WHAT INFLUENCES MEDIA COVERAGE? AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN MAJOR ITALIAN NEWSPAPERS: 1996-2015

1 Introduction

This paper studies the media coverage of African countries in two major Italian newspapers, La Repubblica (hereafter, Repubblica) and Il Corriere della Sera (hereafter, Corriere), between 1996 and 2015. The objective of the empirical analysis is to identify which characteristics of the countries affect their coverage in the newspapers. The motivation for this research is twofold. First, the research provides new evidence on the determinants of what makes foreign countries 'newsworthy'. While communication scholars have long explored the concept of newsworthiness, as described in Section 2, the debate is still open. The importance of this issue is both theoretical and empirical. On the one hand, the theory of agenda setting (McCombs and Show, 1972) suggests that the specific 'reality' that we learn about comes from what is observed through the lens of the media, because personal experience is impossible. In brief, people's perceptions are influenced by what they find in the media. On the other, empirical studies confirm that the views of citizens regarding politics, economics and culture are strictly correlated with what the media decide to include in the news (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). In particular, the correlation between the public and media agendas is higher for issues that do not closely regard the lives of the survey respondents, such as political scandals, foreign policy and the conditions of foreign countries (Weaver, McCombs and Shaw, 2004; Wanta, Golan and Lee, 2004). In this respect, the mass media have a heavy responsibility in describing and discussing the main plights of each African country. In the West, the public frequently feel that Africa has some of the worst economic and social conditions in the world; however, these conditions are difficult to understand since they take place in distant countries. The mass media thus increase the knowledge of western citizens regarding African countries[1]. But how do the media select African news and stories? A first step in

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[1] International organizations, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, release facts and statistics on Africa on a regular basis. However, citizens do not directly access these statistics, preferring to consult them, when available, in the overviews prepared by the media.

exploring this issue consists of studying whether some factors systematically affect the coverage, in the West, of African countries.

The second motivation for the present research regards the impact of the media on the actions of policymakers. In fact, some scholars have shown that media agenda setting can affect not only people's perceptions, but also their behavior (McCombs and Shaw, 1974; Roberts, 1992; Blood and Phillips, 1997). Many scholars have investigated the behavioral consequences of media content in the sphere of political action, that is, the impact of the media agenda on policy agenda (Dearing and Rogers, 1996; Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw, 2004; Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006; John, Bertelli, Bevan, and Jennings, 2013). Politicians need a large amount of information to carry out their daily activities; however, the time and resources of politicians are scarce. The mass media thus enable political elites to get information regarding the most important events of the day (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2016). More importantly, the mass media can provide the primary source of 'factual' information in those fields, such as foreign affairs, where there are few alternative information outlets (Sevenans, 2018). The idea is that an increase or decrease in media focus on an issue will be followed by an increase or decrease in policy actions regarding that same issue (Esser and Pfetsch, 2004; Wolfe, Jones and Baumgartner, 2013).

Most empirical studies on this theme confirm that political leaders are sensitive to those issues with the highest media salience, and support the theory that the media agenda can have a substantial impact on policymakers' behavior, especially when the issues at stake are not recurrent (Pritchard, 1986; Protess et al., 1991; Yanovitsky, 2001; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Bonafont and Baumgartner, 2013). As with the public agenda, the influence of the mass media on the policy agenda is greater for specific topics: foreign policy, interventions in conflict areas, humanitarian aid and commercial policies (Entman, 2004; Gilboa, 2006; Sparre, 2001). When the media report on extreme economic and political conditions abroad, for example humanitarian disasters, the mass media can have a real impact on positions, decisions and policies (Gowing, 1994; Seo, 2011)[2].

There is a clear link between the results of these studies and the content of this paper. First, if non-African politicians want to get information regarding the political and economic conditions of

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[2] In this respect, some scholars have proposed the so-called CNN theory: the media coverage, especially television coverage, tends to 'push' the policymakers and diplomacies from powerful countries to take measures that otherwise would not be adopted (Robinson, 2005). According to Gilboa (2003), the mass media can determine the national interest and usurp diplomats in their role of representing such interests abroad. Thus, the mass media act as 'mediators' in foreign policy, to the extent that they can be considered as the 'new diplomacy' (Gilboa, 2005).

African countries, there are few alternatives other than the media. The mass media therefore define and shape the views of policymakers on events and issues regarding African countries. Second, foreign policy actions frequently focus on African countries, which may involve military and non-military interventions. These interventions tend to focus on areas that suffer from poor conditions, be they political (coupes d'état, civil wars, conflicts between states) or environmental (famines, natural disasters). Detecting what affects the media coverage of foreign countries which, in turn, draws the attention of policymakers, is thus important to clarify the chain of events that might lead to the adoption of political actions.

What affects the media coverage of African countries is crucial for European and even more so for Mediterranean institutions. The geographical proximity between Mediterranean countries makes them an important point of departure and arrival for legal and illegal migrations. Although people of different nationalities may have the same motivations to migrate (e.g., harsh economic conditions, fear of persecution), the intensity and frequency of migrations is often linked with the characteristics of the country of origin. In addition, the broad and heated debate among the Members of the European Union regarding the reception policies, a debate revitalised every year by the drowning of hundreds of migrants in the Mediterranean (see, among others, Betts and Collier, 2018), cannot disregard the profound political and economic differences between African countries.

In conclusion, this paper studies whether the economic and socio-cultural conditions of African countries affect the coverage of each country in major Italian newspapers. This research, on the one hand, contributes to a better understanding of what makes a group of countries newsworthy and, on the other, explores the role of the mass media in shaping the first phases in the political process, corresponding to the identification of the problem and the formulation of the general political lines.

The next section summarizes the main results of the empirical literature regarding the media coverage of world countries. Section 3 describes the data used in the empirical analysis and presents some descriptive statistics. Section 4 presents the results of a panel analysis whose dependent variable is the number of mentions of African countries between 1996 and 2015 in Repubblica and Corriere. Since the mentions of African countries shoot up during international football championships, Section 5 explores whether, during one of these tournaments, the newspapers find the time to describe the political and economic conditions of the participating

countries. The sixth section focuses on the media coverage of coups d'état, while the last section discusses the findings of the paper and links them with the results of previous studies.

2 Media coverage of countries: a review

Communication scholars have long been interested in identifying the key determinants of what makes foreign countries 'newsworthy' and why some countries are considered more newsworthy than others (e.g., White, 1950; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 2004; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). Broadly speaking, being newsworthy means having a number of reasons for which events or stories warrant attention in the media (Shoemaker, 2006). Some of the 'news values' that affect the news selection include frequency, continuity, proximity, reference to elite nations or to elite persons (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Bell, 1991; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). However, producing a list of conditions for newsworthiness involves three major problems (Bednarek and Caple, 2017). Firstly, the concept of newsworthiness has not yet been precisely defined. Secondly, the list of news values may be excessively long and include overlapping elements. Thirdly, the conditions of newsworthiness can change across media, countries and time periods.

Many studies have thus focused on the probability that *specific* topics will appear in the media. Among the various forms of 'specialization' of the newsworthiness analysis, research on the different coverage by the media of countries has a prominent role. In fact, while some countries receive continuous attention in the newspapers and on TV, others are relegated to a secondary position or are even completely ignored unless they happen to be hosting an extraordinary event. This asymmetry is not surprising. It is understandable that the mass media will devote more space to large and rich countries as these countries have more inhabitants, larger geographical areas and more economic resources. This abundance of *structural characteristics* and how these are combined increase the probability of notable events and stories being reported in the media. At the same time, empirical analyses can shed some light on the magnitude of such effects as well as clarifying the role played by non-economic factors in affecting the probability that a country will appear in the news.

There are several approaches to the empirical analysis of country coverage. Some studies analyse the coverage of a single country in the news all over the world. Other studies consider the coverage of all world countries in the media of a single country. Finally, some scholars explore the

flows of international news at a global level, considering multiple countries as both the host and guest of media outlets.

The results of this mass of empirical studies are not homogeneous. Some studies find that the largest countries in terms of GDP tend to have a larger media coverage than the smallest nations (Dupree, 1971; Kariel and Rosenvall, 1984; Ishi, 1996; Golan, 2008; Lee, 2007; Mangani and Tizzoni, 2017). Other studies, however, do not confirm this result (de Verneil, 1977; Robinson and Sparkes, 1976). Population is a significant predictor of media coverage in some studies (Rosengren, 1977; Ishi, 1996), but not in others (Robinson and Sparks, 1976; Ahern, 1984). However, studies using multiple regression models (accounting for other variables), instead of correlation methods, reject the population size hypothesis (Wu, 1998).

The economic relationships between different countries are frequently investigated as a determinant of media coverage. For example, Kariel and Rosenvall (1984), Rosengren (1977), Segev and Hills (2014), Sheafer et al. (2013, 2014) and Wu (2000, 2007) found that bilateral trade is a strong predictor of countries' mutual newsworthiness (similar but fewer significant correlations are obtained in Golan, 2008; Koopmans and Vliegenthart, 2010; Lee, 2007; Wanta and Golan, 2010; Wu, 2000). However, Jones et al. (2013), Pietiläinen (2006), Robinson and Sparkes (1976) and Wu (1998) found no evidence that increased trade volume is a predictor of more references to countries in the news.

Similarly, older studies have found geographical distance to be a significant predictor of the prevalence of foreign countries in the news (Dupree, 1971; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Shoemaker et al., 2007). However, with the advent of new transportation and information technologies, today the applicability of distance has arguably diminished (Livingston and Van Belle, 2005). Some scholars use the Wallerstein (1974) theory and suggest that 'major' foreign nations are more likely to receive news coverage than 'peripheral' nations (Chang, 1998; Jones et al., 2013; Kim and Barnett, 1996; Wanta and Golan, 2010).

Cultural and value proximities are other variables used in the empirical analyses (Shoemaker et al., 1991; Wu, 2000). Among the cultural affinity variables used in international news flow models are common language (Kariel and Rosenvall, 1983; Wu, 2000), extent of migration (Koopmans and Vliegenthart, 2010), past colonial relationships between states (Nnaemeka and Richstad, 1980), ethnic similarities (Golan, 2008; Johnson, 1997; Lee, 2007; Shoemaker et al., 1991), shared religion (Lee, 2007), and shared civilization (Koopmans and Vliegenthart, 2010). Finally, Walter et al. (2016)

broaden the media sample and consider entertainment content as a measure of the media coverage of countries.

Broadly speaking, the empirical literature on the coverage of nations is heterogeneous and presents some problems. First, many studies use an elementary econometric methodology. In particular, several scholars show a simple correlation between the mentions of countries and other variables (Golan, 2008). The correlation analysis leaves open the question of the magnitude of the impact of the explanatory variables on the coverage of countries. For instance, some studies found that the GDP tends to increase mentions and coverage, but it is not clear to what extent. Other contributions use a simple ordinary least square method, which estimates the impact of several covariates on media coverage, but ignores the fact that observations refer to different periods.

Another problematic issue of empirical studies is the sample size. Some studies use data from multiple information sources, but regarding a limited period (for example, Guo and Vargo, 2017). Other studies consider a larger time span, but regarding few media outlets. In addition, when several years are being investigated authors are unlikely to conduct a panel analysis (one exception is Jones et al., 2013). Some studies include many countries or many media in the sample but, at the same time, use few explanatory variables, placing the empirical model at a risk of heterogeneity problems. For example, several scholars have found that the richest countries obtain more media coverage. However, countries with the same per-capita income (for example, the Ivory Coast and Pakistan) may have completely different socio-cultural characteristics.

Finally, a multi-media approach raises a number of problems. For instance, using many sources of information makes it difficult to control the homogeneity of the very same sources. In fact, it makes little sense to aggregate the news published on independent and informal websites with newscasts from TV channels controlled by the central government.

Given the methodological issues discussed in this section, we decided to consider the news regarding African countries that appeared in the media of a single country. In particular, the next sections consider the print versions of two Italian newspapers from 1996 to 2015. This allows us to focus on the same information sources for a long period and ensures greater homogeneity in the sample analyzed, facilitating future international and inter-media comparisons. In addition, we used 17 economic and socio-cultural variables to explain the number of mentions of African countries in the newspapers. We conducted a panel analysis because the data were collected over

time and from the same newspapers. Using this methodology, the empirical findings are robust, although they cannot be extended to other countries or other media.

3 Methodology, data and descriptive statistics

This section considers the print versions of two Italian newspapers with the highest print circulation and the highest online accesses: Corriere della Sera (hereafter, Corriere), based in Milan, and La Repubblica (hereafter, Repubblica), based in Rome[3]. The data include all the articles published between 1996 and 2015 (twenty years) that mentioned one or more African countries. To collect the data, we used the online archives of both newspapers. In the case of Corriere, we crosschecked the data using the Lexis-Nexis database. The empirical analysis did not include Mali and South Sudan for the following reasons. In Italian, Mali can mean 'evil', 'ills' or 'diseases' (especially with a figurative meaning) and a search for this word generates multiple observations that have nothing to do with Africa. South Sudan became an independent state only in 2011 and the statistics regarding this country are not available. Therefore, regarding Sudan, we excluded explicit mentions regarding South Sudan. With these adjustments, the sample includes 52 African countries. The World Bank (https://data.worldbank.org/) was the source for the data regarding the economies, social development and infrastructures of African countries (see below). Finally, we considered the website http://www.jonathanmpowell.com/coup-detat-dataset.html to collect data regarding the coups d'état in Africa between 1996 and 2015.

Corriere and Repubblica mentioned African countries 229,944 times in the period under review. Repubblica is responsible for two-thirds of the mentions. The most mentioned countries in both newspapers were Egypt, Libya, South Africa, Morocco and Tunisia. Altogether, the mentions of African countries increased over time, from 5467 in 1996 to 19493 in 2015. We generally followed previous empirical studies regarding the determinants of a country's media coverage. We therefore considered five categories of variables that could impact on the number of mentions of African countries:

1) Macroeconomic figures (GDP, GDP per capita; population; population density). The hypothesis, largely adopted in previous studies, is that notable events are more probable in the largest and richest countries.

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[3] In July 2017, Repubblica had 1262824 unique visitors compared to 1072207 unique visitors for Corriere (http://www.audiweb.it/).

2) Relationship with foreign countries (exports of goods and services as a percentage of GDP; inflows of foreign direct investments; tourist arrivals). The links with foreign countries increase the probability that events and stories occurring in a country are covered by foreign mass media.

3) Cultural and social development statistics (urban population, as a percentage of total population; percentage of individuals using the Internet; percentage of GDP due to the service sector; life expectancy). These variables are linked with the ability of African citizens to interact with international news organizations. The countries with a high degree of social and cultural development can make their voices heard at an international level. We included life expectancy in this category as it depends on economic characteristics as well as on public health, medical care, and diet.

4) Variables that regard the specific relationship between Italy and African countries (distance between Rome and the capital of each African country; bilateral aid flows; African individuals resident in Italy, by country of origin).

5) Exceptional events (coups d'état; participation in the Football World Cup, hereafter, FWC; organization of the African Cup of Nations, hereafter, AFCON).

Many of these explanatory variables have been used in previous empirical studies. Regarding the political and institutional instability, which has been often considered as a determinant of media coverage, we only used the occurrence a coup d'état, as this was defined in the database set up by Jonathan Powell (for details on the construction of the database see http://www.jonathanmpowell.com/coup-detat-dataset.html). The political instability does not depend only on coups d'état. The World Bank adopts a more general approach and estimates an index of 'Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism'. However, this estimation is not available for all African countries and for all the years under review in this paper. Regarding sports events, we considered the variables, 'participation in the FWC' and 'organization of the AFCON'[4]. These championships are, on the one hand, 'exceptional', and, on the other, take place on a regular basis (every four years), which is why they can be considered as 'exogenously determined'. Table 1 sums up the explanatory variables used in the next section along with the abbreviations and descriptive statistics.

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[4] AFCON is the main international association football competition in Africa and should be differentiated from the African Championship of Nations, which exclusively features players who are active in the national championships held in African countries.

Table 1. Explanatory variables and descriptive statistics.

variable	Abbrev.	Obs.	mean	min	max
Gross Domestic Product	GDP	1056	63940.24	231.64	1094059
Gross Domestic Product per capita	GPD pc	984	1787.59	65.01	22742.38
Country inhabitants	Population	1056	17.16	0.07	181.18
Population density	Density	1031	79.63	1.95	621.97
% of exports on GDP	Exports	895	33.12	4.43	124.39
Inflows of FDI	FDI	979	4.69	-82.89	161.82
Tourist arrivals	Tourism	638	1004.14	2.90	14100
% of urban population	Urban	1056	39.05	7.01	87.15
% of individuals using Internet	Internet	956	5.89	0	57.08
% of GDP in service sector	Services	712	47.74	4.14	91.48
Life expectancy	Life exp	1051	56.92	29	75.85
Coups d'état	Coup	1060	0.09	0	1
Participation in FWC	FIFA	1060	0.02	0	1
Organization of AFCON	AFCON	1060	0.01	0	1
Distance to Rome	Distance	1060	56.26	0.59	183.50
Aid flows	Aid	797	10051.45	-31.36	754980
Africans resident in Italy	Residents	429	15154.6	3	454773

Source: The World Bank for socio-economic statistics and http://www.jonathanmpowell.com for coups d'état. Notes. GDP in billion dollars. GDP pc in thousand dollars. Population in million inhabitants. Density in inhabitants per km^2. FDI in million dollars. Tourist arrivals in thousands. Life expectancy in years. Coup, FWC and AFCON are dummies. Distance in thousand kilometers. Aid flows in thousand dollars.

Population and GDP show a high correlation (COV=0.75). Therefore, the next section only considers population as the explanatory variable as a proxy of country size.

4 Main empirical analysis

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of a panel analysis with fixed-effects at the country level, performed separately for Corriere and Repubblica. We applied the standard tests to assess the normality of the distribution and a Hausman test, which confirms that the fixed effect model is preferable.

Table 2. Mentions of African countries in Corriere, 1996-2015. Panel analysis (fixed effects).

Coup	-2.59	-2.94	-2.92	-3.36	-3.51	-3.76	-3.97	-5.26	-7.19	-8.85	-12.37
	(6.24)	(6.23)	(6.29)	(6.11)	(5.69)	(5.74)	(6.08)	(6.98)	(7.55)	(8.43)	(10.11)
FIFA	76.65***	76.21***	76.23***	76.19***	76.28***	77.27***	78.16***	79.74***	91.56***	93.33***	104.88***
	(11.45)	(11.42)	(11.53)	(10.92)	(10.15)	(10.16)	(10.41)	(11.04)	(12.29)	(13.75)	(18.56)
Org	50.49***	52.65***	52.51***	52.25***	52.05***	51.69***	52.73***	52.55***	56.57***	65.62***	93.31***
	(16.26)	(16.24)	(16.41)	(15.53)	(14.45)	(14.44)	(14.79)	(15.72)	(17.17)	(19.82)	(27.38)
Distance	0.04	0.22**	0.23**	0.24**	0.21**	0.19*	0.19*	0.28**	0.39***	0.45***	1.23**
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.48)
Pop	1.47***	1.82***	1.83***	1.82***	1.84***	1.76***	2.25***	2.14***	2.32***	2.24***	0.67
	(0.44)	(0.45)	(0.45)	(0.43)	(0.41)	(0.40)	(0.46)	(0.49)	(0.56)	(0.67)	(1.17)
Urban	-0.29	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.05	-0.16	-0.73	-1.46	-1.37	-1.02	-1.07
	(0.88)	(0.89)	(0.91)	(0.88)	(0.83)	(0.85)	(0.91)	(1.07)	(1.29)	(1.61)	(2.69)
Life exp		-2.64***	-2.59***	-2.71***	-2.67***	-2.73***	-2.71***	-3.32***	-4.00***	-3.77***	-6.40**
		(0.80)	(0.83)	(0.80)	(0.75)	(0.75)	(0.82)	(0.95)	(1.13)	(1.23)	(2.78)
Density			-0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.004	0.01	0.06	0.03	-0.03	-0.04
			(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.35)
GDP pc				0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.002	0.001	-0.0009	-0.0004
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.001)
FDI					0.05	0.14	0.06	0.02	-0.14	-0.55	-0.79
					(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.25)	(0.34)	(0.40)	(0.61)	(0.79)
Internet						0.45*	0.37	0.55*	0.63*	0.25	-0.22
						(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.30)	(0.34)	(0.49)	(0.66)
Exports							0.55**	0.70***	0.35	0.43	-0.63
							(0.21)	(0.26)	(0.34)	(0.45)	(0.63)
Aid								0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03
								(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Services									-0.65	-0.64	-0.78
									(0.52)	(0.59)	(0.89)
Tourism										0.006	-0.04***
										(0.004)	(0.01)
Residents											-0.71***
											(0.27)
CONSTANT	55.38**	170.69***	170.41***	173.05***	174.04***	186.82***	34.426	233.31***	303.53***	278.47***	477.75***
	(30.66)	(46.63)	(47.58)	(45.44)	(42.32)	(43.12)	(36.229)	(55.32)	(71.40)	(80.95)	(174.16)
R^2	0.18	0.07	0.08	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.48
Prob chi/F	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
n	1056	1051	1031	984	979	956	895	797	712	638	429

Notes. Coup, FIFA and Org are dummies. Distance in thousand kilometers. Pop in million inhabitants. Urban, Internet, Services and Exports in percentages. Life exp in years. Density in inhabitants per km². GDP pc in thousand dollars. FDI in million dollars. Aid in million dollars. Tourism in million arrivals. Residents in millions. Standard errors in parentheses. ***: significant at the 0.01 level; **: significant at the 0.05 level; *: significant at the 0.10 level.

Table 3. Mentions of African countries in Repubblica, 1996-2015. Panel analysis (fixed effects)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Coup	8.67	7.85	8.25	7.99	7.57	6.94	7.86	7.37	5.52	3.87	-5.78
	(22.01)	(22.03)	(22.24)	(22.26)	(16.17)	(15.63)	(16.60)	(18.76)	(20.29)	(22.29)	(27.76)
FIFA	183.50***	182.51***	182.67***	182.89***	183.41***	196.62***	199.52***	207.20***	226.76***	240.76***	329.86***
	(40.35)	(40.38)	(40.76)	(39.75)	(28.83)	(27.69)	(28.42)	(29.66)	(33.03)	(36.34)	(50.95)
Org	248.13***	253.04***	250.76***	249.61***	248.62***	239.49***	241.49***	237.99***	268.92***	312.60***	481.88***
	(57.32)	(57.42)	(57.97)	(56.56)	(41.04)	(39.35)	(40.34)	(42.24)	(46.14)	(52.37)	(75.15)
Distance	0.44	0.86*	0.96***	0.80**	0.62	-0.02	0.04	0.50	0.72*	0.73*	2.44*
	(0.29)	(0.35)	(0.36)	(0.37)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.30)	(0.34)	(0.29)	(0.44)	(1.34)
Pop	10.21***	11.02***	11.13***	11.13***	11.19***	10.27***	10.95***	10.27***	10.13***	9.48***	9.39***
	(1.55)	(1.60)	(1.62)	(1.59)	(1.15)	(1.11)	(1.24)	(1.32)	(1.52)	(1.76)	(3.21)
Urban	3.67	4.73	5.12	4.76	3.96*	0.66	-0.30	-5.08*	-4.97	-4.84	-10.44
	(3.13)	(3.18)	(3.23)	(3.22)	(2.35)	(2.33)	(2.50)	(2.89)	(3.47)	(4.27)	(7.38)
Life exp		-6.00**	-5.19*	-5.15*	-5.01**	-5.28*	-5.97***	-8.79***	-10.95***	-8.92***	-16.12**
		(2.85)	(2.95)	(2.93)	(2.13)	(2.05)	(2.24)	(2.55)	(3.03)	(3.25)	(7.64)
Density			-0.61	-0.46	-0.34	-0.25	-0.21	0.07	0.27	0.15	0.16
			(0.47)	(0.47)	(0.34)	(0.33)	(0.34)	(0.40)	(0.54)	(0.59)	(0.96)
GDP pc				0.004	0.01***	0.0004	0.002	0.0079	0.02*	0.02**	0.03**
				(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
FDI					0.44	0.13	-0.12	0.09	-0.29	-2.16	-2.94*
					(0.51)	(0.64)	(0.70)	(0.91)	(1.08)	(1.61)	(2.17)
Internet						6.78***	6.81***	8.24***	8.56***	6.77***	6.95***
						(0.70)	(0.73)	(0.83)	(0.93)	(1.30)	(1.81)
Exports							1.51*	2.21***	0.72	0.55	0.49
							(0.59)	(0.69)	(0.92)	(1.20)	(1.73)
Aid								0.06	0.08	0.08	0.11
								(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.15)
Services									-2.39*	-2.58	-5.18**
									(1.40)	(1.57)	(2.45)
Tourism										0.03***	-0.07***
										(0.01)	(0.02)
Residents											1.3*
											(0.70)
CONSTANT	-217.23**	44.99	23.42	15.78	20.52	194.14*	203.83	476.39	702.35***	-484.23***	349.44***
	(108.05)	(164.85)	(168.08)	(165.44)	(120.24)	(117.45)	(124.67)	(148.61)	(191.80)	(113.87)	(77.90)
R²	0.19	0.15	0.15	0.18	0.24	0.28	0.26	0.16	0.15	0.26	0.01
Prob chi/F	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
n	1056	1051	1031	984	979	956	895	797	712	638	429

Notes. Coup, FIFA and Org are dummies. Distance in thousand kilometers. Pop in million inhabitants. Urban, Internet, Services and Exports in percentages. Life exp in years. Density in inhabitants per km². GDP pc in thousand dollars. FDI in million dollars. Aid in million dollars. Tourism in million arrivals. Residents in millions. Standard errors in parentheses. ***: significant at the 0.01 level; **: significant at the 0.05 level; *: significant at the 0.10 level.

The most evident results in Tables 2 and 3 regard the participation in the final phase of the FWC and the organization of the AFCON. The coefficients are always high and significant. Participating in or organizing a football championship lead to increased mentions of African countries. This result is not surprising. The reports regarding international tournaments include multiple mentions of *all* participating national teams or organizing countries, not only African ones. The next section explores whether the mentions related to football championships are associated with a description of the general conditions of African countries, while the rest of this section focuses on the other explanatory variables.

The coefficients of the explanatory variables are higher in Repubblica (Table 3), which gives more coverage to African countries, as also emerges in the descriptive statistics. However, the results of the empirical estimates of the Corriere and Repubblica country mentions are rather similar. Country size is always positive and significant: on average, the largest countries receive higher attention from the media (using GDP instead of population produces the same result). However, the coefficients of population are small. For instance, Table 2 (regarding Corriere) shows that having one million more inhabitants only generates one or two more country mentions per year. The effect of country size is higher for Repubblica: one additional million inhabitants means ten more mentions. Geographical proximity does not have a clear impact on the probability of obtaining media coverage. In the case of Corriere, the most distant countries tend to receive a larger coverage, but the effect is small. However, it is clear that Italian newspapers do not favor the closest countries, for example the nations of the Maghreb. The occurrence of a coup d'état does not increase the country mentions in the newspapers. This result is interesting, because a coup d'état is an outstanding event that should increase the media coverage of a country. A coup d'état occurring in Africa probably remains in the news for a short time. Repubblica's country mentions of African countries increase with Internet users, while the impact of Internet usage is less evident in Corriere.

In both newspapers, population density, bilateral aid flows, FDI net inflows and population resident in urban areas do not have any effect on the number of mentions of African countries, while the Africans resident in Italy (per country) have an irrelevant impact on the media coverage (the residents are expressed in millions in Tables 2 and 3). Other variables (trade openness, share of services on GDP, tourist arrivals) have an ambiguous effect (in terms of sign and significance) on the number of mentions, while the richest countries do not have any advantage in terms of media coverage. A clear result regards life expectancy. The countries with the lowest overall life

expectancy obtain more mentions in both Corriere and Repubblica. Although a number of different circumstances affect life expectancy, this result shows that Italian newspapers give particular attention to the countries with extremely poor socio-economic conditions, possibly exacerbated by famine and civil wars.

In conclusion, the largest countries have a higher media coverage, although the effect of country size is not high. In addition, the sign and significance of coefficients in the panel analysis show that the more 'advanced' countries do not appear more frequently on the web pages of major newspapers, although this result is not conclusive. Finally, Italian newspapers devote more mentions to countries in an 'extreme environment' as long as life expectancy is a good proxy of extremely poor socio-economic conditions.

5 Football championships: an opportunity to talk about something else?

The last section has shown that the mentions of African countries tend to rise during the World or African football championships. This result is not completely unexpected, because most mentions regard the national football teams. However, international tournaments might provide an opportunity to talk about the political and economic conditions of African countries. To assess this, we considered the 2015 AFCON held in Equatorial Guinea from 17 January to 8 February 2015 and the articles of Corriere and Repubblica mentioning African countries, published between 1 January to 15 February 2015, and related to the championship. We only considered the mentions of the sixteen countries that qualified for the tournament.[5]

There were 93 mentions of African countries in Corriere and 199 in Repubblica that were related to participation in the tournament. We examined the content of the corresponding articles and found that 19.27% of mentions contained descriptions of institutional, social, economic or cultural conditions of African countries. Of course, not all participant countries received such attention. In addition, some of the descriptions of non-sporting characteristics of African countries were short or inaccurate. However, these figures lend some support to the idea that football championships can focus the world's attention on African countries and provide an opportunity to describe and discuss institutional and economic issues regarding disadvantaged nations. In other words, some issues would probably be ignored without the pretext of football competitions.

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[5] Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia and Zambia.

6 Coverage of coups d'états and country characteristics

The fourth section has shown that a coup d'état does not increase the media coverage of African countries. This is a serious shortcoming because a coup d'état can have a significant impact on the institutional framework and social equilibrium of a country, thus meriting special attention on the part of the mass media and international organizations. Coups d'état probably remain in the news for a short time. In addition, the coverage of African coups d'état might be lower than the coverage of similar events in other areas of the world. To explore these hypotheses, we considered all the coups d'état included in the Jonathan Powell dataset between 1996 and 2015. Only 18 coups d'état took place in the rest of the world against the 100 coups d'état in Africa. Table 4 shows the average number of articles in Corriere and Repubblica devoted to a coup d'état and the average length of the articles (in words).

Table 4. Coups d'état in Africa and rest of the world (1996-2015).

	Africa	Rest of the World
Coups d'état	100	18
Average articles	2.05 (0.45)	2.12 (0.34)
Average length	279.34 (77.92)	332.77** (61.81)

Notes. Average length in words. Standard deviations in parentheses. ***: significant at the 0.01 level; **: significant at the 0.05 level; *: significant at the 0.10 level.

Broadly speaking, a coup d'état remained in the news for a short time: 2.05 articles for African coups d'état and 2.12 for coups d'état in the rest of the world (the difference is not significant). Secondly, the average length of the articles regarding African countries is significantly lower. In other words, the media show scarce "interest" in such events when they take place in Africa. The asymmetry might be explained by the country characteristics. However, a simple OLS (not shown here) does not reveal any significant relationship between the explanatory variables in Tables 2 and 3 and the coverage of the coups d'état. For example, the coups d'état in the largest nations did not have a higher media coverage in terms of number of articles or number of words. An alternative explanation for the asymmetry is the higher frequency of coups d'état in Africa: the

interest of newspaper readers in an event may decrease with the frequency of such events. The newsworthiness of the event therefore diminishes. Of course, this circumstance does not reduce the seriousness of the event and its political and humanitarian consequences.

7 Conclusions and implications

This paper contributes to the literature regarding what determines the media coverage of world countries. The analysis focused on the news regarding African countries which was published in Italy between 1996 and 2015 in two major newspapers, Corriere and Repubblica. We considered several economic and non-economic variables in a panel analysis of the mentions of African countries.

Among the covariates included in the panel analysis, only a few have a significant impact on the number of mentions. The 'size' of a country significantly influences the media coverage, but the magnitude of this effect is different between the two newspapers under review. While it is understandable how the abundance of resources in a country increases the probability of notable events being reported in the media, our empirical analysis does not provide conclusive confirmation of this hypothesis. This result contrasts with many previous studies that found a high and significant correlation between country size and media coverage. The reason for this discordance may be due, at least in part, to the excessive use, in previous studies, of correlation analyses which cannot assess the real impact of economic size and other variables on the number of country mentions. Our analysis shows that the size of a country *does* affect its media coverage, but also that such effect is not too large.

The fact that the media coverage does not strictly depend on the macroeconomic characteristics of African countries can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the mass media could be considered as 'insensitive' to the economic gaps between African countries. In other words, since the GDP and GDP per capita do nor exert a decisive influence on media coverage, the newspapers' attitude towards African countries reflects a sort of balancing effect that contrasts the 'privilege' that the mass media usually grant to large, rich or powerful countries. On the other hand, Italian newspapers probably prefer to highlight the social and cultural characteristics of African countries, instead of focusing on the income inequalities within a continent whose 2017 average income per capita was, according to the World Bank, seventeen times lower than the average European income per capita. One could also argue that Italian journalists are able to distance themselves

from the 'instrumental approach' (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013), for which news professionals, belonging to the elite group in every country, tend subconsciously to adopt an elite perspective when they report news from the world. Such a perspective often consists of covering news and stories of the most powerful countries (i.e., the largest and richest ones).

Another interesting result is that coups d'état do not increase the visibility of African countries in the media. A possible explanation, still unexplored, is that the attention of the media towards such events tends to decline when such dramatic events occur frequently, as is the case of Africa. In fact, we have shown that the media devote more attention to the coups d'états in other continents, at least in terms of words per article. Another explanation relies upon the different readers' perception of global and local issues. According to Golan (2008), global issues such as international terrorism might attract more attention in western newspapers because they involve the readers more directly. In contrast, coups d'état or civil wars in Africa could be considered 'local problems', which cannot affect the lives of readers to a large extent.

The panel analysis reveals the massive interest of the mass media in sporting tournaments. This is not surprising, because all national teams are continuously mentioned as participants in any football championship. In addition, football is the most popular sports in Italy (as well in Africa and in most other European countries). At the same time, we found that a football championship can be a pretext for talking about something else, such as, in our data, the political and economic conditions of African countries. From this perspective, the organization of a football championship is a 'desirable' event because it creates visibility for many countries that otherwise would be completely ignored by the media.

A clear result is that Italian newspapers systematically devote more coverage to the countries that suffer from severe social and health conditions, approximated with life expectancy. This result reflects the media interest in the extreme situations of some African countries, regardless of the usually scarce newsworthiness of such countries. It is also consistent with previous studies that found that most news from the Third World tends to focus on negative news (Masmoudi, 1979). However, only reporting bad news risks perpetuating a simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of African countries.

Another notable result is the irrelevance of distance in the determination of media coverage. This result shows that neighbourhood and 'familiar' issues, such as the flow of migrants leaving the Maghreb, do not affect the number of mentions of African countries in the news.

This paper suffers from the following limitations. First, the empirical analysis regards the media outlets of a single country, and the results cannot be extended to the rest of the world's media industry. Second, we have only considered the print versions of newspapers. However, given the popularity of the Internet as a means to gather information, the determinants of the coverage of African countries in online media still warrant investigation. Third, the paper does not include a detailed analysis of the media content. The extent of media coverage also depends on the length of each article devoted to African countries, although many newspaper articles mention more than one African country and it is unclear what proportion of the length of the article should be devoted to which countries. More importantly, a thorough content analysis could detect the 'tone' and the 'frame' of each article. In other words, a further examination could determine the 'importance' that the media attributes to the economic and political issues regarding African countries.

These developments in the empirical analysis could help in further understanding what kind of news regarding Africa can be found in the media, and how this news is presented. Previous research has shown that the perception of foreign issues is strictly dependent on the news selection operated by the media. In turn, perceptions affect the positive and negative feelings of individuals towards foreign countries and foreign continents. Of course, mass media users do not necessarily play a passive role during the formation of their own views, since each individual uses his/her own different sources to gather information on events and issues. The fact remains that for many citizens, media content is often the primary source of information regarding places, peoples and cultures, especially when direct contact is absent.

In reporting African news and stories, the mass media have a heavy responsibility also towards policymakers, for several reasons. Firstly, politicians pay attention to media content because it can act as a mediator of public opinion. Secondly, previous research has shown that the process of news selection affects the knowledge of politicians, especially in relation to 'distant' issues. From a 'western' perspective, the political and economic conditions of African countries can certainly be considered distant. Finally, African countries are frequently the focus of policy actions of national and supranational institutions. As long as policymakers rely on the news to gather political and economic information on foreign countries, the attention of the media to the conditions of African nations can thus affect the implementation of active policies in relation to the most disadvantaged people in the world.

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