockpiling weapons of mass destruction and organizing mass scale casualties (Baker, Cooper, & Mazzetti, 2011). Similarly, Boko Haram and the Chibok kidnapping represent the same phantom threat of terrorism exacted upon the United States. Both groups are described as being fueled by anti-Western ideals, and they exist in direct opposition to U.S. conceptions of freedom and global security. Boko Haram's involvement in the Chibok kidnapping likely resonated with U.S. creators and consumers of news because the story appeals to America's aggressive goal of squelching evil terrorism worldwide (Benjamin, 2017) and making sure the bad guy is brought to justice (Zhou et al., 2011).

Hero construction

An interesting element of this storytelling character type is that there is no obvious, singular hero ideal. The hero is varied and represented by different groups that constantly shift. Some stories attribute their successful release to the Nigerian government in collaboration with enigmatic Swiss operatives. Nigerian lawyer and activist Zannah Mustapha was instrumental in negotiating their release (Adegoke & Idowu, 2017), along with independent blogger Ahmad Salkida (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017). In addition to those figures, news stories characterized a few other heroes including the United States, other global powers, and the girls themselves.

American Superpower

Much of the language in reporting on the Chibok girls codified symbols of U.S. identity. Headlines and blurbs were peppered with descriptive words such as liberated or freed from Boko Haram. These words have meaning that is commonly associated with the United States. The national identity is linked to its assumed role as an international do-gooder and key player in helping to resolve social ills on a global scale (Gay, 2014). Koh (2003) describes the United States as a model superpower with "exceptional global leadership and activism...willing to commit real resources and make real sacrifices to build, sustain, and drive...the promotion of human rights" (p.1487). As a core country in a vastly globalized world, the United States is in some ways expected to demonstrate leadership through global governance. The country's economic wealth and power obligate it to protect vulnerable populations of other countries and intervene when necessary (Gay, 2014). This obligation necessitates having a significant role in the matters of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries of the Global South. Sometimes the United States fulfills this duty through humanitarian efforts and international development, an idea that evolved from the formation of the Peace Corps (Petersen, 2011). Additionally, the U.S. media's commitment to reporting on Nigeria's missing girls also functions as a form of public diplomacy by communicating reputational cues and America's ideological conceptions of

freedom and justice. These items are essential to the foundation of the national narrative. In one story, U.S. President Obama even essentializes the need for U.S. newsmakers to remain vigilant in amplifying this story:

by keeping memories alive, by telling stories, by hearing those stories, we can do our part to save lives. I think drop by drop by drop that we can erode and wear down these forces that are so destructive, that we can tell a different story. (para. 5)

This charge was taken on by journalists and U.S. based film creatives too. Though a fictionalized heroic account, the hugely successful film *Black Panther* opens with a secret mission to rescue a group of women from several gun toting men, wandering Nigeria's Sambisa forest. But this charge did not just stop at stories. The U.S. government sent "a rapid-response team of roughly 40 officials...to the U.S. embassy...including CIA analysts, two of the FBI's top hostage negotiators and a therapist to treat the girls upon their return" (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017, para. 84). Officials swooped in with drone technology that helped gather and share information about Boko Haram's movements with the Nigerian government. Actions by the United States set the precedent, encouraging others in the global community, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and China, to become engaged in rescue efforts (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017).

In addition to offering resources for girls' return, the United States was also valuable in their resettlement. Shortly after their escape, dozens were awarded funding to attend the American University of Nigeria Academy, an exclusive college in northeast Nigeria (Abimboye, 2014). An African-American millionaire volunteered to sponsor school fees for about 20 of the girls (Nsehe, 2016). Two groups of girls were even sent to Christian boarding schools in rural areas, including Virginia's Mountain Mission and Canyonville Christian Academy, a school run by former White House adviser Doug Wead (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017).

Though perceived as well-intentioned, some scholars suggest these acts are simply political strategies for the purpose of bargaining for power and control (Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Others have even implied that coverage of this kind signifies imperialistic notions by highlighting the incompetence of African leadership in managing their own national affairs (Scott, 2009). However, this allegation is not completely unfounded. Even after negotiations, many of the girls still remain missing and Nigeria's president at the time, Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan, was highly criticized for his role in managing the issue. Native Nigerians have been fault-finding in their assessment of the government's slow rescue response to the Chibok kidnapping and other acts of terrorism that have occurred since (Gopep & Searcy, 2018). And eventually heroic actions by the United States were met with resistance: "Soon, the Nigerians stopped returning American phone calls. 'We had to tell them: Obama is not our president! You're not in Washington now,' said one official" (as cited in Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017, para. 135).

Inefficiencies in Nigeria's government could have helped lay the groundwork for this saga's exposition, while also being the cause of Boko Haram's unruliness. The group's origins are linked to economic distress. Overdependence on oil created a decline in some of the traditional agricultural sectors in the northern region, disrupting and neglecting the local economy. With a lack of jobs and economic stimulation, crime and lawlessness increased (Thomson, 2012). To

cope with growing hardship, community leaders instituted Sharia law, set up Islamic learning centers, and began spreading a fundamentalist version of Islam (Blanchard, 2016). Bound by religion and in opposition of a secular government that destabilized their economy, Boko Haram flourished and this is due in part to poor national governance.

In the previous passage, U.S. intentions operate in a way that confuses the clarity of a hero role by insinuating a surreptitious anti-hero role. All the same, coverage of Nigeria's Chibok girls reinforces the strength of American power by communicating and framing U.S. identity as a powerful, yet empathetic hero.

Hashtag heroes

News of Nigeria's missing girls gained great national and international attention after a message from U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama went viral. Obama tweeted a photo of herself holding a sign that read #BringBackOurGirls. More than just the first black family in the White House, the Obamas pioneered a fresh way of communicating with the public, as the first sitting president and first lady to hold social media accounts. Although Obama did not create the original hashtag, the viral tweet became viewed as a critical diplomatic gesture, a novel act of digital activism, and a strong expression of unified solidarity. The tweet was also seen as a social call to action that further mobilized digital advocates and amplified the story's value in U.S. news media. Obama's use of language from the hashtag connotes an intimate connection to the missing girls that would likely elicit a sense of compassion. This sentiment was reinforced in a Mother's Day speech, where Obama said she and President Obama saw their own daughters in the missing girls (Loken, 2014). In reaction to Obama's actions, the U.S. public became deeply interested in Nigeria's missing girls as a newsworthy humanitarian issue globally and in U.S. media, setting the stage for strong digital advocacy.

Loken (2014) posits that Obama's reference to Nigeria's kidnapped schoolgirls as our daughters too is an example of the United States engaging in imperial dynamics. Being claimed by a political figure that represents the highest office in the country helped legitimize their status as victims of terror, making them even more worthy of attention and protection because of U.S. influence (Loken, 2014).

In addition to endorsement from a high-profile figure, the story's salience was largely driven by everyday people engaging in hashtag activism. This was very influential in raising the issue's profile and meant to pressure action from the Nigerian and U.S. government (Khoja-Moolji, 2015a). Various digital communities rallied behind the viral hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls, progressing the discussion on Twitter (Olson, 2016).

Active civic engagement is indicative of U.S. identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). This brand of digital mobilization has been lauded for encouraging more civic unity (Dahlgren, 2009). As a social platform, Twitter is a product of U.S. ingenuity and innovation (Carlson, 2011) that is intrinsically embedded within the United States' projected image of democracy. Using Twitter, U.S. citizens, motivated by the character qualities embedded in news-produced narratives, expressed heroic empathy through hashtag activism. This is an example of audiences directing

news flow (Nelles, 1997), which further reflects a national democratic image. This activism also implies the power of people in the United States to initiate change. Tweets and retweets about the abduction were instrumental in Nigeria's missing girls maintaining prominence in U.S. news.

Black Girl Martyr

In continuing with the build of a climactic narrative, “the vulnerable and innocent protagonist's survival” occurs in spite of hardship, villainy, and threat of corruption (Hovdestad, Hubka, & Tonmyr, 2009; Zhou et al., 2011, p. 8). As details emerged about the horrors they endured, the public survivors from the group shift into hero status. Some articles described harrowing escape stories. Other outlets depicted the girls as unyielding in their fight to record their own torment in hidden journals, a detail that references another well-known survivor narrative icon—Anne Frank. One news article discussed their desperation for food (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017):

As they moved from camp to camp, food became scarce. The Chibok girls chewed tree bark as they waited for meals that never came. They used plastic bags to lift sips of water from muddy puddles, sometimes going thirsty for up to four days. (Naomi) Adamu had a long-running kidney condition, which brought physical agony. “We were left to eat grass,” she said. (para. 156)

Another threat to their survival was in their decision to rebuff forced religious conversion by members of Boko Haram. As a primarily Christian area in a region dominated by Islam, Chibok exists as a place of refuge and a target. When propositioned about converting, a number of the girls resisted even at the peril of rape, violence, forced marriage, deprivation, and sexual bondage (Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2017). Through these examples there is some sense of agency in the bravery they exhibit and a steadfast unwillingness to compromise. This display of courage is in line with Inner Strength, one of eight levels ascribed to a flawed hero experience that denotes the character's transformation (Ohler, 2008).

Ironically the resilience that was once championed in stories made some social pariahs. As the years went on and some girls trickled back into communities with children fathered by terrorists, community members suspected they were merely traitorous decoys, sent to finish the job (Searcey, 2017b). In fact, some of innocence portrayed is completely flipped; the young girls and women who at one point came of age in torture were believed to be proteges of evil, still loyal to their captors. Published stories of young girls being forced to reenter their communities as suicide bombers (Searcey, 2016, 2017b) complicated the veteran status they initially experienced.

Conclusion

In a country such as the United States, where nearly 250,000 missing black people are severely underreported annually, it is with great surprise that abduction in a culturally and geographically distant country took precedence in U.S. news coverage. The absurdly large number of abductees,

the strange cast of characters, and gripping details likely made the narratives easily adapted for U.S. readership.

As a dominant sphere of public influence, the media play a significant role “in affecting perceptions of the importance of an issue [and] creating master narratives” (Christiano, 2017, p. 8). This is evidenced by European historical literatures that have weaponized the storytelling tradition against African cultures. An example is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, which constructed and proliferated the fictional appeal of Africa as the dark continent (Bassil, 2011; Miller et al., 2013).

Narrative storytelling is a powerful tool that can be broadly applied to human learning by educating children and adults (Edosomwan & Peterson, 2016). Regarding Nigeria’s missing girls, journalists and news organizations were able to employ this technique to spur interest in this tragic real-life tale. Their work helped reduce the moral distance between sufferers and consumers of that suffering, encouraging a dismissal of the bystander approach and restoring ownership of other suffering through unified public outrage (Zhou et al., 2011). Continuing to tell the story has been a useful call to action that has kept this story present in the public conscience.

The challenge with this technique is that journalists who engage in it deal with the dilemma of potentially compromising objectivity, an underlying ethic in the field (Harbers & Broersma, 2014). Also, narratives can present the reduced version of a complex story. In some ways, journalistic news narratives transformed 276 young girls into a unidimensional, and at times oversimplified, understanding of what it means to be a kidnap victim and survivor or a pawn to be traded for territorial power. An advantage to this method is that it can make culturally distant struggles easier to understand and remember, but potentially at the risk of exploiting the characters involved, further institutionalizing distorted truths in the public’s social memory.

If PIC truly “is a special form of communications whose unique role is taking on the world’s demons and inequities” (Christiano, 2017, p. 6) as a public social good, then certainly Western news outlets used published accounts to slay a global metaphorical dragon that refuses to die—terrorism. However, it can never be known how this incident would have turned out had the news coverage not occurred and the social media blitz not taken place. Still, there is no doubt journalists who creatively reported on these stories tapped into something that transcends.

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