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14. **JON SILVERMAN**  
 15. The University of Bedfordshire  
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20. **Mediating identity:**  
 21. **The West African diaspora,**  
 22. **conflict and communication**  
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27. **ABSTRACT**  
 28.  
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31. *Migration raises many existential problems, not least, questions of identity. Over*  
 32. *time, migrants settle and form a diaspora in a new land but does dislocation from*  
 33. *their geographical 'home' inevitably subvert their sense of self? Can representation*  
 34. *through the diasporic media mitigate this loss? The African Union considers the*  
 35. *diaspora the sixth region of Africa and the news media helps foster amongst exiles*  
 36. *an 'imagined diaspora' (Anderson), connecting them to their country of origin. In*  
 37. *the social media age, this 'diaspora of the Internet' (Tettey) can be seen at work, often*  
 38. *acting as a mirror for division and disharmony in the country of origin. Taking a*  
 39. *case study approach of three countries in West Africa and interpreting conflict in*  
 40. *its broadest senses, this article seeks to examine the ways in which the news-related*  
 41. *media of the West African diaspora has influenced understandings of identity.*  
 42.  
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31. **KEYWORDS**

32. diaspora  
 33. media  
 34. conflict  
 35. identity  
 36. West Africa  
 37. migration

45.  
46.  
47. **Introduction**  
 48.

49. Being African is an increasingly complex identity. As someone who has  
 50. been told she is too black to be British, and too British to be African,  
 51. I am strongly against the notion that identity can be policed by some  
 52. external standard.

(Hirsch 2012)

The journalist and author, Afua Hirsch, has good reason to consider notions of identity and belonging. She was born in Britain to a black Ghanaian mother and white British father, whose own father was a Jewish exile from Nazi Germany. Those seeking to pigeon-hole might describe her as an 'Afropolitan', an African born in the diaspora or an African who identifies with both their African and European heritage. (There are various academic contestations of the term 'Afropolitan', which are beyond the remit of this article.)

Another commentator who straddled two cultures, the American-born James Baldwin, who found his unique voice in Paris during the 1950s, was far less nuanced in his analysis of racial identity: 'All you are ever told about being black in this country (the United States) is that it is a terrible thing to be' (Baldwin and Troupe 2014).

The reason for beginning this article with quotes about identity from two writers of different generations is to point up the transformation of the diasporic public sphere in the intervening decades. Baldwin's undoubted influence on American identity politics was shaped by his writing and public speaking, his views sharpened in his formative years by physical distance from his country of origin. In the twenty-first century, Hirsch has a far greater range of communicative tools at her disposal as well as the advantage of occupying a liminal deterritorialized space. When she lived and worked in Ghana for a number of years she was still able to engage regularly, both in British identity debates and issues around African migration and culture, by blogging. It is the influence of this public space on notions of identity, which is the subject of this article.

Diaspora media acts as a kind of hinge between two continents and two heritages and can be highly influential especially in its representation of conflict and upheaval. Yet, at a time when its impact is potentially more far-reaching than ever, the role of this media has been under-researched. Oyeleye (2017: 25) makes the point that, as an umbrella term, 'media of the diaspora' elides importance differences between the 'professionalism' and ethics of journalism and the more free-flowing social media ecology, which has opened up new spaces of communication. Tetey describes the latter as the 'diaspora of the Internet' (2009) and this article is a response to the 'need to problematize the liminality of diasporic engagement with politics and identity in order to be able to analyze the relationships between home and diaspora ...' (Oyeleye 2017: 29).

This inquiry focuses on West Africa because of the geographical proximity of the countries which provide case studies and the similar historical/social divides in two of them and because of the author's own research experiences in that region. Whereas there has been extensive research into the influence of the diaspora on conflict and upheaval in the Horn of Africa, especially Eritrea and Somalia (Chama 2017), comparatively little has been done on the other side of the continent. Through a series of interviews, supplemented by a reading of secondary sources, it aims for a qualitative assessment of diasporic commentary on *inter alia*, party political and ethno-regional divides in Sierra Leone, Liberia's enduring legacies from the nineteenth century, the image of Nigeria abroad and coverage of a war crimes trial and other human rights issues.

### **African diaspora, identity and conflict**

The relationship between diaspora and peace/conflict has been much debated. One strand of argument is that diasporas can play a beneficial role in conflict

1. resolution and peace building through access to donor agencies (Lyons 2004).  
 2. On the other hand, Brinkerhoff sees the potential for diaspora communities  
 3. to 'raise money to support continuing warfare, promote public opinion and  
 4. interventions in support of their cause' (Brinkerhoff 2006: 27). While Anderson  
 5. describes as 'long distance nationalism' the temptation of the disaffected  
 6. diaspora member 'to play identity politics' in the conflicts of his homeland  
 7. (Anderson 1992: 13).

8. Georgiou argues that it is time to move beyond such 'utopian/dystopian'  
 9. distinctions (2013: 81), but this contested ground offers a useful frame in  
 10. which to analyse the relationship of the media of the African diaspora to iden-  
 11. tity formation. A helpful starting point in this quest is Palmer's definition of  
 12. the modern African diaspora as consisting of:

13.  
 14. ... the millions of peoples of African descent living in various socie-  
 15. ties who are united by a past based significantly, but not exclusively, on  
 16. 'racial' oppression and the struggles against it; and who [...] share an  
 17. emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent;  
 18. and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems  
 19. in constructing and realizing themselves.

20. (Palmer 1998: 3)

21.  
 22. However, this definition does not include that element of diaspora conscio-  
 23. usness captured by Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community'. In other words,  
 24. the element coming from within the perceptions of the community itself. It is  
 25. *imagined* (original emphasis) because the members of even the smallest nation  
 26. will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of  
 27. them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson  
 28. 1983: 49). It is an image fostered and magnified by media representation, in  
 29. Oyeleye's words: 'helping to sustain diaspora formations and to enhance a  
 30. sense of diaspora consciousness' (Oyeleye 2017: 29).

31. In his study of democracy in Africa, Nic Cheeseman writes that, although  
 32. such pressures as elections inevitably aggravate tensions between communi-  
 33. ties, 'the politics of belonging was not equally pronounced across the conti-  
 34. nent [...] they (*sic*) were most pronounced in more diverse countries where  
 35. governments had actively favoured some ethnic groups and discriminated  
 36. against others' (Cheeseman 2015: 157).

37. Although generally sound, this formula does not hold for all African states.  
 38. Rwanda is one of the least diverse countries in Africa, with a unitary language  
 39. (Kinyarwanda) and only three tribal groups, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Here, the  
 40. construction of a mythic diaspora by Hutu supremacists and supported by  
 41. government, was a necessary component of the decades of propaganda,  
 42. which led ultimately to the genocide of 1994. The story that the Tutsi were a  
 43. Nilotic people who migrated to central Africa and imposed a despotism over  
 44. the indigenous Hutu and Twa was woven into the fabric of prejudice, which  
 45. animated Radio Rwanda and the infamous private station, Radio Télévision  
 46. Libre Des Milles Collines (Prunier 1995; Melvern 2000). Some might see an  
 47. irony in the fact that it was the military force of a genuine diaspora, Rwandan  
 48. exiles living in Uganda and Tanzania, which overthrew the Hutu regime and  
 49. ended the genocide.

50. The unashamed partisanship and low ethical standards of much African-  
 51. based media, whether on the side of government or opposition, one tribal  
 52. group or another, are accepted as the facts of life in many parts of the

continent. In the case of Sierra Leone for example, the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission observed that:

Some newspapers are in danger of becoming little more than scandal sheets, relying on proactive and, at times, dishonest headlines in order to promote sales.

(Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report 2004: 80)

So, the research questions underpinning this article are these: when it comes to the lens trained on Africa by the media of the diaspora, does distance lend objectivity, even impartiality? Or is the freedom afforded by a home, however temporary, in another country or on another continent, 'conferring the privilege of being able to intervene in certain domestic debates without fear of retribution' (Wai 2012: 243), regarded as a safe space in which to fight identity battles with even more partiality?

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative study, taking an inductive approach, with the data derived from a small number of semi-structured interviews and a close reading/interpretation of secondary texts. The interviewees are media representatives whose country of origin is either Liberia, Sierra Leone or Nigeria and whose work has, in different ways, been shaped by the conflicts in that West African region, whether conflict defined as war or as internal political upheaval and ethnic contestation. They were asked to reflect principally on the issue of identity, interpreted flexibly in a number of different ways: attachment to and understanding of tribal/ethnic affiliation, political/party grouping and the interests of the nation and/or Africa as a continent. Some of the ground covered also embraces the various strands of relationship forged in the host country which, in the social media age, create what has been called 'the connected migrant' (Diminescu 2008).

The interview transcripts and the texts – news dispatches, opinion pieces, blogs and reports – were subjected to thematic analysis, drawing patterns of meaning from the discursive construction of media, conflict and identity, and seeking to elicit common themes in the three case studies. This is a small-scale inquiry done in a short time-scale, with the interviewees chosen only on the basis of freely available published material, so it makes no large claims about being representative of diaspora intervention in the three countries. As stated earlier, this is relatively an un-researched terrain so more extensive investigation is called for.

**Data analysis**

**Sierra Leone**

Dr Zubairu Wai (quoted above) is a Sierra Leonean scholar who migrated to Canada. His birth country was lacerated by a decade-long civil war in the 1990s and during that period, diaspora journalists and campaigners saw it as their responsibility to publicize in foreign policy circles the issues dividing their homeland. The media and internet became part of the diasporic communicative spaces and avenues for networking. These spaces helped the diaspora articulate certain views and opinions regarding the conflict, while allowing them to keep in touch with events back home' (Wai 2012: 234). As an example,

1. the Internet discussion forum, Leonenet, founded in 1991/2 at the start of  
 2. the violence, helped demystify the origins and character of the rebel force,  
 3. the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) 'at a time when information about the  
 4. conflict and the insurgents was limited and misleading at best' (Wai 2012: 34).

5. The online newsletter, Focus on Sierra Leone, published by Ambrose Ganda  
 6. in the United Kingdom, where the largest expatriate Sierra Leonean community  
 7. lived, not only carried regular updated news and opinion on the conflict but  
 8. became a valuable conduit for advocacy and lobbying for a negotiated settle-  
 9. ment after Ganda established contacts with the RUF. And following the 1997  
 10. coup, which overthrew the SLPP government and brought in the short-lived  
 11. Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, two exiled Sierra Leoneans, who found  
 12. refuge in neighbouring Guinea, set up a radio station, FM 98.1, as a diasporic  
 13. mouthpiece for the ousted president, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah (Wai 2012: 235).

14. Wai believes that focusing on whether diasporas play a positive or nega-  
 15. tive role is a 'false binary that is both problematic and self-limiting' (Wai 2012:  
 16. 209), but others, both inside and outside the media, take a different view. And  
 17. some appear conflicted about their role. Sanpha Sesay, who blogs under the  
 18. sobriquet, 'The Texas Chief' from Dallas, swapped a position as press attaché to  
 19. the Secretary of State for Development and Economic Planning in Freetown  
 20. for that of assistant editor-in-chief of the *Salone Monitor*. He left a devastated  
 21. country behind when he sought asylum in the United States in 1999 and  
 22. joined some 3000 Sierra Leoneans in the Dallas Metro area:

23.  
 24. Journalism in the diaspora is about coming together. I see my main goal  
 25. as promoting political and social change in Sierra Leone. The country  
 26. is so divided into supporters of the two political parties [the governing  
 27. All People's Congress and the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party]  
 28. that its national identity is seriously compromised. I want to change this  
 29. polarisation because it brings no economic value to Sierra Leone.  
 30. (Sesay 2017)

31.  
 32. As an illustration of his self-proclaimed mission, Sesay posted this blog in  
 33. 2014 after learning that some opponents of the government were refusing to  
 34. play an active role during the Ebola crisis, accusing the president of siphoning  
 35. off funds intended for the health service:

36.  
 37. For us in the Diaspora, we have the duty to educate our people about  
 38. the consequences of this Ebola virus and avoid politicizing it. It is not  
 39. a disease brought by APC or SLPP; neither had it come from north,  
 40. south, west nor east region, as the president [Ernest Bai Koroma] spelt  
 41. out clearly ... Help! Help! It is your duty and responsibility. God bless  
 42. Sierra Leone.  
 43. (Sesay 2014)

44.  
 45. However, Sesay's call for a non-partisan diaspora response to Sierra Leone's  
 46. problems is rather undermined by his admission that he is a member of the APC:

47.  
 48. I was neutral, unaligned when I was living and working in Sierra Leone  
 49. but in 2006, a friend here in the US influenced me to join the APC. Most  
 50. prominent Sierra Leone journalists, whether at home or in the diaspora,  
 51. are associated with one of the parties. That's the way it's always been.  
 52. (Sesay 2017)

Sanpha Sesay's apparently contradictory views offer a revealing insight into what might be called Sierra Leone's 'identity crisis'. The term, 'ethno-regional divide', was used in the Introduction to this article and it requires some elucidation here. Like Liberia, modern (i.e. post-eighteenth century) Sierra Leone was shaped by the influx of former or freed slaves from the Americas and West Indian colonies. This cohort, known as Krios, settled in and around Freetown and henceforth, occupied an elevated social status, in comparison with the indigenous tribal population. According to the judge and media scholar, Abou Bhakarr Muhammed Binneh-Kamara, as late as the 1960s it was almost impossible for a non-Krio to be appointed to a judicial position even though many amongst the country's largest single ethnic group, the Mende, were known to have acquired a good level of education and vocational experience (Binneh-Kamara 2018).

In many respects, Sierra Leone remains a country fractured along ethnic and regional lines and its domestic media reflects these divisions (see Silverman and Binneh-Kamara 2016). As an example, the *Sierra Leone Telegraph* published an unashamedly partisan account of a political rally held in London addressed by a putative presidential candidate for the Sierra Leone Peoples Party, Brigadier Julius Maada Bio, in December 2017. The language in the report was a world away from the journalistic ideal of impartiality:

He was passionate, confident and assuring as he addressed hundreds of Sierra Leoneans at the prestigious Royal Regency Hall in London. [...] With his usual humility after delivering his statement, Rtd. Brigadier Bio went table after table thanking the guests for gracing the fundraising dinner as a sign of confidence in his leadership [...] The show of love and affection towards Bio continues to demonstrate his huge popularity at home and abroad.

(Thomas 2017)

And for good measure, his wife, Mrs Fatima Bio, is described as 'beautiful and elegant'. The byline on the report is that of Abdul Rashid Thomas, editor and proprietor of the newspaper, yet it is hard to discern the input of a professional journalist in his copy. Perhaps the clue lies in a declaration at the foot of the page, 'Article written by the SLPP Information, Media and Communications Committee'.

In Sierra Leone, political allegiance and ethnicity are deeply intertwined. Of the two dominant tribal groups, the Mende of the south and east have traditionally supported the SLPP, while the Temne of the north vote for the APC. Preferment in many professions, including the media, is often dependent on which party is in power. Such a lack of fluidity in affiliation is often mirrored in diaspora groups and it is understandable that some scholars argue that 'diasporas often frame conflicts in ways that are uncompromising and categorical' (Lyons 2004: 21). This appears to be true of many of the communicative spaces occupied by the Sierra Leonean diaspora:

When I go on Facebook or Twitter, I am acutely aware of the divisive and often hateful language when discussing politics used by people, whether they live in Toronto or London or Freetown. I am a Temne from the north of my country and my name immediately gives away my ethnic and regional origin. So, a Mende social media user will pick up on that and treat me with hostility. And there is no way of regulating this kind of discourse.

(Binneh-Kamara 2018)



1. Since the turn of the millennium, Western media has engaged in a protracted  
 2. internal debate about its portrayal of African states such as Sierra Leone. The  
 3. *Economist* headlined its opinion piece of May 2000, while the war was still  
 4. raging, 'Hopeless Africa' (11 May 2000). By the second decade, the same jour-  
 5. nal was writing about 'A hopeful continent' (August 2013). But the *Economist's*  
 6. gaze is an exterior one. The same examination of progress or regression goes  
 7. on in the media of the diaspora and tends to validate Tettey's assertion that  
 8. within the mediascape of the Internet, Africans are actively engaging in politi-  
 9. cal and policy discourse in their country of origin (Tettey 2009). Sanpha Sesay,  
 10. blogging from Texas, is a good exemplar of this interventionism, even at the  
 11. cost of portraying his country in a negative light:

12.  
 13. What is specifically necessary for us to do in our various destinations in  
 14. the diaspora is very critical. In the first place, we have to use our influ-  
 15. ence by informing big economic powers and donor agencies about the  
 16. daunting problems that rage in our country. It is our responsibility to  
 17. cry to the world about problems such as electricity and water supply so  
 18. that people will come to our aid. The Western world respects journalists,  
 19. therefore our news reporting could create a positive impact if we keep  
 20. reporting about our difficulties that need external help.

21. (Sesay 2013)

## 22. 23. 24. **Liberia**

25.  
26. If Sierra Leone's fractured identity is reflected back by the diaspora media,  
27. then the same is true of Liberia, whose history is entwined with that of its  
28. neighbour.

29. The diasporic writer, Emmanuel Dolo, argues that the enduring fissures in  
30. Liberian society explain the 'absence of a cohesive national identity' and that  
31. 'ethnic bigotry and class discrimination' have caused a 'national identity crisis'  
32. (Dolo 2007: xx). So, what are these fissures?

33. The support given by Liberia's Charles Taylor to the RUF rebels who  
34. attacked Sierra Leone in 1991, was a catalyst for the vicious war of the follow-  
35. ing decade. As stated earlier, both states grew from the reintroduction of freed  
36. slaves from North America into their territories in the nineteenth century. In  
37. Liberia's case, too, this influx and its relationship to the indigenous population  
38. has had social, economic and political consequences, which are still being felt  
39. in the twenty-first century.

40. The so-called Americo-Liberians (sometimes known as Congo Town  
41. Liberians) formed a dominant diasporic elite, whose influence has been so  
42. potent that, until the election of George Weah in 2017, only one president,  
43. Samuel Doe, an ethnic Krahn, had come from outside this community. Indeed,  
44. the coup instigated by Doe in 1980 has been interpreted as a revolt of the  
45. politically marginalized against the hegemony of the advantaged Americo-  
46. Liberians. In the wake of the political turmoil of the 1980s, many Liberians  
47. sought exile abroad, fostering: 'The idea that the Liberian middle class sat out  
48. the war in the United States, and that its return will shape Liberia's future ...'  
49. (Steinberg 2011: 41).

50. The diaspora media in the United States did little to dispel this notion, and  
51. in the first free elections after the war's end, in 2005, many reports pointed  
52. out the disparity between the qualifications of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former

1. It is worth noting that accusations that some of the exiles financed the military campaign, which triggered the start of the civil war, were investigated by Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The TRC took evidence in the United States and recommended the lustration of Johnson-Sirleaf.

World Bank economist, and her ill-educated challenger, George Weah.<sup>1</sup> However, the election of Africa's first democratically elected female president was not, in itself, a panacea for Liberia's ills. Steinberg's research into one of the largest Liberian communities in the United States, on Staten Island, New York, illustrates how the diaspora of a country at war becomes a kind of mirror of the conflict. As the war was ending in 2003 and the political actors in Liberia were competing for power and influence, a struggle broke out for control of the elected body representing Staten Island's Liberians. Reports in the *Staten Island Advance*, fuelled by partisan commentary from the various factions, attest to the bitterness of the rupture:

It is no stretch to suggest that what was being enacted here was a proxy or a metaphor; that a community abroad was playing out its fears about the situation at home.[...] It is tempting to conclude that the Staten Island protagonists were stand-in figures, and that the stage on which they fought was erected by collective anxiety about the uncertain peace back home.

(Steinberg 2011: 50)

The largest Liberian diaspora population in the United States is in Minnesota and it took an active part in the 2017 election that Weah won. According to community activist, Abdullah Kiatamba:

Minnesota is not just an observer or a sideline cheering squad. People are involved here as much as people on the ground in Liberia. Minnesota is shaping and influencing things. People are literally living in two worlds around this election.

(Covington 2017)

Much of this involvement came through social media platforms, described as a 'gamechanger' by broadcaster, Al-Hussein Fadiga, whose online station *Radio Africa* attracted thousands of new listeners throughout the campaign. 'You cannot successfully win elections in Liberia without huge support from the diaspora community', according to Wynfred Russell, who runs a non-profit organization. However, that also means that familiar tropes of Liberian practice are just as prevalent, with the remittance payment used as leverage. 'People will say openly, "Look, if you don't support my candidate, you can rest assured I'm not going to send you money for Christmas". Proverbially, you cannot bite the hand that feeds you' (Covington 2017).

But the thematic evidence informing this article does not run in one direction only. The African Union's description of the diaspora as 'the sixth region of Africa' (the others being North, South, East, West and Central Africa) is not merely an acknowledgment of the benefit brought to the continent by the remittance economy. It also recognizes the ability of the diaspora to harness citizen engagement in a myriad other ways. Like Sierra Leone, Liberia suffered horribly from the regional Ebola outbreak of 2014 and 2015, as already threadbare health services buckled under the strain. The initial response of the World Health Organisation was inadequate and research has shown that the diasporas of both countries provided a measure of medical relief in response to media-led publicity. Reports in the Liberian publication, *Frontpage Africa* (2014 and 2015), cited by Robtel Neajai Pailey, describe shipments of relief materials, paid for and organized by diasporan Liberians in the United States and



1. Europe. She argues that this opened up a 'third humanitarian domain' (Horst  
2. et al. 2016) sending the same kind of assistance that the diaspora provided  
3. during the armed conflicts of the 1990s.

4. But she goes further, positing that the relief effort was an assertion of  
5. identity, in that it not only eased the burden on the government in Monrovia  
6. but 'also enabled Liberian diasporas to practise citizenship from afar, thereby  
7. expanding the spatial contours of the state and public authority "outside"  
8. (author's quotation marks) of its geographic ambit' (Pailey 2017: 665).

9. A similar 'expansion' took place during the years 2007–10, in a different  
10. context, when a small cohort of journalists from Liberia and Sierra Leone  
11. provided daily radio reports from The Hague on the war crimes trial of the  
12. former Liberian president, Charles Taylor.<sup>2</sup> The journalists were natives of the  
13. countries they were broadcasting to but 'over the lifetime of the project became  
14. a temporary diaspora in the heart of Europe' (Silverman 2017: vii). One of  
15. the Liberian reporting team was Joseph Cheeseman, who lived through the  
16. Liberian conflict, which ended only in 2003. He reflects on the psychological  
17. difference brought by geographical separation from the homeland:

18.  
19. I felt I had a kind of dual identity when I was living and working in The  
20. Hague. Obviously I was from Africa, but I simply saw myself as part  
21. of an international press corps, as a journalist among equals, without  
22. any perception of being an African subject to the kind of ethno-political  
23. pressures we experience at home. Objectivity was always my watch-  
24. word. However, at some points of the trial, when witnesses alleged that  
25. Taylor and others had indulged in cannibalism, I was greatly embar-  
26. rassed, especially when a lady from the Democratic Republic of Congo,  
27. sitting near me in the press gallery, asked if there were no animals in  
28. Liberia, that we (Liberians) had to resort to eating humans.

(Cheeseman 2017)

29.  
30.  
31. The 'pressures at home' are another indication of the divide between the  
32. 'Americo-Liberian' elite, of which Cheeseman is a member (one of his ances-  
33. tors, Joseph James Cheeseman, was the twelfth president of Liberia, serving  
34. between 1892 and 1896) and the indigenous majority. He accepts that the  
35. historical/cultural connection is a significant part of his own identity, which  
36. he does not seek to deny. By contrast, the celebrated Liberian-born journal-  
37. ist, Helene Cooper, who works for *The New York Times*, found it hard openly  
38. to confront her identity for many years: 'I travelled all over the world, writ-  
39. ing about wars and conflict and all sorts of things – everything except Liberia  
40. which I basically embedded in my head' (Cooper 2008).

## 41. **Nigeria**

42.  
43.  
44. As the case studies of Sierra Leone and Liberia have demonstrated, the deterri-  
45. torialized space occupied by the media of the diaspora has undoubtedly had an  
46. impact on perceptions of African identity. It is possibly less true of West Africa  
47. than East Africa, but social media platforms, such as Facebook, have allowed the  
48. diaspora to intervene in 'real time' in political contestation at home. However,  
49. as the UK-based African media academic, Dr George Ogola, observes:

50.  
51. ...while digital technologies, such as social media, have now been widely  
52. adopted in Africa, millions remain unconnected to the Internet. This

2. The project was run by the charitable arm of the BBC, BBC Media Action, under the umbrella title 'Communicating Justice'. The author was the consultant/mentor.

means that these new platforms are inaccessible to the masses. Traditional media – particularly radio – therefore remain an important platform for public engagement. At election times, these kinds of legacy media formats are critical in enabling the public to make informed choices.

(Ogola 2017)

With the pace of technological change becoming ever faster, television probably counts as ‘legacy media’ for some, especially the young. But its influence should not be discounted. The Nigerian diaspora channel, BEN Television (BEN standing for Bright Entertainment Network), based in London, had an image of itself as an avatar of ‘Afropolitanism’ when it began broadcasting to audiences both in the host country and Nigeria in 2003. Nigerians make up the largest African diaspora in the United Kingdom. As the channel’s own prospectus put it:

BEN television is a black-oriented, urban, diverse and cosmopolitan family channel introducing new, cultured programmes to European taste [...]. It also includes a range of cultured programming to empower, transform and challenge the conventional perception of Africa and Africans.

(BEN Television [www.bentelevision.com](http://www.bentelevision.com) 2007)

Nigerian media scholar, Abiodun Adeniyi, suggests that the prospectus held the promise that:

a new element in transnational communication is coming because the programmes are no longer going to be entirely African; neither are they going to be reproducing white, liberal Eurocentrism. [...] Through a consumption of BEN TV programmes therefore, the migrant may acquire a new worldview, one that is not entirely African.

(Adeniyi 2016: 54)

This vision speaks to diaspora media being a ‘lateral’ connecting factor for many second-generation diaspora Africans, linking them, not so much with people from the ancestral homeland, but with other black citizens of the country in which they live and the concerns that animate them, such as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement. But BEN TV’s founder and chair, Alistair Soyode, explains that early aspiration has had to give way to financial reality:

When we started, we wanted to reach the black community in the United Kingdom as well as the African diaspora. But we do not have the money to put on ambitious original programming or hire our own reporters. And in any case, black British viewers would compare us with mainstream British television and find us wanting so we have had to fall back on unpaid ‘community correspondents’ and ‘free’ content from Africa’s largest network, NTA (Nigerian Television Authority), which runs 100 stations all over Africa.

(Soyode 2017)

With more consistency than Sanpha Sesay in Texas, Soyode admits that his guiding philosophy is to present images of positivity about his homeland. In Soyode’s case, to counter the stereotype of Nigerians as ‘lawless and constantly perpetrating fraudulent schemes’. BEN TV offers a fairly traditional

1. format, with studio discussion (one weekly programme, dealing with migra-  
 2. tion and resettlement issues, is called 'In Diaspora' and connects viewers/  
 3. listeners in Nigeria with a panel in London), regular segments of Christian  
 4. evangelism, paid for by different ministries, and news from NTA, delivered in  
 5. the style familiar to sub-Saharan audiences, that is, a fairly unrelenting diet of  
 6. poorly-edited reports on the policy announcements of politicians addressing  
 7. conferences. As Adeniyi comments, 'stories are official and have a government  
 8. leaning' (Adeniyi 2016: 54).

9. Soyode acknowledges that viewers see BEN Television as a 'Nigerian chan-  
 10. nel' but argues that its longevity has earned it a credibility in addressing issues of  
 11. concern to second-generation viewers, such as deaths in police or prison custody  
 12. and diversity, or the lack of it, in British institutions. Despite financial constraints,  
 13. some 40 per cent of its live programmes deal with British domestic matters and  
 14. senior police officers and politicians, including the mayor of London, have partic-  
 15. ipated in studio-based interviews and discussions. The hybrid identity of the  
 16. station is mirrored by Soyode's assessment of his own status:

17.  
 18. I see myself as a hyphenated British-Nigerian, comfortable in both loca-  
 19. tions. I imagine I will go back to Nigeria to live at some point, because  
 20. the country needs its best professionals, to repair its image. I would like  
 21. to enter politics, and if truth be told, my ambition is to run for president  
 22. in 2019. By contrast, my two children have made their lives in the United  
 23. Kingdom. My son is studying PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics)  
 24. at Oxford and my daughter works for the National Health Service. They  
 25. have both been to Nigeria and know about their heritage but they see  
 26. themselves as British.

(Soyode 2017)

### 30. ***Diaspora activism, migration and identity***

31. BEN Television's mediated course between two cultural outlooks is, of course,  
 32. a world away from the brand of activism practised by transnationalist 'advocacy'  
 33. media, which has made its mark on Nigerian affairs, first during the  
 34. dictatorship of Sani Abacha in the 1990s and, more latterly in the twenty-first  
 35. century, by exposing social, economic and political conflict and the growth of  
 36. terrorism. What Shola Olabode calls the 'exploitation of guerrilla or under-  
 37. ground activism using electronic media, especially radio' (Olabode 2016: 131)  
 38. did not deter the Abacha regime from committing human rights abuses, such  
 39. as the execution of the writer/environmental campaigner, Ken Saro-Wiwa, but  
 40. it may have helped pave the way for a return to democracy.

41. The more recent upsurge in citizen journalism, exploiting the 'heteroge-  
 42. neous nature of the tools of the new media' (Olabode 2016: 146) has lent  
 43. a truly global dimension to campaigns such as the 'Bring Back Our Girls'  
 44. (BBOG) movement, formed after the kidnap of hundreds of young women  
 45. from Chibok in north-eastern Nigeria in April 2014. That the majority of the  
 46. three million or so tweets, using the hashtag #BBOG, emanated from the  
 47. United States may not be unconnected with the fact that one of the most  
 48. influential diaspora citizen media websites, SaharaReporters.com is based in  
 49. New York city.

50. Citizen activism, allowing global audiences to view unfolding crises and  
 51. conflicts in real time, has undoubtedly helped shrink the world of conflict and  
 52. transform conceptions of identity. As Olabode points out,

At rallies and demonstrations in big cities across Nigeria, activists were seen collecting both audio and visual documentation of protests – published on SaharaReporters.com, their own personal Facebook pages and Twitter, and pictures, also published on Flickr.

(Olabode:140)

There is, of course, another side to this social media phenomenon, and that is the extraordinary seductive power of the imagery to draw those experiencing political upheaval, war or straightforward poverty in Africa towards the promise of a better life in Europe. If people in Nigeria, Chad, Mali or Libya believe, or are told, that their identity no longer has to be confined to a bounded national space but can be recast in a global context, the pressure to migrate becomes irresistible.

Western (and indeed world) mainstream media has reported on the flow of peoples northwards through Africa and across the Mediterranean from a number of perspectives: as a humanitarian catastrophe, a potential immigration problem for Western nations or a troubling source of terrorism. But the Nigerian diaspora magazine, *The African Courier*, published in Germany since 1998, has opted for a different approach. In August 2017, it announced an information campaign under the rubric, ‘Know the Facts’, to warn of the dangers and challenges of irregular migration. The magazine has partnered with the African-German Information Center and the Migration Enlightenment Project in Nigeria to work with media, civil society and government agencies to dissuade people from taking illegal routes to Europe.

It is an example of diaspora media neither acting as a mouthpiece for the government ‘at home’ nor adopting an oppositional stance but taking what might be called a social responsibility approach, giving ‘a realistic picture of the situation of irregular migrants in Europe while also encouraging youths to look at positive alternatives to emigration available in Nigeria’ (*The African Courier* 2017). Whether any would-be migrants have consulted *The African Courier* before embarking on their perilous journey towards Europe is, of course, another matter.

**Conclusion**

This article has sought to problematize the multifarious roles played by West African diaspora media in addressing conflict in its broadest sense, not merely armed hostilities but political rivalries emanating from the ‘homeland’ and the challenges faced by those forced to leave their country of origin, or who leave by choice, to adapt to unfamiliar identity ‘re-formulations’. The thematic analysis has shown that it is a mutable process, which defies simple categorization:

In effect, migrants are straddling two or several socio-cultural spaces, which, in turn, leads them to form hybrid identities in an ongoing, complex process of cross-fertilization, of shifting balances of power, within the self, and of fluctuating relationships with various communities.

(Diminescu and Loveluck 2014: 24)

An examination of the diaspora media of both Sierra Leone and Liberia has shown that political and ‘ethno-regional’ differences that undermine each country’s sense of unity are reflected and highlighted by those based abroad. In Nigeria’s case, the global impact of campaigns, such as ‘Bring Back Our

1. Girls', illustrates Tettey's 'diaspora of the Internet' in action. But like Sierra  
 2. Leone and Liberia, albeit on a far larger canvas, Nigeria's geographical, ethnic  
 3. and political divisions are as likely to be magnified by diaspora media inter-  
 4. vention as healed by it.

5. The interviews indicate that, as the world shrinks through new media affor-  
 6. dances, many diasporic occupants of the deterritorialized space are comfortable  
 7. with a 'hyphenated' identity, having a foot in both camps as it were. Sanpha  
 8. Sesay has lived and worked in Texas for nearly twenty years and acquired  
 9. American citizenship in 2010. Does he see himself as an African American?:

10.

11. I prefer the description, 'Sierra Leonean-American' because it distin-  
 12. guishes us from those black people born in the United States.  
 13. Unfortunately, on official forms, there is no box you can tick which iden-  
 14. tifies you as 'Sierra Leonean American'. But as a 50-year-old, I identify  
 15. with Africa in a way that young Sierra Leoneans living here do not.  
 16. Many do not want to go there because of all the negative images they  
 17. see on the media.

18.

(Sesay 2017)

19.

20. Understanding the dynamic relationship between diaspora media, conflict  
 21. and identity involves an epistemological quest and many questions. Can we  
 22. find any empirical measurements to assess changed identities over time in  
 23. response both to relocation and media representation? How do we discover  
 24. what role media has played in the mass movement of peoples from the  
 25. African continent to Europe as distinct from the filtering back of experiences  
 26. of other people from the same village or town? How do we judge at what  
 27. point migrants become a diaspora?

28. One thing that can be said with some degree of confidence is that the  
 29. African diaspora is now populating the online sphere in ever greater numbers,  
 30. using Twitter and Facebook to influence the global debate about international  
 31. development. It may not yet be true that the diaspora, through its media, is  
 32. having the impact on elections and political change in Africa that it is having  
 33. on development projects and advocacy, but that day may not be too far away.

34.

35.

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