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## Why Do Americans Care? *The New York Times* and the Coverage of the Media Campaign “Bring Back Our Girls”

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### INTRODUCTION

The media campaign “Bring back our girls” was initiated on April 2014, after the kidnapping of around 234 Nigerian girls by the ‘subversive’ group Boko Haram in the northern region of the country. The outreach of the campaign has been worldwide, but has had a greater impact in the United States. As part of the media campaign in social media like Twitter and Facebook, public figures as the First Lady, Michelle Obama, have expressed their concern for the abducted girls and claimed for immediate action from the Nigerian government. Indeed, the participation of such personalities has increased the attention given to the situation in Nigeria.

Particularly, it is the interest of this essay to explore how the coverage of the media campaign “Bring back our girls” made by *The New York Times* (NYT) is framed under the metaphor savages-victims-saviours. In order to answer this question this essay is divided into five sections. First, an overview of the NYT as one of the most important media in the United States is presented. Second, the context of the kidnapping of the girls in Nigeria, the activities of Boko Haram and the media campaign are briefly outlined. Third, the media analysis tools to be used as well as the conceptual framework that informs the essay are described. Likewise, this section includes the sources for the collection of data. Fourth, by using media analysis tools the content of the selected articles is revised. Finally, a section of conclusions is provided.

## THE NEW YORK TIMES: LEADING THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the Alliance for Audited Media,<sup>1</sup> the NYT is located in the second place, after the Wall Street Journal, in the list of the 25 national newspapers in the United States with more circulation, both in digital and printed versions. Being among the main printed sources of information is a trend that has marked the trajectory of the newspaper since its first edition in the year 1851. Even if founded in the city of New York its outreach is national on a basis of daily circulation.

The NYT describes itself as a medium “dedicated to providing news coverage of exceptional depth and breadth, as well as opinion that is thoughtful and stimulating” (*The New York Times* 2010). Likewise, they claim to be a reliable source of information that is characterized by its highest standards of trust and impartiality. The fact that it has earned more Pulitzers than any other paper is the main pride of the corporation.

Commonly known only as *The Times*, this medium has played a very important role as part of the mainstream media in the United States when reporting local and international events. As Lule (2002:275) indicates, the NYT represents a very interesting case for those interested in researching the influence of journalism and media in society and politics. By having established as one of the most important national newspapers, studies affirm that its influence is both national and international, at the point that the NYT is able to set the agenda of other media and political interest in the country. Moreover, the NYT editorial section is known for being the place of reference for politicians, academics and scholars in the United States: “because of its status in social, political, and journalism communities, the editorial page of the Times can be particularly noteworthy, especially in times of crisis” (Lule 2002:276).

Accordingly, as the NYT is increasingly related to the corporate media and the so-called ‘traditional’ media, it has also been accused of mis-

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<sup>1</sup> Alliance for Audited Media is a non-profit organization located in Illinois, United States that connects North American media companies, advertisers and ad agencies. AAM independently verifies print and digital circulation, mobile apps, website analytics, social media, technology platforms and audience information for newspapers, magazines and digital media companies in the U.S. and Canada.

representing the news and events. Indeed, the framing of the events it is said to be spotty and limited, whereas the coverage of the news is selectively shown to the readers, especially in the online version of the NYT. The most recent salient cases that supported this criterion have been the heroic portrayal of George Bush after 9/11, the support to the Iraq War or the partiality towards Israel in the conflict with Palestine. This has meant that many people in the United States distrust this medium and look for alternative media, especially internet sources (Kim 2012:62).

Regarding the assumed readers of the newspaper, it is important to mention that both digital and printed versions of the NYT have different audiences. The first is addressed to a younger population or those in touch with the technology, such as computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. The printed version instead is part of the tradition of reading newspapers for an older population. However, as they cover a wide range of interests—economy, business, culture, religion, health, etc.—they address a varied population, as they claim: “while our readers are as diverse as the subjects we cover, one trait is common to all of them: the need to know” (*The New York Times* 2010).

## NIGERIA, BOKO HARAM AND THE “BRING BACK OUR GIRLS” MEDIA CAMPAIGN

This section is aimed at contextualizing the campaign “Bring back our girls” by exploring the event that led to its spreading around the world: the kidnapping of around 234 girls<sup>2</sup> in Northern Nigeria. In addition, it is important to situate the group Boko Haram and the way their ‘subversive’ activities have been destabilizing Nigeria and calling attention from the international community.

In 2013 the Islamist sect Boko Haram was declared as a foreign terrorist organization by the US Department of State due to the violent activities that they have been carrying out in Nigeria since 2002, year in which the ‘organization’ was created. They have also been linked to Al-Qaeda for conducting the same type of attacks and having the same ideal of ‘Jihad’ or war against the West. Boko Haram originated in Maidiguri, a

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the number of kidnapped girls is not unanimous in the different sources consulted. However, as a reference for this essay the number of 234 girls provided by Amnesty International is used.

city located in north-eastern Nigeria; here, it is important to note that Nigeria lives under a state of ongoing tensions between the north and south of the country, which in several times is addressed by foreign media and governments as a religious conflict between the Islamist North and the Christian South. Indeed this division is a consequence of the British colonization, during which the colonizers imposed Christianity on the population, where the local predominant religion was Islam (Council on Foreign Relations 2014; Owolade 2014).

In addition, out of dissatisfaction and neglect from the central government of Nigeria, Boko Haram was born as a fundamentalist group, who rejects the Western influence in the country and has taken the opportunity to exploit the government through a series of violent acts. Even if originally they did not use violence as a main strategy, since 2009 they began to attack the police, military, politicians, and public places like schools, religious temples and governmental institutions. In this way Boko Haram has been committing suicide attacks in many parts of the country, but specifically in the capital city of Abuja, where even the United Nations building was attacked in 2011. Recently, the radicalization of their activities shifted the targets of the violence towards civilians, including schools, villages and kidnappings (Owolade 2014; Council on Foreign Relations 2014).

According to Amnesty International (AI), only in the first three months of 2014 around 1500 people were killed in northern Nigeria by the attacks of Boko Haram. As well, the government is being accused of arbitrary detentions and executions as part of their campaign against the insurgency of Boko Haram. Moreover, AI informed that since 2012 hundreds of people have been forcibly disappeared in hands of the military and police (Amnesty International 2014).

This brief background is helpful to situate the recent kidnapping of approximately 234 girls from a government's boarding school last 14 April in Chibok, Northern Nigeria. It is said that Boko Haram broke into the school heavily armed by night and that after shooting the guards, and setting fire to houses, they took the girls and headed into the woods. A few days later, the leader of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf appeared in a video in which he claimed the abduction in the name of the group and Islam and emphasized that the girls were going to be sold for sexual slavery and forced marriage. Since then very little has been known about them (Amnesty International 2014).

After this public announcement, the families of the girls began to take action by marching to Abuja and demanding concrete actions from the government. The public demonstrations showed the anger and despair from the relatives of the abducted girls, which transcended to the social media activism beyond Nigeria. Indeed, the biggest media campaign was initiated by a Nigerian through the social media Twitter with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. According to media sources like the Wall Street Journal, since the first tweet on April 23 the hashtag has been used 1.7 million times. Since then the campaign became very popular in rising awareness for the situation of the abducted girls and against Boko Haram, at the point that celebrities and politicians joined the cause through social media. In collaboration with Amnesty International the lead of this campaign around the world counted with Michelle Obama, John Kerry, Malala and others (Wall Street Journal 2014; Amnesty International 2014).

#### DATA COLLECTION: TIMEFRAME AND METHODOLOGY

First, this section is aimed at explaining the selection of the time-frame and articles of *The New York Times* in terms of the coverage of the media campaign “Bring back our girls”. As mentioned, the campaign was initiated on April 23th in Nigeria, and since then spread around the world through social media. However, the fact that an NGO like Amnesty International assumed the leadership of the campaign through their own web page, Facebook, Twitter and blogs signified an increasing awareness towards the cause of the kidnapping. Precisely, since May 2 the campaign was taken over by AI and diffused more significantly in the United States.

In this sense, the timeframe of the news selected is of two weeks, between May 2 and May 15. During this time the digital version of the NYT published a total of six articles regarding the “Bring back our girls” campaign. Among these, five are opinion columns, whereas only one is news. It is important to mention that the articles that referred to the general situation of Nigeria, Boko Haram and the kidnapping were excluded from the selection, as the main interest of this essay is to understand the coverage of the campaign, not of the proper event. The following table summarizes the information related to the articles selected:

	Date	Title of the Article	Author	Type
1	May 3, 2014	Bring back our girls	Nicholas Kristof	Opinion
2	May 3, 2014	Standing with the Kidnapped Girls in Nigeria	Nicholas Kristof	Opinion
3	May 6, 2014	What Can I Do to #Bring-BackOurGirls?	KJ Dell'Antonia	Opinion
4	May 7, 2014	Can Hashtag Activism Save Kidnapped Nigerian Girls?	Robert Mackey	Opinion
5	May 14, 2014	The Kidnapping of a Country	Lauren Bohn and Chika Oduah	Opinion
6	May 15, 2014	U.S. Officials Question Ability of Nigeria to Rescue Hostages	Eric Schmitt and Brian Knowlton	News

Second, in terms of conceptual framework, this essay is concerned with two main issues: the metaphor savages-victims-saviours (SVS) developed by Makau Mutua (2001) and the concept of politics of representation. On the one hand, Mutua's metaphor refers to the way a narrative is constructed in order to depict three main dimensions that justify human rights impositions and interventions. On the other hand, Hall (1997:2) suggests that the language used is able to construct meanings around cultures and share meanings. In this sense, when something or someone is represented, language is operating to through systems of representation. In this sense, this paper is interested in exploring how the NYT represents a national campaign about an event from outside the United States and how this is translated in signifying practices. Such analysis also includes the stereotyping of other cultures (in this case Muslims, Nigerians) as a signifying practice. Lastly, as part of the methodology, this paper is concerned with the use of framing as a tool for media analysis. This allows understanding how the campaign and the event are portrayed by the NYT.

### COVERAGE FROM *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

The six articles selected from the NYT present common issues around the topic of representation and use of frames. In this section the main findings of such analysis are described and incorporated into the concepts of politics of representation. It is important to mention that the findings are grouped into two subsections. First, it is analysed how the NYT uses representation of difference to depict 'otherness' when refer-

ring to the Nigerian context. Second, the analysis is informed by framing as a tool to identify the frames used for the coverage of the campaign, especially regarding the use of the metaphor savages-victims-saviours.

## REPRESENTATION OF OTHERS

Firstly, it is important to recall that representation “is the process by which the members of a culture use language to produce meanings” (Hall 1997:61). This implies that things, objects, people and events do not carry meaning by themselves, but there are human beings who attach it to them. In this case, the NYT as part of the mainstream media in the United States is the one who is making meaning.

One of the common issues found in the articles of the NYT is the way Nigerians—be them the government, the abducted girls or Boko Haram—are represented as the ‘others’. For Hall (1997: 225) one of the main forms of representing other cultures is through stereotyping. In this sense, media may use stereotypes in order to reinforce practices that are inscribed by relations of power. In this case, Nigerians are portrayed by the NYT under common characteristics, such as backward, powerless, indifferent, incapable, etc., which may closely related to the notion of racial inferiority. Nonetheless, not only the issue of race is represented, but also the cultural and religious differences are highlighted.

When representing others, Hall (1997:229) argues that a division between “them” and “us” is created and expressed through a polarized form of representation. For example, the recurrent dichotomy in representation appeals at things or people being good/bad, or civilized/primitive, there are very well-fixed boundaries which divide the “us” from “them”. This is how the difference is represented both in texts and images. In the case of the articles selected from the NYT, the division is clear enough to be identified: “us” are the good and powerful Americans, while “them” are represented both by the bad terrorists that kidnapped innocent girls and the Nigerian government, which shows itself unable to rescue them.

Particularly, the coverage made by the NYT of the media campaign “Bring back our girls” shows that a representation of difference also includes the dimensions of gender. Throughout the articles it is a recurrent topic the destiny of the abducted girls. Indeed, one of the preoccupations of the authors is the way these girls sexuality could be affected by

the abduction: forced marriage, sex slavery, loss of virginity, impossibility of marrying if rescued. There is also a confusing association of Islam with terrorism (under the War on Terror frame) due to the fact that Boko Haram is an Islamist group. In this sense characteristics like terrorist, attacker, extremist, fundamentalist, militant and separatist are constantly used to describe Boko Haram.

The following quotes from two articles from May 3 and May 6 reflect how the authors are aiming at creating what Hall (1997:231) calls the “spectacle of the other”, when contextualizing the Nigerian cultural and religious reality by referring to the sexuality, purity and virginity of women:

If the missing Nigerian schoolgirls come home, their problems won't be over. Even assuming (with ridiculous and probably unwarranted optimism) that they have been untouched during their captivity, their communities and even their male family members may regard them as damaged goods. It's that [...] attitude that led to their kidnapping; on the smaller scale, it may mean they can never regain what they have lost (Dell'Antonia 2014).

Northern Nigeria is a deeply conservative area, and if the schoolgirls are recovered, it may be difficult for them to marry because of suspicions that they are no longer virgins (Kristof 2014).

As Zarkov (1997:113) highlights in her analysis of the “media war” in Serbia during the years of violent conflict, media chooses to operate through body politics, which means that sexuality and female body become a means for politics. Indeed, media constructs narrative out of body politics in order to justify practices and political processes. In the case of the coverage of the campaign and the abduction of the girls in Nigeria, the NYT uses the victimization of women in terms of their sexuality as a way to appeal to the sensitivity of the readers, so they can claim action from the government and justify all the measures taken by political leaders in order to ‘help’ the victimized women in Nigeria. This is also contextualized under the notion of Muslim women that live under oppression because of a religious belief—which is non-acceptable for most Americans.

## FRAMING THE NEWS UNDER THE METAPHOR ‘SAVAGES-VICTIMS-SAVIOURS’

When Mutua (2001) suggested that the international human rights body was marked by a tri-dimensional metaphor, he did not contemplate the fact it could be used to explain other similar situations where it can also be suitable. In this essay, one of the main arguments is that the NYT has framed the coverage of the campaign “Bring back our girls” using the same three dimensions mentioned by Mutua.

In this sense, it is first important to consider what the meaning of each one of dimensions included in the SVS metaphor is. For Mutua (2001:202-204), the Western leaders, organizations and governments have discursively constructed each one of the dimensions in a way that they are part of the human rights narrative and practice. The first is the ‘savages’, depicted as inhuman and barbaric, who could be people or states belonging to a particular culture. The second dimension is the ‘victims’, whose rights and human dignity have been violated by the savages. Finally, the third dimension is composed by ‘saviours’, the “ones” selected to civilize and rescue the victims from the savages, frequently related to Eurocentric notions of superiority.

Precisely, each one of these dimensions is used by the NYT when covering the campaign and events taking place in Nigeria. It is argued in this paper that the SVS metaphor is used as a frame, which means the way a particular event is reported by the NYT. Papacharissi and Oliveira (2008) suggest that frames are vital to understand how individuals perceive reality and comprehend the events. In this sense, why is it important to realize the use of the SVS metaphor as a frame in the coverage made by the NYT? Evidently, the frames are increasingly having geopolitical importance and reflect the different political, economic and social perspectives and interests that media have when reporting the news (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008:53).

In addition, as frames can be located in four places within the communication process: the communicator, the receiver, the text, and the culture itself, this particular analysis situates the frame in the communicator, meaning the NYT. Again, how the SVS metaphor is used to report about the “Bring back our girls” campaign? In relation to the first dimension (savages) it has been identified that each one of the articles selected tends to associate both the Nigerian government and the group

Boko Haram with ‘savages’. Even if this framing is done at different levels, as Boko Haram is a “terrorist” group, the government is also continuously portrayed as unable to protect their citizens, corrupt and neglect. The following extract shows the different ways in which Nigerians are described as ‘savages’:

*About Nigerian government:*

While the Nigerian military has shown little interest in rescuing the girls, it has, in the last few years, presided over a brutal counterinsurgency in response to Boko Haram bombings. There is viciousness on both sides (Kristof 2014).

*About Boko Haram:*

DOZENS of heavily armed terrorists rolled into the sleepy little town one night in a convoy of trucks, buses and vans [...] the high school girls, asleep in their dormitory, awoke to gunfire. The attackers stormed the school, set it on fire [...] the girls were kidnapped by an extremist Muslim group called Boko Haram, whose name in the Hausa language means “Western education is a sin” (Kristof 2014).

Regarding the second dimension of victims, the NYT has appealed at sensitizing the readers through text that describes the critical situation of the kidnapped girls. As mentioned before, the articles use the threats to female bodies as a way to cause repulsion towards the perpetrators. In some of the articles the possibility of the girls to be raped, forcibly married or enslaved is often mentioned. This is a key issue to consider the importance of the campaign in the United States, due to the fact that the use of frames in political and mass communication “influence how people understand, remember, evaluate and act upon a problem” (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008:54).

The third dimension is also identified in the selected articles of the NYT, which has to do with the ‘saviours’. This role is embodied in the United States, as a society and as a global power. As Mutua (2001: 204) states the promise of the saviour is freedom, in a way the victims can be liberated from tyranny from the state, the religion, the culture that oppress them. In the United States the role of saving Nigerians is attached to a society that through social media activism is able to pressure the political leaders to take action. In the articles, the authors are emphatic when requesting immediate intervention to help the ‘incapable’ government of Nigeria to find the missing girls. As well, the United States is

portrayed as the only actor that can do something to save the victims from Boko Haram.

However, the ‘saviours’ mission is not only attached to political actors or ‘social media’ activists in the United States. A civilizing mission is also used to promote the interest of American citizens by the writers of the NYT. This means that each one of the readers can feel that there is something he/she can do to ‘save’ the girls from an unfair reality. Specifically, some of the articles suggest that there is more to do, in the sense that there are American NGOs already working for a better life for Nigerians, and it would be a good idea to also get involved in such kind of ‘good’ work:

For most of us, “real action” means continuing to financially support and push for that kind of change [...] “We can fight groups like Boko Haram by doing the opposite of what it does. It kidnaps girls, and we can send them to school. Organizations like Developments in Literacy do a great job educating girls in Pakistan, or Campaign for Female Education (Camfed) does the same in Africa. In the long run, the best way to fight extremism is education, especially education for girls” (Dell’Antonia 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Without denying the difficult reality of Nigeria and the increasing violence perpetrated against civilians in hands of Boko Haram, it is also necessary to understand that the way in which the events are portrayed by the mainstream media in the United States is informed by discourses of ‘heroism’, ‘salvation’ and justification for future actions in Nigeria and other countries around the world. As stated before, the aim of this essay has been to explore how the metaphor savages-victims-saviours is used as a frame by the NYT when writing about the “Bring back our girls” campaign. It is interesting to see how the role of ‘saviours’ is attached to all Americans who are committed to save the kidnapped girls through different channels. Why do Americans care? This question can be answered through the continuously used narrative by media and political leaders to create the sense of a ‘duty’ for American society to help the world.

Finally, the fact that the NYT is one of the main newspapers in the United States reflects how media can influence politics and society. By covering the campaign because important public figures demonstrated

their interest is also a way to show that also politics has a strong power over what media selects to present as primary information.

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