

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

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Abstract: This article attempts to provide some insight into the way Somalia is represented by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to normalize and legitimize western military presence in the coastline of the Federal Republic of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy. Hence, the article analyzes BBC online news through critical discourse analysis to uncover how superior-subordinate power duality works on BBC online news reports. The article also attempts to look at how the depiction of Somalia as ‘an inert fact of nature’ normalizes the involvement of western military power to establish western hegemony in Somalia in particular and in the Horn of Africa region in general. The article aims to show how BBC coverage works in ‘othering’ the people of Somalia and why such discourse portrays Somalia and its people as distant ‘other’.

Keywords: piracy, media, representation, orientalism, Somalia, Horn of Africa

INTRODUCTION

Following the intensification of piracy in the coastline of the Federal Republic of Somalia (hereafter Somalia) western countries began to involve actively in the counter-piracy activity of Somalia. Specific BBC online news items began to advocate the value of military involvement of western countries in the coastline of Somalia using maritime security arguments as a base of normalization, and depiction of Somalia as ‘incapable other’ that needs help from outside (possibly from western countries). The issue of maritime security and the link

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between pirate groups of Somalia and Islamist militants called the al-Shabab are used in online coverage as means of explanation and legitimatization of western military presence in Somalia.

Based on online reports by the BBC, this article attempts to reveal how media coverage represents the involvement of western military power in the coastline of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy? In other words, how BBC online news attempts to normalize the involvement of western countries in the counter-piracy of Somalia and legitimize their actions? Besides, the article intends to answer the question of why Somalia is depicted as a weak, drought-affected, lawless, and a challenge for international maritime security, and an 'inert other'? The article intends to analyze BBC online news because "the BBC sees its online news service, not a distinct entity, but as an integral part of its multi-platform service" (Way 2016, 20; Svendsen 2018, 60-61). Thus, the article attempts to show how online coverage may serve as an enforcer of orientalist images. Authors of this article are aware that news reports cited in this article do not make a representative and inclusive conclusion about the BBC coverage as a whole or even about the set of news reports of authors under consideration hereafter.

With the help of the theoretical framework of orientalism and representation, the present article attempts to deliver insights into how western media like the BBC use generalized images, and framed views over Somalia to normalize the presence of western military power in Somalia anti-piracy movement.

The publication of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978) helps scholars and practitioners to study how the representation and orientalist discourse of the 'west' versus the 'rest' works to establish power relation between the occident and the orient. Moreover, the work of Said gives ground to understand the way western countries attempt to take control of the 'other'. Orientalism is an academic area of study, an attitude, and manner of behavior which marks a clear difference between the self and the other, between the occident and the orient. As stated by Said this otherness is not random but related to power (Said as cited in Way 2016, 20). Moreover, Said writes that "the relationship between the west and the non-west is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1979, 5).

Concerning representation, Stuart Hall 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.” He adds that “to represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for” (Hall 1997, 15-16). Against this background, the article attempts to shed light on media’s claim of objectivity and to uncover orientalist views.

Following the introduction, the article is divided into four sections including (1) phases of piracy; (2) analysis of specific media online reports; and (3) a conclusion.

PHASES OF PIRACY IN SOMALIA

The fundamental cause for the intensification of piracy in the coastline of Somalia in particular and the Horn of Africa in general is debated in most cases. But most observers have a similar insight 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 date exactly the act of piracy in the coastline of Somalia, different pieces of evidence indicate that piracy began to surface in the coastline of Somalia shortly after the removal of Siad Barre’s government in 1991 (Eichstaedt 2010, 29-30; Percey and Shortland 2010, 2).

The evolution of Somalia piracy passes three major stages. The early stages of pirate activity began in the 1990s following the end of the Siad Barre 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 1990’s internal instability of Somalia as an advantage, some liners also navigated to the coastline of Somalia to dispose a hazardous waste for a cheap price (Laing 2010; Lennox 2008; Menkhaus 2009). So, unlike other countries of the region that share the coast of Indian Oceans the illegal dumping of hazardous waste is high in the coastline of Somalia that, in turn, exposed the local Somali community to health complications (Abdullahi 2008).

The negative health situation together with the negative economic condition increasingly complicated the life of the community around the seashores and harshly affected the income of the Somali fishermen whose life was dependent on fishing activity 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 the protection of the sovereignty of the Somalia water that in turn led to the augmentation of the involvement of foreign

fishermen on the water of Somalia. As a result, recurrent clashes between the local fishermen and foreign fishermen became a common feature on the coastline of Somalia (Bell and Lawellin 2017, 17-18).

During the second stage, the size of hijacking motherships at strategic choke-points of the Gulf of Aden by the Somalia pirates increased. Then, the flow of seaborne commerce became under attack and the piracy activities of Somalia become an international organized crime. The amount of ransom asked by pirates also increased during this stage. Particularly, beginning in 2005 the issues of Somalia piracy become one of the major security issues of the commerce of international water. At this stage, the pirate groups of Somalia began to use motherships and fast vessels, spokesperson, accountant, logistics coordinator, and illegal money transaction networks (Lennox 2008; Middleton 2008).

The third stage is the period of the active involvement of global powers, particularly western countries, asserting the insecurity of international water on the remote 2300 coastline of Somalia. That being the case, the EU-naval forces, NATO combined task forces, and US-maritime forces began a movement to avert the piracy on the coastline of Somalia. Forces from Russia, China, India, Japan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, among others,¹ also moved to the geopolitically strategic coastline of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden region under the banner of fighting piracy.

Western media asserted that top officials in Mogadishu or Hargeisa do not enroll directly on the pirate attacks; they likely support or benefit from piracy. Yet, such assertion regarding the involvement of the Somalia authority seems one explanation to justify foreign involvement instead of empowering Somalia or other regional powers like Kenya and Ethiopia to frustrate the intensification of piracy in the region. Western media also underlined the lack of security in Somalia that made Somalia a safe haven for pirates thus qualifying the involvement of western countries in fighting piracy. The presence of piracy, in turn, helped western countries to access a strategic power base on the geopolitically strategic coast of the Gulf region asserting

¹ For competition of Middle Eastern States in the Horn of Africa region see e.g., Philipp O. Amour, "Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances in the Gulf Region and the Middle East." In *The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East: Regional Rivalries and Security Alliances*, edited by Philipp O. Amour. 2020, pp. 407-434.

the presence of weak government in Somalia (Puchala 2005; Møller 2009).

ANALYSIS

For Edward Said “Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, travelers, politicians, as well as others working within similar discursive formations.” For him, “the West’s representation of the East works within the framework of a conscious and determined effort at subordination” (Shabanirad and Marandi 2015, 23). In this regard, Said also articulates that “making of statement” about the ‘orient’ or ‘rest’ “authorizing view of it”, “describing it” and “settling it” is mainly “for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient” or the ‘other’ (Ibid.)

Regarding the role of media in neutralizing and shaping the interests of orientalists, Said also states that “one aspect of the electronic postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media’s resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds” (1979, 29). In a similar vein, Arturo Escobar states that media represents the developing World with loaded terms such as “overpopulation, the permanent threat of famine, poverty, illiteracy, and the like”; such “images just do not seem to go away” easily from the mind of people (Escobar 2011, 12).

Indeed, different media reports make use of such discursive formations and orientalist representations to explain and reflect on the relationship of the west and the east as well as the actions of the former in the hemispheres of the later. Such reports use the discourse of superior-subordinate power duality in addition to loaded images to normalize western military existence in the coastline of Somalia and to establish western hegemony in the region. Online reports regarding piracy in Somalia make use of such discursive formations and loaded images rooted in weak-strong or superior-subordinate power duality and prejudices between the ‘west’ and Africa or the ‘west’ and the ‘rest’ to explain the presence of western military powers on the coastline of Somalia.

Different BBC online reports argue the necessity of western military involvement on the geopolitically strategic coast of Somalia by pointing out the security of international trade on the international maritime sea. A report (BBC, March 11, 2008) states that “piracy is still a worrying problem for maritime security” and cites this “largely

due to attacks off the Horn of Africa, specifically in Somali waters or in the territorial waters off Somalia". Another online publication (BBC, February 12, 2012) argues that piracy is a challenge of international trade while it is the base of Somalia's economic growth. Thus, "Puntland's political elites are therefore unlikely to move decisively against piracy" hence the livelihood of the local community is dependent on it. Such coverage is problematic from different point-views.

It presents piracy as the foundation of Somalia's economic growth that is a challenge for international trade. It indicates that the local community is not interested in the diminishing of piracy which gives ground to Western involvement in Somalia to put an end to piracy. Media reports tend to report a certain pirate-act committed by a certain group of pirates as if it were committed by the whole Somali people and sometimes even as a problem of the whole African Horn (Way 2013, 29).

An online publication (BBC, March 11, 2008) connects piracy and the youths of Somalia as follows: "piracy has become a way of life for many young Somali men, as they simply do not know any better." One explanation for this reads that "Many young men have no education and no understanding of the rule of law."

Expressions as such recall our attention to Said's expression "that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (1979, 5). More generally it relates to the continuation of the hegemonic idea of the 'orientalist'. It is in this form of discursive homogenization and systematization that western powers try to lay claim to reality to normalize their actions and to deep root their hegemony over the strategic water coast of Somalia and neighboring countries using counter-piracy and maritime security as an explanation.

Such generalization and simplification in the coverage take place not just concerning the relation of Somali people to piracy but also concerning the local economy with piracy as mentioned above. For instance, the following text from a report (BBC, January 12, 2012) argues that: "The night pictures show a significant increase in light emissions from Puntland's main centres of Garowe and Bosasso. This suggests an increase in electricity consumption because of economic development." The report indicates that the economic growth of Puntland is linked to piracy. It also indicates that economic growth is measured by one actor, that is, the emission of light at night. Such

indications seem to explain pirate activities and the dependency of the local economy on piracy. Such coverage tends to enforce orientalist orientations that legitimize the presence of western powers in the coastline of Somalia under the banner of fighting piracy by indicating the people of Somalia as a direct beneficiary of piracy.

Besides, media coverage maintains similar misrepresentation by portraying Somalia as a 'weak' or 'subordinate' state or 'other' to justify western military presence and hegemony over Somalia (Aleñá Naval 2017, 10-11). For instance, a report (BBC, February 21, 2012) describes Somalia as a "failed state" and describes piracy as "one of the few ways of earning a good living in Somalia (...)." Another report (BBC, January 12, 2012) indicates that the local people are not collaborators in the counter-piracy and the pirate groups are difficult to be challenged by the weak state due to the "common support of piracy."

Such coverage does not distinctly separate the Somali people from pirate groups. Rather, news agencies associate piracy as a way of life for many Somali men, who lack not just perspectives but also an understanding of the rule of law. Hence Somali people are represented as not willing and not capable of fighting against piracy, it becomes obvious for the reader of such coverage that it is on Western powers to interfere; hence they are capable and willing to put an end to piracy. This discourse forms and delivers a legitimation for the political elite to interfere on-site.

In such coverage, there is an acute dichotomization of identities including '*otherization*' and misrepresentation by portraying the west as a problem-solver and guardian of the 'rest'. Whereas, the 'rest' is portrayed as the cause and igniter of the problem in focus (Kbiri 2017, 608-609).

As stated above, this indication of the Somali people as a collaborator of piracy is used to justify the necessity of external maritime security guard - possibly from western countries (BBC, March 11, 2008). At this point, it is important to remember, yet again, Said's argument that the relation between the 'west' and the 'non-west' "is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said 1979, 5). Therefore, reports' explanation of protagonist-antagonist, superior-subordinate, and weak-strong power/relation duality between the 'west' and the regional authorities emanated from the intention of normalization and legitimizing of

‘western’ presence on the strategically important coastline of Somalia in particular and the African Horn region in general (Kbiri 2017).

In addition to the above-mentioned ways to normalize and to legitimize the involvement of western powers in the coastline of Somalia news agencies warn the link between pirate groups and Islamist militants from the al-Shabab. For instance, a publication (January 12, 2012) states the following about the risk and the link between pirate groups and al-Shabab: “if pirates increase their co-operation with Islamist militants from the al-Shabab group, piracy could end up funding regional instability and terror.” Thus, a land-based response is regarded as necessary to tackle piracy.

Paying attention to or advocating the empowerment of the local governments of Africa including Somalia in the fight against piracy find less attention in many of these media reports and news cited in this article.

Moreover, to lay claim to reality in Somalia and to portray the west as a protagonist, news reports use abstraction, exclusion, inclusion, naming, and grammatical strategies. Accordingly, based on the discourse of fighting piracy and by creating knowledge about Somalia news reports serve as an enforcer of the ‘orientalist’ in legitimatizing the subjectivity of the country (Way 2013, 21). For instance, news reports use homogenized ‘naming’ strategy to represent Somalia and its people as an unfamiliar ‘other’. According to Theo van Leeuwen, when news reports fail to name ‘social actors’ by their identification name, readers understand them as distant ‘other’ rather than seeing and accepting them as an individual living in our surrounding (Van Leeuwen 1996, 48).

Some online publications express the protagonist-antagonist duality in their coverage of the actions of western maritime force more than others. Following sentences serve as an example “The UK’s Royal Navy shot dead two suspected pirates attacking a Danish cargo-ship off the coast of Yemen.” or “A Royal Navy warship on Nato anti-piracy operations has destroyed two pirate boats in the Somali Basin” (Way 2013, 26). In the above expressions, the Royal Navy of the UK is represented as a protagonist and maritime security guard by shooting dead “two suspected pirates”. The alleged pirates are represented as being shot as antagonists. Besides, the NATO force is represented as a maritime security guard of the region that wrecked the pirate boats.

The action of the Royal Navy and NATO is also marked in the text as ‘shooter’ and ‘destroyer’ (Ibid). Such formulations create the image

of the protagonist on one side (the shooter and destroyer) and guilty on the other (pirates/Somalis) as well as establishes and justifies western military presence over the strategic coastline of Somalia and the Horn of Africa based on maritime security discourse; thus, portraying the 'west' as a protagonist and the 'rest' as antagonist and subordinate. Such coverage is unlikely a coincidence; rather, it is rooted in an 'orientalist' discourse against Africa or the 'rest' (Kbiri 2017). It is through such kind of discursive representation that western powers legitimize their interference in local and regional affairs, and to maintain their hegemony over the 'rest' or Africa.

News Reports underline the role and action of Western actors like the U.S naval force, the EU-naval force, the British navy, and NATO anti-piracy operation teams. To a lesser degree news reports mention the contribution of countries like China, Russia, and Japan. The role of regional and local naval powers for the maritime security of the Gulf region finds less attention.

CONCLUSION

In its online news outlet, specific media reports portray Somalia and its people as "an inert fact of nature" (Said 1979) and distant 'other' through associating piracy as a common custom among the young Somali, and an indication of the Somali people's meager awareness of the rule of law. Such reports constitute a discourse that indicates the moral rightfulness of the protagonists, western powers, to normalize and legitimize their presence and direct involvement on the strategically important coastline of Somalia and the nearby African Horn States.

Different online reports' coverage mirrors discourses rooted in protagonist-antagonist, superior-subordinate, and strong-weak power duality associations between the 'west' and the 'rest'. This coverage usually gives priority for the presence of the 'west' to solve the problem of the other, and less attention to empowering and strengthening the officialdom of Somalia and its people in particular, or neighboring African states in general in the battle against piracy. The presence of western powers in the coastline of Somalia was articulated and presented positively by portraying them in different online reports as the major security agents for maritime security and on the fight against piracy. On the other side, the authority of Somalia and its people are represented negatively as collaborators or supporters of piracy.

This construction intends to show that western powers are the major valid representative and legitimate authority for peace and socio-economic stability and progress of the region while disregarding the rule of local and regional rulers. The representation also reflects, as though, Somalia and other neighboring regional powers in the Horn in particular and the remaining states of Africa and their continental organization, African Union, in general, as incapable ‘other’ that rely on western help to secure the region. Different reports paint the picture of Somalia with no perspectives, lacking food and money, and a hub of terrorist organizations; all of which indicate the necessity for foreign involvement and western intervention.

As mentioned above, this article does not aim to make general assumptions about the BBC coverage as a whole or about the publications cited in this article.

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