OUT OF AFRICA — GLOBAL NEWS ANALYSIS 26–27

# Theoretical Framework: Contested Centers and Communicative Sovereignty

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## 1. Core argument

**Thesis: the global news order has not been decentered. It has been re-centered, several times over.** East Africa is now a periphery to several centers at once: Washington and London, but also Ankara, Beijing, Moscow, Tehran and Doha. Each center applies Galtung and Ruge's selection rules with itself as the elite nation. The result is not more African voice. It is more competition over who narrates Africa.

The framework calls this condition the **polycentric periphery**. It makes three claims.

1. **Selection converges; attribution diverges.** All centers pick the same high-threshold, negative events. They part ways on cause, blame and remedy. Rivalry between centers is fought at the level of frames, not facts.
2. **Facts travel on old rails.** The contra-flow outlets still draw much of their raw material from Western wire agencies. Their difference lies in the layer they add on top: analysis, op-ed, choice of expert, choice of what to leave out.
3. **The periphery still speaks through the center.** Multipolarity changes who the center is, not where East African voices enter. They enter as victims, officials or partners, filtered through a sponsor's narrative. Measured against MacBride's "many voices", this is plurality of centers, not plurality of voices.

The normative stake is **communicative sovereignty**: the capacity of East African publics to define their own situation in their own categories. The epistemic stake is **epistemological resilience**: whether audiences can keep a coherent picture of reality when several confident truth regimes compete. The project studies the supply side of both. It shows what the competing centers offer, and what they leave out.

## 2. Architecture

The framework has four levels. Each level has its own theories, its own new concepts and its own propositions to test.

> Structure → Institutions → Discourse → Norms and stakes. Structure constrains institutions; institutions produce discourse; discourse is judged against the norms.

Read from top to bottom: structure constrains what institutions can do, institutions produce discourse, and discourse is judged against the norms. The codebook measures level 3 directly. Levels 1 and 2 are inferred from patterns across outlets. Level 4 supplies the criteria for judging the results.

## 3. Level 1: Structure

The structural level explains *why* East Africa appears in global news at all, and on whose terms. Three traditions supply the argument.

### Center and periphery

Galtung's structural theory of imperialism (1971) describes a *feudal interaction structure*. Periphery nations interact mainly with the center, rarely with each other. News follows the same pattern: Kenyans learn about

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Ethiopia through London, not Nairobi. Galtung and Ruge's news factors (1965) are the editorial expression of that structure. The periphery becomes news only when negative, elite and personified.

The framework keeps Galtung's geometry and multiplies its centers. In a polycentric periphery, each center keeps its own vertical line to East Africa. The horizontal links between East African societies stay thin. The question is whether the new centers thicken those horizontal links or only add more vertical ones.

### NWICO and MacBride

The MacBride report (1980) named the problem as imbalance: one-way flows, a few agencies, and the right to communicate denied to most of the world. Its remedy was national and regional communication capacity, not new external broadcasters.

The contra-flow outlets borrow NWICO's language. RT and CGTN speak of breaking Western monopoly and giving voice to the Global South. The framework takes that claim seriously enough to test it. MacBride's own yardstick is whether the periphery gains voice and capacity, not whether the center changes hands.

### Media ecology

Innis (1950, 1951) argued that space-biased media serve the extension of empire across distance, and that monopolies of knowledge form around the dominant medium. International satellite and web broadcasting are space-binding media in his sense. Each state broadcaster is an instrument for projecting a center's knowledge across space.

Two Innisian points matter here. First, competing monopolies do not add up to pluralism: four monopolies of knowledge are still monopolies, each with its own blind spots. Second, time-biased forms, oral tradition, local memory and community media, are where periphery knowledge persists. Their absence from global coverage is a structural silence, not an accident.

**What the structural level predicts:** shared selection of crisis events across centers; vertical sourcing through each center; little horizontal, African-to-African sourcing.

## 4. Level 2: Institutions

The institutional level explains *how* each center turns structure into output. It treats the outlets as organizations with sponsors, routines and dependencies.

### Contra-flows

Thussu (2007) describes flows that run against the dominant West-to-rest direction. The framework accepts the term but separates two meanings. A contra-flow can run against the *direction* of flow (South to North, East to West). Or it can run against the *content* of the dominant flow (a counter-narrative). The four outlets studied are contra-flows in content, but not in direction: they still flow from a center to the periphery.

### Strategic narratives and sharp power

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013) define strategic narratives as means by which states construct shared meaning of the past, present and future to shape behavior. The framework treats each outlet's East Africa coverage as one front of its sponsor's strategic narrative.

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Nye's soft power (2004) describes attraction. Walker and Ludwig's sharp power (2017) describes influence that pierces and manipulates rather than attracts. The distinction is useful but hard to observe in text. The framework substitutes an observable: **strategic self-reference**. A sponsor appears where it flatters (spaceports, railways, summits) and disappears where it might be implicated (arms, votes at the UN, its own regional role). The pattern of presence and absence is the textual trace of strategy.

### Dependence on wire infrastructure

Boyd-Barrett (1980) showed how a few agencies structure what the world knows. That structure persists. The early evidence in this project shows TRT's hard news running largely on AFP, AP, Reuters and Anadolu copy, and Press TV building stories from Middle East Eye, *Africa Intelligence* and Western agencies.

This yields a two-layer model of each outlet:

| Layer | Content | Source | Where difference appears |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fact layer | Events, figures, quotes from officials | Largely shared wire infrastructure | Selection and headline only |
| Frame layer | Analysis, op-ed, expert choice, attribution, omission | The outlet's own staff and networks | Cause, blame, remedy, self-reference |

The contra-flow is real, but thin. It sits on top of the old infrastructure.

**What the institutional level predicts:** strategic self-reference in each state outlet; convergence in the fact layer and divergence in the frame layer; the strongest sponsor imprint in analysis and opinion genres.

## 5. Level 3: Discourse

The discourse level explains *what* the coverage makes true, salient and normal. Four concepts link the levels above to the text.

### News factors as a selection grammar

Galtung and Ruge's factors act as a grammar that decides which events enter the text. The framework re-specifies two factors. *Reference to elite nations* becomes **reference to the sponsor**. *Consonance* becomes **narrative consonance**: fit with the sponsor's strategic narrative rather than with audience expectation. The other factors are retained as stated.

### Framing as the bridge

Entman (1993) gives the four functions that the codebook measures. His cascading activation model (2004) adds a vertical logic: frames cascade from administrations through elites and media to publics. The framework adapts the cascade to the state broadcaster. The sponsor government sits at the top. The outlet's experts and op-ed writers form the elite tier. Wire facts enter at the media tier and are reframed there.

### Regimes of truth

Foucault's concept names the mechanisms that decide which statements count as true and who may utter them (1980). Each outlet installs its own regime: the UN and its fact-finding missions, local governments, the

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outlet's own analysts, or secondary intelligence reports. In a polycentric periphery, regimes of truth compete. Audiences face several confident accounts, each certified by a different authority. This is the link to epistemological resilience.

### Articulation

Hall's notion of articulation (1986) describes how elements with no necessary connection are joined into a meaningful unity. The framework uses it to name a recurring move: **displaced framing**. An East African event is articulated to a conflict elsewhere: Somaliland to Gaza and Israel, Ethiopia to the Red Sea rivalry of Gulf states, an Ebola facility in Kenya to US power. The event's meaning is located outside the region. Displaced framing is where the periphery most clearly becomes a stage for the centers.

Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) reminds us that preferred readings are not guaranteed. African audiences may read these outlets negotiatedly or oppositionally. The present design studies encoding. Decoding is a later stage (Section 9).

**What the discourse level predicts:** competing regimes of truth by outlet; displaced framing in outlets whose sponsors have conflicts outside Africa; narrative consonance stronger in analysis than in news.

## 6. Level 4: Norms and stakes

The normative level asks *what is at stake* for East African publics. It supplies the yardsticks against which the findings of the other three levels are judged. The working definitions below are proposals; the project lead's own definitions take precedence.

### Communicative sovereignty

**Working definition:** the capacity of a public to define its own situation, in its own categories, through its own voices, and to have that definition circulate. It has three dimensions that can be observed in coverage:

| Dimension | Question | Indicator in coverage |
|---|---|---|
| Voice | Do East Africans speak? | Share of African sources; non-official African voices (codebook B4) |
| Definition | Whose categories name the situation? | Who supplies labels, problem definitions and remedies (B5, C2.3.1) |
| Agency | Are East Africans subjects or objects? | Subject positions: sovereign agents vs victims, pawns, partners (C1.3) |

Communicative sovereignty is not the same as state sovereignty. A government can assert sovereignty loudly while its citizens remain unheard. RT's coverage, for example, may amplify a government's claim against outside pressure while excluding that country's opposition and civil society. The framework keeps the two apart.

### Epistemological resilience

**Working definition:** the capacity of a public to form and maintain a coherent, revisable understanding of events when several authoritative accounts compete. Resilience is threatened in two ways: by monopoly (one

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regime of truth crowds out others) and by fragmentation (many regimes of truth, none trusted). The polycentric periphery risks the second.

The supply side of resilience can be observed: the share of coverage that explains context, cites verifiable evidence, marks uncertainty and acknowledges competing accounts. Coverage that does these things supports resilience. Coverage that offers confident attribution on secondary evidence erodes it.

### Peace journalism

Galtung's model (1998), developed by Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), gives the third yardstick. It asks whether coverage explains causes, includes all parties and non-elites, names invisible effects and reports solutions. It is the practical form of Galtung and Ruge's own 1965 recommendations. The codebook's peace and war indices (B6) measure it.

### How the three norms relate

The three yardsticks overlap but do not coincide. Peace journalism concerns the conflict. Communicative sovereignty concerns the public. Epistemological resilience concerns knowledge. An article can score well on one and badly on another. A humanitarian report built on UN sources may be good peace journalism and still give East Africans no voice.

## 7. Theoretical propositions

The framework yields seven propositions. Each is falsifiable with the codebook and corpus. Each would be disconfirmed by the result named in the last column.

| No. | Proposition | Level | Main evidence (codebook) | Disconfirmed if |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | **Convergent selection.** All six outlets select the same high-threshold, negative East African events. | Structure | A7, B1.1, B1.8, B2.1 by outlet | Event clusters differ substantially across outlets |
| P2 | **Divergent attribution.** Outlets differ more in cause and blame than in topic. | Discourse | B5.2, B5.3 vs B2.1; C3.4 | Attribution differences are no larger than topic differences |
| P3 | **Strategic self-reference.** Each state outlet references its sponsor where it flatters and omits it where implicated. | Institution | B1.5 (values 2 and 3), C1.5, C3.4 | Sponsor reference is random with respect to valence |
| P4 | **Thin contra-flow.** Difference concentrates in the frame layer; the fact layer converges on shared wire material. | Institution | A9, A10 crossed with B5 and F3 | Wire-based items differ as much as own analysis |
| P5 | **Displaced framing.** Outlets whose sponsors have conflicts elsewhere articulate East African events to those conflicts. | Discourse | B1.4, B3 foreign actors, C2.5.3, F2.3 | Displaced framing is equally common in all outlets |
| P6 | **Vertical voice.** Across all outlets, East African non-official voices are rare and enter through the center's framing. | Structure, Norms | B4.2, B4.6, C1.2, C1.3 | Contra-flow outlets show markedly more African non-official voice |

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| No. | Proposition | Level | Main evidence (codebook) | Disconfirmed if |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P7 | **Competing certainties.** State outlets attribute blame with more certainty on weaker evidence than reference outlets. | Norms | B5.3, C2.2.3 modality, C3.3.8 evidentiality | Certainty and evidence quality do not differ by outlet group |

P1 and P2 together restate Galtung and Ruge for a multipolar order. P3 and P4 are the institutional core. P5 is the framework's most distinctive claim. P6 and P7 connect findings to communicative sovereignty and epistemological resilience.

### Link to the research questions

- **RQ1 (selection)** tests P1 and P3.
- **RQ2 (framing and attribution)** tests P2, P4 and P5.
- **RQ3 (change and norms)** tests P6 and P7, and follows all propositions over time.

## 8. New concepts proposed

The framework introduces six concepts. Each fills a gap between the inherited theories and what the early evidence shows.

| Concept | Definition | Builds on | Why it is needed |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Polycentric periphery** | A region that is periphery to several competing centers at once, each with its own vertical line of news flow | Galtung (1971); Thussu (2007) | Center–periphery theory assumes one center; contra-flow theory assumes the flows decenter |
| **Re-centering** | The replacement or multiplication of centers without a gain in periphery voice | MacBride (1980) | Separates plurality of centers from plurality of voices |
| **Strategic self-reference** | The patterned presence of a sponsor state where it flatters and its absence where it may be implicated | Galtung and Ruge (1965), elite nations; Miskimmon et al. (2013) | Gives sharp and soft power an observable trace in text |
| **Thin contra-flow** | Counter-narrative added as a frame layer on top of shared wire facts | Boyd-Barrett (1980); Thussu (2007) | Explains why outlets look similar in news and different in analysis |
| **Displaced framing** | Articulating a regional event to a conflict elsewhere, so its meaning lies outside the region | Hall (1986), articulation; Entman (1993) | Names how the periphery becomes a stage for the centers' rivalries |
| **Competing certainties** | Several confident regimes of truth, each certified by a different authority, offered to the same public | Foucault (1980); epistemological resilience | Names the specific epistemic risk of a polycentric order: fragmentation rather than monopoly |

These concepts are offered as working tools. They should be retained only if the evidence shows the patterns they name.

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## 9. Tensions and open questions

The framework has weak points. They are listed here to compare against your own ideas.

1. **False equivalence.** Treating CNN, Al Jazeera and four state outlets as six "centers" risks flattening real differences in editorial independence. The framework handles this by coding outlet group (A4) and testing whether the patterns differ by group. Whether that is enough is open.
2. **Where is Al Jazeera?** It is state-funded, yet often closest to the peace journalism yardstick in the early evidence. It may be a center of its own, a bridge, or evidence that funding alone predicts little.
3. **The missing African outlets.** Communicative sovereignty cannot be judged only by its absence in foreign media. A comparison with East African outlets (for example the *Nation*, *The Citizen*, *Addis Standard*) and pan-African outlets (Africanews) would show whether the region narrates itself differently. This may be the most important extension.
4. **Encoding without decoding.** The design studies texts. Hall's model, and the concept of epistemological resilience, both point to audiences. A reception stage in Kenya and Ethiopia, perhaps building on audience research on Chinese media in Kenya (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018), would complete the argument.
5. **Galtung on Galtung.** The framework uses both the 1965 news factors and Galtung's later peace journalism. The two are compatible in spirit, but one is descriptive and the other normative. The framework should state clearly when it describes and when it judges.
6. **Innis and the digital.** Innis wrote about stone, papyrus, print and radio. Applying space bias to web and social video is defensible but needs argument. Platform distribution (YouTube, TikTok, X) may matter more for these outlets' African reach than their websites.
7. **Strategy or routine?** Strategic self-reference could also be explained by ordinary newsroom routine: outlets cover what their correspondents know. Distinguishing strategy from routine requires comparing the sponsor's presence in analysis with its presence in wire-based news (P4).
8. **Time frame.** Five months is short for claims about change. The diachronic analysis should be framed as event-driven dynamics, not long-term trends, unless the corpus is extended.

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Page ranges for Hall (1986) and Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) should be checked before publication.

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