

## Representation of Somalia in Western media: The case of BBC and piracy

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**Abstract:** This article intends to examine the way Somalia is represented by Western media like BBC to normalize and legitimate Western military presence in the coastal water of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy. Hence the article approaches BBC online news through the critical discourse analysis. This is done in order to disclose the normalization traditions in the discourse of the news agency. Seemingly, this study aims to uncover how superior-subordinate power duality works on BBC online news reports. The paper tries to look at how the depiction of Somalia as ‘an inert fact of nature’ normalizes the involvement of Western military power to establish hegemony in Somalia, in particular, and in the region of the Horn, in general. The purpose is to understand how BBC works into ‘othering’ the government and people of Somalia and why it is necessary to depict Somalia and its people as distant ‘other’. Representation and Orientalism are implemented, trying to reveal how BBC serves as an agent of the Eastern world. The ambition of the news agency to normalize and legitimize Western military presence on the coast of Somalia using maritime security discourse as a stepping stone is also taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** piracy, media, representation, Orientalism, Somalia, BBC

### INTRODUCTION

The publication of Edward W. Said’s book *Orientalism* in 1978 helped to study how the representation and Orientalist discourse of the West over the ‘rest’ works to normalize power relation between Orient and Occident. Besides, the work of Said gives ground to understand the

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way Western hegemony framed. In this article we follow to uncover how Western media like BBC tries to conceptualize a distorted image, a generalized image, and how fabricated views over Somalia to normalize the presence of Western military power in the antipiracy movement. Accordingly, the issue of maritime security and the link between pirate groups of Somalia and Islamist militants called the al-Shabab are used as means of normalization and legitimation for Western military presence in Somalia. To question BBC's claim of objectivity and to uncover the Eastern view of the news agency, critical discourse analysis is applied together with representation and Orientalism theories. We selected BBC, because this company "sees its online news service not as a distinct entity but as an integral part of its multi-platform service" (Way 2016, 20; Svendsen 2018, 60-61).

We try to reveal how BBC serves as an agent to build Orientalist images. "Orientalism is an academic area of study, a style of thought, which makes distinctions between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'". As stated by Said "this distinction is not arbitrary but linked to power"; it is "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1978, 5).

Concerning representation, Stuart Hall (1997a; 1997b) argues that "to represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses", or "to represent means to symbolize, to stand for...". The organization of BBC's representation of Somalia is based on this metaphor. Following the intensification of piracy in the coastal water of Somalia Republic, Western military powers began to involve in the counter-piracy activity of this country. Subsequently, to normalize the foreign military involvement, media like BBC began to advocate the value and importance of Western military presence in the region, using maritime security as a base of normalization by depicting Somalia as an 'incapable other' that needs help from outside; possibly from the 'West'. For instance, an article published by BBC, on its online platform, mentions that "since there is failed state..., piracy is a way of earning a good living in Somalia" (BBC News 2012b). The report states the contribution made by the Western military powers like US and EU naval forces, the British Navy, and NATO anti-piracy operation teams. Apart from this, the contribution of states like China, Russia, and Japan is mentioned in the news report. However, the role of regional and continental naval power for the maritime security of the Gulf region is not mentioned. Rather,

the news agency prefers to show the picture of Somalia as one that tells the story of “no food, no money, no resources and hub of terrorist organizations” (Ibid).

Another 2008 BBC article represented Somalia by using pejorative terms like “...piracy has become a way of life for many young Somali as they are not educated and do not know any better life. Many young people do not understand the rule of law”. BBC does not separate the Somali people from pirate groups. Rather, the news agency homogenizes piracy as “a way of life for many in Somalia”. And people are depicted as “no understanding the rule of law” (Rankin 2008).

Other BBC online publication claims that piracy, which is the challenge of international trade, is the “base of Somalia’s economic growth. ...political elites are therefore unlikely to go decisively against piracy and the livelihoods of the local community is dependent on it” (BBC News 2012a). In this expression, BBC tries to depict that the life of the local communities depends on piracy. Does this article try to reveal how BBC’s representation of Somalia normalized the involvement of Western military power on the coastal water of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy in Somalia? How the involvement of Western military power in the counter-piracy of Somalia normalized and got legitimacy? Why Somalia is depicted as weak, drought-affected, lawless, a challenge for international maritime security and an ‘inert other’? Why the people of Somalia are portrayed as collaborator of piracy?

## PHASES AND EVOLUTION OF PIRACY IN SOMALIA

The fundamental cause for the intensification of piracy on the costal water of Somalia in particular, and in the Horn of Africa in general, is frequently debating. Most people have similar perception that piracy in Somalia stems from the poor economic condition in the country in general and the fishermen community of Somalia in particular (Beloff 2013, 47). Even if it is ambiguous to mention when the act of piracy started in the sea coast of Somalia, different evidences indicate that it happened shortly after the removal of Said Barry’s government in 1991 (Eichstaedt 2010).

The evolution of Somalia piracy passes three major stages. The early stage of pirate activity in Somalia began in the 1990s following the end of the Said Barry era. During this stage, the Somalia local fishermen began a small scale attack against foreign fishermen on the

reach and long water coast of Somalia. Concomitantly looking at the 1990s internal instability of Somalia as an advantage, some liners also navigated to its coastal water to dispose of a hazardous waste for a cheap price (Lennox 2008, 8). So, unlike other countries of the region that share the coast of Indian Oceans, the illegal dumping of hazardous West is high in the coastal water of Somalia that in turn exposed the local Somali community to health complication (Najad 2008). The negative health situation together with the negative economic condition have more complicated the life of the community around the sea shores and hardly affected the income of the Somali fishermen and pushed them to launch an assault in response to ransom (Plaut 2005). Particularly the weak political and military capacity of the government of Somalia Republic hindered it to protect the sovereignty of the Somalia water that in turn leads to the augmentation of the involvement of foreign fishermen on the water of Somalia. Subsequently, recurrent clashes between the local and foreign fishermen became a common feature on the sea coast of Somalia Republic (Bell & Lawellin 2017). During the second stage, the size of hijacking mother ships at strategic choke points of the Gulf water of Aden by the Somalia pirates increased. Subsequently, the flow of seaborne commerce became problematic and the piracy activities of Somalia became an international organized crime. Especially since 2005, the issue of Somalia piracy has become one of the major security issues of the commerce of international water. At this stage, the pirate groups of Somalia used mother ships and fast vessels, spokesmen, accountants, logistics coordinators, money transaction network teams, etc; officials also had a role (Lennox 2008). The third stage is the period of the active involvement of the global powers, particularly the 'West', asserting the insecurity of international water on the remote 2300 cost line of Somalia. That being the case, EU naval forces, NATO combined task forces, and US maritime forces began a movement to avert the piracy on the water cost of Somalia. Forces from Russia, China, India, Japan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc. also moved to the geopolitically strategic cost of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden region under the banner of fighting piracy. Concerning the involvement of higher officials, it is asserted that even if the top official of Mogadishu or Hargeisa does not enroll directly on the pirate attacks they support and benefit from piracy indirectly. The assertion and the depiction of the involvement of the Somalia authority seems a pre-calculation to directly involve on the matter rather than

empowering the Somalia Republic or other regional powers like Kenya and Ethiopia to frustrate the intensification of piracy in the region. Another point was the security problem of the Somalia Republic. The piracy helped the Western superpowers to access a geopolitical strategy on the Gulf region as regards a nihilistic and incapable government in Somalia (Møller 2009).

## ANALYSIS

According to Edward Said (1978, 11), “Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, travelers, politicians, media as well as others working within similar discursive formations”. Arturo Escobar also states that media represents Third World with stereotyping terms such as “overpopulation, the permanent threat of famine, poverty, illiteracy, and the like”, which “images just do not seem to go away” easily from the mind of people (Escobar 2011, 12). That being the case, on its online platform publication BBC also tries to play the same role using colonizing terms to portray or to represent and construct Somalia as ‘failed state’ or even as ‘primitive other’, and its people as “no understanding the rule of law and collaborator of pirate groups” (Rankin 2008). There are some reasons for that, among which: to normalize the presence of Western military power in the cost of Somalia using international maritime security as a discourse; to present a dichotomy between West and Africa or the ‘rest’ (Ferguson 2012) and to legitimize the representation of the Western dominance as solver and guardian of the ‘rest’. In order to bring into practice Western hegemony over Somalia and to legalize Western military intervention in Somalia, BBC uses homogenizing and normalizing statements like “piracy is a way of life for many Somali”; “youth in Somalia has no understanding for the rule of law”; “piracy is challenging international maritime security”, “Somalia is a failed state”, etc. (Ibid). BBC tries to maintain this misrepresentation, in view of justifying the Western military presence and hegemony over Somalia – a kind of media myth that maintains confusion through this duality and over-generalization in the world outside the Western one. In place of appreciating the effort and activity of the indigenous, regional and non-Western powers, it is largely engaged the homogenization idea by the news agencies such as BBC in the theme of piracy in Somalia and even of the whole Africa (Way 2016, 29). A

BBC article about the piracy Somalia and the economic growth can be seen:

The night pictures show a significant increase in light emission from Puntland's main center of Garowe and Bosasso. This suggests an increase in electricity consumption because of the economic development in which the base of this economy is piracy (BBC News 2012a).

It would be intellectually wrong to associate the full economic growth of Puntland with piracy. The other amazing and foolish conclusion of the article indicates that the economic growth is measured by one actor, that is, emission of light at night. Therefore, it would be intellectually sluggish to reach into such a homogenized conclusion. But when we came to the main point, this homogenization is not without reason. Rather, BBC, as an agent of the 'Orientalist', intentionally associates the economic growth of Somalia with piracy to legitimize the presence of Western power in the coastal water of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy by categorizing the people of Somalia as a collaborator of pirate groups and direct beneficiary of piracy. No less, BBC portrays Somalia and its people as "an inert fact of nature" (Rankin 2008). We remind Said's expression that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the 'other' as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978, 3). More generally it is the continuation of the hegemonic idea of the 'Orientalist'. It is in this form of discursive homogenization and systematization that Western powers try to colonize reality to normalize their actions and to deeply root their hegemony over the strategic water coast of Somalia and neighboring countries, using counter-piracy and maritime security as a cover. In the considered case, it is hardly to find news agency able to redirect the myth and to demonstrate that Somalia in particular, and Africa in general, is not an inert fact of nature. Actually, through grammatical strategies, based on the discourse of fighting piracy and by creating a certain knowledge about Somalia, the news agency serves as an agent of the 'Orientalist' in legitimizing the subjectivity of the country (Way 2016, 21). For instance, the news agency uses homogenized 'naming' strategy to represent Somalia and its people as an unfamiliar 'other'. According to Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 48), in news reports we fail to name 'social actors' by their identification name, readers understand them as distance 'other' rather than seeing and accepting them as an individual

living in our surrounding. Besides, to legalize and normalize the involvement of Western military power in the costs of Somalia, the news agency warns about a link between pirate groups and Islamist militants from the al-Shabab: “if pirates increase their co-operation with Islamist militants from the al-Shabab groups, piracy could end up funding regional instability and terror. ...land-based response is necessary to tackle piracy of [Somalia]” (BBC News 2012a).

As stated above, while BBC argues the necessity of Western military involvement on the geopolitically strategic coast of Somalia, it mentions the security of international trade on the international maritime as justification. In the Report of 11 March 2008, we read: “piracy is still a worrying problem for maritime security ...largely due to attacks off the Horn of Africa, specifically in Somalia waters or in the territorial waters of Somalia” (Rankin 2008). In the BBC publication of 12 January 2012, it is asserted that the local people are not collaborators of the counter-piracy, and it is difficult to challenge the pirate groups by the ‘failed state’ because of the “popular bases of piracy in the country” (BBC News 2012a). It is an illustration for BBC’s justification of protagonist-antagonist, superior-subordinate, and weak-strong power duality between the ‘West’ and the regional authorities or the ‘rest’ emanated from the intention of domination and legitimating Western hegemony and presence on the strategically important coast of Somalia in particular and the African Horn region in general (Kbiri 2017, 608-609). Related to the protagonist-antagonist duality and the action of Western maritime force, according to Lyndon Way observations based on BBC online news, the Royal Navy of UK and NATO forces are represented as the “protagonist” and maritime security guard by “shooting dead two pirates” (Way 2016, 26); and they are glorified; so, intentionally creating the image of the protagonist on one side, and the “guilty” on the other, as well as to establish and justify Western military presence and hegemony over the strategic coast of Somalia and the Horn of Africa based on maritime security discourse. Thus portraying the ‘West’ as a protagonist and the ‘rest’ as a subordinate is not a matter of coincident during the anti-piracy movement of Somalia. Fairly such kind of representation is an age-old phenomenon of the ‘Orientalist’ against Africa or the ‘rest’ unfolded in a peculiar discursive depiction of the relationship between West and the ‘rest’.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than focusing on the interrogation to improve and strengthen Somalia Republic's broken political situation on the battle against piracy, BBC online news strained to portray Somalia Republic and its people as "an inert fact of nature" and a distant 'other' through associating piracy with the "way of life for the young Somali". We identified part of the main reasons for this kind of discourse, defining an approach of the West and the 'rest'. As we can see, there is a reinforcement of some stereotypes of viewing Orient, which are practiced by the online news. It comes in continuation of the manner "TV, films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds" (Said 1978, 29). Moreover, in the discussed case, the presence of Western military powers on the coastal water of Somalia was articulated and presented positively by portraying them as the sole security agent for maritime security in the fight against piracy. On the other side, the authority of Somalia Republic and its people are represented negatively as collaborators and supporters of piracy. This construction is done aiming to show the sole valid representative and legitimate authority for peace and socio-economic life of the region is done by the Western powers. The representation also reflects the Somalia Republic and other neighboring regional powers in the Horn, but also the other states of Africa and their continental organization (African Union), in general, as incapable 'other/s' that totally rely on Western help to secure the region.

Keeping constant the political breakdown and uncertainty in Somalia Republic since the end of Cold War era (1991), the exotic and stereotyping portray of Somalia people as distant 'other' as well as depicting this society through unfamiliar assertions such as "poor understanding of the rule of law" is nothing but a discourse to show the moral rightfulness and to legitimize the presence of Western powers on the strategically important water cost of Somalia Republic.

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