

Anti-Sudanese Prejudice in the Media

AUTHOR: ANTON LIN

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“Journalism...should reflect both positive and negative aspects of human activities and expose potential constructive solutions to important challenges.”

*Reporters Without Borders*¹

“Journalism should also attempt to fairly represent varied viewpoints and interests in society and to place them in context”

*American Press Institute*²

In exposing the atrocities that all parties agree have occurred in Darfur,³ the international community, and media especially, have played an important role that has saved countless lives. The divestment campaign and Save Darfur movements that developed in the early 2000s were informed by media reports of what was happening, and in turn provided the media with more information. The Enough Project’s work on tracing funding sources had a huge impact on US government policy towards Sudan sanctions. All of those involved in exposing what was happening have the right to be proud of their work.

However, certain narratives and ways of categorizing Sudanese news have developed over the last fifteen years in a way that is now prejudicial. To begin with, fixing certain aspects of the narrative removes agency from the lives of Sudanese people as they live their own stories each day. Explicit prejudice is rare, and usually lacks impact for being so easy to identify. Procedural biases are harder to spot and so can be much more pernicious.

Collectively, all of these mechanisms generate a dynamic of prejudice against many aspects of Sudanese life. Individual examples for each of these types of prejudice are shown below. It is important to understand that the following discussion is not intended to discredit the vital work these outlets (and even the articles cited) perform, but to show how even professional and fair-minded global institutions have succumbed to subtle bias in reporting.

¹ (Reporters Without Borders)

² (American Press Institute, n.d.), drawing from the Elements of Journalism

³ Bashir himself has acknowledged that many have died in Darfur, though he disputes the UN figures and said at a September 2006 press conference it was ‘only 10,000’. There are no agreed figures for deaths there, though by 2008 the UN put the figure at 300,000 (Holmes, 2008).

It may well be that the insinuations or preferences of these commentators are correct (excluding any that are overtly prejudicial in any way) in that they align with Sudanese people's desires. That does not give international commentators, however, the right to achieve their ends through prejudice. Fair process and a proper threshold of evidence are integral parts of the truth and reconciliation process, while prejudice is not.

This essay uses the portrayal of the RSF in the media as a case study. The RSF has not necessarily been treated with more prejudice than other institutions in Sudan, but due to its current prominence it provides a clear example of the issue.

Appropriation of Agency

The frameworks of analysis that helped mobilize millions of uninformed western citizens have not evolved as events have moved on. The application of old narratives to new events and people removes agency from the Sudanese and reserves it for international commentators.

The early demands for the Sudanese government to stop the atrocities have developed into a general sense of entitlement. Non-Sudanese media outlets and think tanks have granted themselves the right to make continuous and quite detailed normative demands on modern Sudanese life and government – Human Rights Watch has explicitly enumerated not just outcomes but mechanisms it demands of Sudan.⁴ When these points of view remain as suggestions, they are a welcome part of the dialogue between an international community and one of its peoples. However, when they demand sanctions, arrests, decide who can and cannot form governments, and take it upon themselves to prioritize certain lives over others, they impact real lives without any democratic right, or experience, to do so.

The Daily Beast, in June 2019, published an article condemning US foreign policy for engaging with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia that were supporting the TMC governing Sudan. The article disapproved of the US taking into consideration the order the TMC provided Sudan.⁵ In fact, within two months of that article, the TMC had handed power over to civilian-majority Sovereignty Council.

The families of those Sudanese killed in civilian-on-civilian violence on 29th December that year, or the residents of Khartoum affected by the mutiny of NISS agents on January 14th, 2020 might or might not want a removal of the stabilizing forces governing Sudan today. The point is that such decisions belong to the people of Sudan, and as is evident from the power transition,

⁴ (Human Rights Watch, 2019) provides a detailed eight-bullet point list of what exactly the government of Sudan should do, even telling the Prime Minister how he 'should' manage some of his committees.

⁵ (Lynch, 2019)

many international actors simply do not know enough about what is happening to make accurate forecasts or prescriptive demands.

Explicit Prejudice

Examples of explicit prejudice are rare in the western media but do persist. The Independent wrote of an interview with Hemeti that ‘this rare interview took place within Hemedti’s residence in the capital, where he sat on a tiffany-blue gilt sofa of nail-salon decadence’.⁶ That type of furniture is a social norm among many Sudanese, including the expatriate community. Gold-gilt furniture is a cultural phenomenon. The deprecating comparison to a nail-salon was a cultural put-down; do all Sudanese with gold-gilt furniture live in homes that look like nail-salons? Is Sudanese culture in general decadent?

An opinion piece in Foreign Policy about Hemeti ends with the line ‘flooring the monster may require more than unarmed protesters’.⁷ It is ambiguous whether ‘more than unarmed protesters’ is a call to violence, or something else. Ambiguous language that leaves room for violent interpretation, especially when from a respected expert such as Tubiana, is itself unwelcome.

Less ambiguous is that describing the transition of Hemeti out of politics as ‘flooring the monster’ places Hemeti firmly in a psychological out-group, to which certain things can be done with lesser moral implications. These tactics of highlighting otherness were used throughout history and especially in the twentieth century as part of the isolation of targets for violence.⁸ Though such literary devices may seem of limited severity, in the context of genocide in Sudan, such language is dangerous.

Procedural Bias - Nomenclature

Use of the term ‘Janjaweed’ to describe current Sudanese actors and institutions is one of the most common ways of denigrating them without having to provide any evidence. Many nuances surround the establishment of the RSF in 2013, for example, as detailed in the timeline published elsewhere in this volume. Numerous different militia groups were brought together in it. The era of the Janjaweed was the late 1990s and early 2000s – many current RSF members were not born then and will have had relatives die at the hands of the Janjaweed. Global Witness, a well-funded NGO that is aware of these differences, nevertheless simplified the

⁶ (Trew, 2019)

⁷ (Tubiana, 2019)

⁸ (Cooper, 2009 p. vii) ‘The process of ‘creating the Other’ does play an important role in defining groups subject to genocide’

narrative to a distorted extreme, writing of ‘the RSF and their predecessors, the Janjaweed’.⁹ Not ‘its predecessors’, at an institutional level, but ‘their predecessors’, at the level of the individuals within the RSF.

‘Janjaweed’ is an informal term used to describe, collectively, certain non-state militias in Darfur from twenty years ago. The formal organ of government, the officially-named RSF, was set up partially to curtail the actions and influence of the Janjaweed. Young RSF soldiers today do not bear responsibility for the crimes, sometimes against their own family members, committed by other people before they were born.

Procedural Bias - Evidence and Selection

Human Rights Watch enumerates¹⁰ a list of allegations against the RSF, to which it then appends the statement ‘The government has also used RSF to interdict migrants and refugees’. It omits to mention that the RSF did this as part of an EU-funded program, at the request of the EU.

Similar occurrence of juxtaposition and omission is found in BBC reporting. On July 12th, 2019, the BBC uploaded a long video to their Africa page in which they detailed the events of June 3rd through social media footage and narration.¹¹ In this video, after showing a man accuse Hemeti of being behind the violence, a section on Hemeti is presented, suggesting by juxtaposition that he may well have been responsible. No mention is made, during the detour into Hemeti’s background, to a video posted on the same page by the BBC a week earlier that showed civilians celebrating the agreement that had just been made in Khartoum.¹² That agreement installed Hemeti as deputy head of state. This video, showing a more positive sentiment about Hemeti, received no narration from the BBC.

The wider media have performed similar acts of selection. An article in Middle East Eye from June 1st, 2019 (two days before the massacre) reported that Colombia, the area at the end of the protests used for drugs, was ‘totally lawless’ and had been criticised by some protesters themselves.¹³ The article confirms that the RSF had asked people to move out of it long before raiding it, and the SPA had extended this request to the protesters in advance of June 3rd. However, no reference to these facts feature in any of the international coverage after June 3rd.

⁹ (Global Witness, 2019)

¹⁰ (Human Rights Watch, 2019)

¹¹ (BBC News, 2019), ‘Sudan’s livestream massacre’

¹² (BBC News, 2019), ‘Sudanese civilians celebrate power-sharing deal’

¹³ (Amin, 2019)

Procedural Bias - Balanced Conclusions

Global Witness released a widely read report in 2019 looking at the funding and independence of the RSF.¹⁴ It identified a company named Tradive as a front company for the RSF, and claimed to have evidence that the RSF sent Tradive 50 million dirhams, 48 million dirhams of which Tradive then sent back to the RSF. This net loss of two million dirhams to the RSF was then held up to be proof that Tradive was funding the RSF.

Clearly the evidence presented proves the opposite - it is the other way around, as the RSF on this evidence has paid Tradive two million dirhams. It is very reasonable for taxpayers to ask why government institutions might be engaging with private companies, and specifically which ones. But drawing the conclusion that the RSF paying a private company money is evidence per se of that company funding the RSF does not follow.

Returning to the BBC video of July 12th, Hemeti's defence to the accusations that he was involved in the June 3rd events is presented;¹⁵ he claims other government agencies were wearing RSF uniforms, and that he had arrested a number of people who had been doing so. The BBC narrator then follows with her own rebuttal, that the BBC had spoken with two people whose identities were not independently verified but who claimed to be RSF perpetrators of the violence. The news story thus provides evidence supporting either claim. The inability to verify the sources could indeed be because the men were not from the RSF, as Hemeti claimed. Or, it is possible that the men were telling the truth and were involved in RSF atrocities. But the segment concludes as a statement of fact that it was the RSF and ends the matter there.¹⁶

If interviews with two people whose provenance cannot be verified counts as definitive evidence, then that standard would have to be applied across all BBC reporting. However, when two Russians were interviewed in 2018 and claimed to have been visiting Salisbury Cathedral to appreciate the spire (in relation to the Skripal poisoning), the BBC described their version of events as 'flat denial mixed with mockery'.¹⁷

In order to make its judgement the BBC used passport, CCTV and other evidence from the security services that the story of the two Russians was not true. In the June 3rd article no such evidence was provided and yet the BBC felt comfortable to pass an equally firm judgement. Evidential burdens are an editorial decision for the BBC and are not in themselves prejudicial. Different standards of proof for different people are prejudicial.

¹⁴ (Global Witness, 2019)

¹⁵ (BBC News, 2019), 'Sudan's livestream massacre', 13 minutes and 55 seconds

¹⁶ Ibid., 15 minutes and 49 seconds

¹⁷ (BBC News, 2018)

Summary

More international media coverage of events in Sudan is required, not less. Breadth of coverage balances out procedural biases and helps inform the judgement of the individuals writing about Sudan. It also provides more information on all aspects of any matter, which in turn increases the accuracy of the reporting.

An important step in this journey is treating the Sudanese as normal people, entitled as a matter of course to the full spectrum of human characteristics. Coverage at present is sensationalised, with even furniture being used to make the stories seem other-worldly. However extreme the conditions of recent years, and whatever journalistic tropes were warranted to awaken global awareness of the atrocities of the past, times have changed. At the crux of the issues surrounding media coverage of Sudan today is agency; this essay has argued that agency is being withheld from the Sudanese by the international community.