Africa is one of the seven continents that exist on this planet. It is the second-largest continent, both in terms of land size and population. It is ethnically diverse and comprised of over 50 different countries with over 2,000 different languages spoken across the different and beautiful cultures it has to offer. It contains around 30% of the world's natural resources and is responsible for much of the world's wealth. Like any other continent, it has many large cities with modern infrastructure as well as rural areas and villages. There are plenty of sights to see and places to visit that everyone can enjoy.

At this point, you might be wondering if we are talking about the same Africa. Because, if you live outside of it, you have probably heard that Africa is a giant infested wasteland inhabited by sickly, malnourished people who cannot fend for themselves. That people there live in huts with no electricity and that the water is undrinkable. That they are always at war and that there is no helping them. You might have heard something of the sort about Africa. That is because the international media has made it its job to scrutinize Africa and misrepresent it in the eyes of the world. This misrepresentation by the media has hurt Africa for a very long time. It is the reason why Africa is not respected from a global perspective. This paper will try to prove that there exists a deliberate misrepresentation of Africa in the international media and also try to go through some possible reasons for why they exist and how this problem can be solved.

Throughout the years, the international media has misrepresented Africa, be it in the west or the east. There is a discrepancy between what local African news outlets report and what their international counterparts have to say about the same news. Dennis Pinto from the Financial Times provided an excellent example of this in an article he wrote. He recounts a story of a time when international media had exaggerated a riot in a Kenyan slum. International media said that the entire country was "burning" when local media reported that violence only occurred in densely populated city slums. International media also reported that millions of middle-class Kenyans were involved in the conflict when, in fact, that was not true (Pinto). This is a perfect example of the media not only misrepresenting but also exaggerating a situation to make it seem worse than it is. Pinto also argues that if the media gave the same attention to real issues, the ones that hurt Africa, like corrupt political leaders, the large sums of money stolen by governments, or how some European countries exploit Africa and take its resources, maybe they might be solved.

Although misinformation about Africa is a problem, the real problem is that there is a lack of African coverage in international news all over the world. African coverage only accounts for about 6% to 9% of all western international news (this means about 2% of the news in general). These numbers drop to about 3% in Japan. If that was not bad enough, most of the coverage about Africa is negative. Over 60% of coverage
about Africa is about conflict, terrorism, disasters, and diseases. In Japan, that percentage goes up to 70% (Hawkins). The media focuses so much on all the conflict in Africa that when the conflicts are actually resolved, they are unlikely to be covered in international media. African news is also overshadowed by news from other parts of the world. For example, if a kidnapping were to happen in both Europe and Africa, the one in Europe would get more coverage than the one in Africa (Hawkins). This sort of favoritism that the international media has towards stories from everywhere but Africa will keep Africa’s coverage at a minimum.

Many times, when Africa does get coverage, Africa is not even the leader of the story. It is often the victim and westerners are represented as the saviors who come to its rescue. Westerners represent themselves as building infrastructure and getting children out of the situation into which were unfortunately born. The media is so focused on spreading this narrative that they forget to talk about Africa’s other problems, like all the money that foreign corporations take from Africa via illicit financial flows or how rich countries benefit from the unfair trade rules which drain money out of Africa (Hawkins). This representation of Africa by the international media serves as propaganda by western countries to reinforce the belief that westerners are superior. There is a belief that the salvation of Africans “lies in Caucasians helping them to learn and embrace superior western culture” (Aina 26). Being portrayed as the victim makes Africa a less legitimate continent than the others. I would go as far as to say that this version of Africa, in the eyes of many people, makes it seem like a burden on the planet, a place that always needs saving, and the mighty, heroic westerners are there to save it again and again. The media even goes as far as to use Africa’s problems to its advantage. The term poornography was created by Charles Quist-Adade and Anita Van Wik by combining poverty and pornography. It refers to the use of naked pictures of poor people, usually young children used in the west to raise money without concern for whether such representations are ethical or not. (81). The people in these pictures are real—and their situations are real as well—but the pictures present a distorted view of reality. These pictures are taken in the poorest villages of Africa, but the media will make it seem like the entire continent is like that.

Apart from destroying Africa’s image in the eyes of the rest of the world and reducing it to a mere place of disaster and tragedy, media misrepresentation also hurts the African continent on an economic level. Adverse media reports have been shown to scare away possible investors from Africa, making them—and Africa—lose out on many opportunities. Because of all the negative news and portrayal...
that Africa receives, many foreign investors have no desire to invest in the continent. Gustav Johnson, an adviser for a Spain-based consulting firm, even confirmed that because of all the bad news reported by the media about Africa, European investors are disinterested in investing there (Fikru). This can be clearly seen when you look at the fact that big enterprises like McDonald’s or KFC, for example, are nowhere to be found in most of Africa, despite consumer interest being high enough. With Africa’s already existing problems and media representation only making everything worse, Africa is in a place where it is hard to build a modern economy.

One of the reasons Africa might be forgotten in the international media is simply a lack of interest by non-African news consumers. Interest in African news has always been low all over the world, which is, without a doubt, linked to the days of colonialism and the notion that Africa ranks below the rest. This creates a chain reaction very detrimental to Africa. People have no interest, meaning that the media will not show it, which in turn makes people dismiss it as irrelevant and unimportant (Golan). This feedback cycle repeats over and over, and if it is not broken, it will continue indefinitely. Lack of interest, however, is only a small part of the real reason for the misrepresentation of Africa in the international news. Race and socioeconomic status are the main reasons. As mentioned earlier, the misrepresentation of Africa is not a new phenomenon. I would even argue that ever since the western world has come in contact with Africa, it has misrepresented Africa in one way or another. At first, it came from the idea that white people were superior to Africans. Westerners described the people they met on the land as uncivilized and inferior. They described them as monkeys or even demons, saying they had “nothing in common with humanity,” and that they were not aware of their own being, not conscious that they were even human beings, as Friedrich Hegel said in his famous The Philosophy of History (93). Because every explorer who came back from Africa said the same thing about the continent, this idea was eventually accepted as a truth in the west—that Africans are a bunch of primitive barbarians, who do not have the brain capacity to build cities or anything of the sort (Aina 26).

These notions were inevitably accepted as truth and taught from generation to generation in the west. From a very early age, kids are taught that Africans are inferior and that they need the help of westerners, Caucasians, in particular, to come and save them from their misery. Western countries want these ideas to be taught so selectively that a Belgian teacher who was married to a Nigerian man decided to quit her job after she had realized that the school at which she used to teach deliberately misinformed children about the situation of African countries, saying that there existed no cities whatsoever in Africa (Aina 26). This goes to show how deliberate this misinformation is. The insistence on spreading misinformation to the young makes sense for what they are trying to accomplish. The Belgian teacher asked her students what they would find in Africa. Her students answered that they would find animals and men with spears hunting those animals. The school system was obviously used as a tool to misinform the population about the realities in Africa—and it works, judging from the fact that Belgian secondary and post-secondary students still view Africa as the media describes it.

These notions did not stick with western countries only. Soon, the entire world came to believe the same thing about Africa. Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States, as well as its 3rd president, also supported the stereotypes about Africa and said that Caucasians were justified for believing them. In his book, Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson writes,

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. (73)

In China, a museum was accused of racism after comparing a black child to a monkey. It is not uncommon to watch international TV shows or movies and see a character make a reference to how poor Africa is or call it a third-world country despite this term being out of date due to its insulting nature.

At this point, people’s perception of Africa is set. Changing the way people see things is going to be a hard task, but it can be done. I don’t think there is one specific solution that will accomplish this; rather it’s the combination of many small parts that will help solve this bigger issue.

First, the international media has to recognize that Africa, like any other continent,
deserves fair and much broader coverage. If Africa never receives coverage to a degree that is similar to that of the other continents, no number of good things said about it will change anything, simply for the fact that no one will see it. For the other changes to matter, Africa needs to be covered equally. Africa also needs to be covered fairly. As mentioned above, an absurdly large percentage of the already little coverage Africa gets is negative. This hurts Africa’s image and helps shape it as a place of disaster in the eyes of those who watch the news. If we want to solve the misrepresentation of Africa in the media, it has to portray Africa the way it is, the good as well as the bad. As stated earlier, the media also has to focus on the more significant issues Africa is facing (governments stealing money, resources being stolen, unfair trade rules, etc.), which is why many people see Africa in a negative light. By portraying it correctly, people will see that Africa is not a place full of catastrophe and that it is a place full of possibilities. Portraying it correctly will also bring the more prominent issues to light and give them a chance to be solved.

The second way this problem could be solved is by changing what is taught in schools about Africa. As established earlier, the reason why a large part of the western world believes the stereotypes about Africa is that these beliefs have been placed inside people’s heads ever since they were young. The same way schools have been able to misinform children about the real situation in Africa, they can teach them about what Africa is really like. If they are taught actual information about the continent, not only will they not believe in what the media says, but as they grow up, some might work in the media and change the way Africa is portrayed. It would create a positive cycle in which children are taught the truth and spread their knowledge around until everyone is knowledgeable. Doing this would do more than changing the media misrepresentation. It would also help change the overall perception of Africa around the world. The advantage of tackling this problem through young people is that having an educated youth leads a society with an educated population in the future. The youth grows up and, in turn, teach the next youth.

The most significant factor in solving the misrepresentation of Africa in the media are the inhabitants of Africa itself, the African people. Changing the perception of Africa in the international media is a long and laborious process, but I believe that Africans themselves are at the center. It might not look like it, but Africa itself has its part to play in the scrutiny and bad treatment it receives from the media. While Africa is being torn apart by the international media, Africans remain passive, quietly receiving the insults, the scrutiny, and the injustice. In fact, many Africans even think of Europeans’ treatment of Africa as some kind of blessing. They embrace it and embrace the cultures of others more than their own. This has become so ingrained that I have personally met African people who have told me that they wish
they were white. Growing up in Africa, I have learned more about the history of other countries than that of my own. I had to go out of my way to learn things that should have been taught at school. In her speech “The Danger of a Single Story,” Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about how, as a child, she would write stories with white characters in them, despite having never met a white person. This was due to European and American culture and literature being more prevalent in Nigeria than African culture. All of this could be a result of colonization and slavery, a result of Europeans always putting in African people’s heads that they are inferior. But even if that was the case, times have changed, and so should people.

With technology becoming more prevalent than ever, it had never been easier to get a new message across. That is what African people should do to change the international perception of them. They should take the initiative and make a change. In her speech, Adichie says that to help solve the lack of African literature in Africa, she helped start a nonprofit to build libraries and refurbish already existing libraries. You do not need to be an author to start such a campaign. One of my uncles has also decided to found a library in the town of France where he lives to promote African literature abroad and, most importantly, to help young Africans who live there and who like to read appreciate literature from Africa.

These changes will not be easy, and it will be a long road. For example, my uncle who is trying to open a library keeps getting shut down by the mayor of his city. He thinks people will not be interested in reading African literature, but my uncle keeps trying because that is all he can do, try. That is how changes are made.

Building libraries, however, is not the only way to improve Africa’s perception in the media. Something as small as telling a friend about the reality of things can go a long way to improving the media’s perception if enough people do it. I, like many other Africans, take pride in learning all sorts of things about different cultures, countries, and places in the world. That is why it is sad to find out that some people still have no idea about the real situation in Africa. It is painful to hear questions like “Do you guys live on top of trees?” or “What language do you guys speak, African?” It is painful to find out that many people do not even know that Africa is a continent. Instead, many people think it is one vast country where uncivilized people fight unending wars and die from poverty and disease. If there is one thing I hope this paper accomplishes, it is to teach at least one person about the reality. I think this is something people should learn about because Africa is a continent with a very diverse culture where more than 2,000 languages are spoken.

Africa plays and has always played a significant role in human history. That remains a fact, even though many of its contributions have been downplayed or erased from history. Africa is a continent full of diversity and a rich cultural heritage. It has a large middle class, like any other continent, and has the potential for great things. All it needs is to be given a chance.

Works Cited


The citation system used in this essay is MLA 8th.