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Exploring the media representation of poverty in Darfur, Western Sudan

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This research analyzes how media constructs narratives of poverty during the Darfur crisis in Sudan. It examines news coverage from international, regional, and local sources (2003–2022) to understand the dominant representational strategies, not to contrast them with a single “true” reality, but to uncover the specific political and ideological work they perform. Employing a triangulated methodology of qualitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal analysis, the study identifies recurring frames: a dominant “conflict-poverty” nexus, the portrayal of Darfuri civilians as helpless victims, and the characterization of aid organizations as heroic saviors. The analysis reveals how linguistic and visual strategies prioritize immediate emotional impact, often at the expense of historical and political context. By situating these findings within postcolonial and African media theory, the study argues that these representations are not mere distortions but active constructions that reflect and reinforce particular power dynamics. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these representational patterns and suggests pathways for more reflexive and contextually-grounded journalism.

KEYWORDS

media representations, Darfur, poverty, framing, critical discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, humanitarian communication

Introduction

The conflict and humanitarian crisis in Darfur, western Sudan, has been a persistent subject of global media attention for over two decades. Rather than acting as a neutral mirror, media representations actively construct narratives, frame issues, and shape perceptions of complex realities (Cottle, 2009). In the case of Darfur, these constructions have significant implications for public understanding, policy responses, and the nature of humanitarian intervention itself. This paper critically examines media representations of poverty in Darfur through a constructivist lens. It does not seek to identify a single, accurate portrayal of poverty but to analyze the specific ways in which different media outlets—international, regional, and local—construct this reality through language and imagery. Building on scholarship that views media as a site of ideological production (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001; Curran, 2011), this study asks: What narratives and frames are privileged? Whose voices are amplified or silenced? And what do these representational choices reveal about the power relations embedded in humanitarian communication? This research contributes to existing literature by explicitly adopting a postcolonial perspective (Willems, 2014; Nyamnjoh, 2020) to analyze Darfur’s media coverage, moving beyond a critique of Western media to a comparative analysis that includes Arabic and Sudanese outlets. It also addresses a gap in communication studies by

focusing specifically on the construction of poverty, a dimension often subsumed within broader conflict reporting (Shi-xu, 2024).

Literature review

Dominant frames in humanitarian reporting

Existing research on media and humanitarian crises highlights recurring representational patterns. Studies of famines, wars, and displacement often note a reliance on frames of conflict, victimhood, and sensationalism (Moeller, 1999). In the context of Africa, these frames are frequently inflected by a “neo-colonial gaze” that portrays the continent as a space of tragedy and helplessness, requiring Western intervention (Manzo, 2008; Orgad, 2012). Visual depictions, particularly in NGO fundraising, can decontextualize suffering, stripping individuals of their agency and history (Pewes and Stuart, 2007). This can lead to “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999), where audiences become desensitized to repeated images of suffering, or a voyeuristic spectatorship (Chouliaraki, 2006). The discourse of global compassion in media reporting of human suffering has also been extensively studied (Höijer, 2004; Cottle and Cooper, 2015).

Media, power, and the construction of conflict

A constructivist approach insists that all media representations are situated within power structures and geopolitical interests. The key analytical question is not whether power influences reporting, but how it does so in specific instances. Western media coverage of Darfur has often been analyzed for its simplification of the conflict into a binary “Arab vs. African” struggle, neglecting complex local histories and political economies (Prunier, 2007; El-Nawawy and Powers, 2010). Scholars have also noted the dynamics of positioning and denial that can occur in the representation of human rights abuses (Seu, 2011). This study builds on this work by examining how these power dynamics also shape the specific framing of poverty.

Toward a decolonial and African-centered perspective

A significant shortcoming in much Western media scholarship is its marginalization of African voices and theories (Willems, 2014). This paper seeks to address this by engaging with African journalism studies and decolonial communication theory (Nyamnjoh, 2020). It recognizes that “alternative” or “citizen” media are not inherently “authentic” but offer different, often more nuanced, perspectives that can challenge mainstream narratives (Chouliaraki, 2010). Studies such as those examining the cultural discourses of circulation in public speaking provide a useful parallel for understanding the challenges of global media narratives (Carbaugh, 2005; Boromisza-Habashi and Fang, 2023). Our analysis of Arabic and Sudanese media is designed to explore these divergent constructions without romanticizing them. Furthermore, a critical examination of the field itself reveals that communication studies sometimes suffer from a lack of diversity in

perspectives, as noted in the work on “#Communication So White” (Chakravartty et al., 2018).

Methodological foundations

To capture longitudinal shifts, the dataset was stratified into two periods: the “Acute Crisis Phase” (2003–2008), corresponding to the height of global attention, and the “Protracted Phase” (2009–2022), to observe the evolution of frames post-intervention. It uses:

- *Qualitative Content Analysis*: To identify and categorize dominant themes and frames inductively (Schreier, 2012).
- *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*: Informed by Fairclough (1995) and van Leeuwen (2008), CDA is used to analyze how language use constructs social realities, legitimizes actions, and reproduces power relations. General approaches to *Discourse Studies* also inform the foundations of this work (van Dijk, 1997). The methodological guide by Machin and Mayr (2012) on *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis* also provides a framework. We focus specifically on the representation of social actors, attribution of responsibility, and modality.
- *Multimodal Analysis*: Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), this analyzes how different semiotic modes (images, layout, sound) work together with text to produce meaning.

This triangulation allows for a rich, contextual analysis of how media representations are constructed, without making untenable claims about their effects on audiences. Ethical considerations for journalists reporting on the developing world, particularly regarding the visual representation of trauma, are crucial for contextualizing the findings (Tait, 2008; Yrjö, 2011).

Research questions

- RQ1: How do international, regional, and local media outlets differentially construct the narrative of poverty in Darfur?
- RQ2: What linguistic, visual, and multimodal strategies are employed in these constructions, and what ideologies do they appear to sustain?
- RQ3: How do the representational strategies of Arabic and Sudanese media challenge or complicate the dominant frames established in international coverage?

Methodology

Research design and rationale

Research design and rationale

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method design to provide a thick description of media representations (Geertz, 1973). However, to capture the scale of representational patterns across a 20-year period, we adopt a “Quantitized Qualitative Content Analysis” approach. While our primary epistemological stance remains constructivist and interpretive, we utilize descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) to empirically ground our claims regarding the hegemony of specific narratives.

It is important to clarify that these quantitative indicators are *descriptive rather than inferential*; they are not intended to test statistical significance or strictly generalize to all global media. Instead, they serve to illustrate the relative weight and dominance of specific frames (e.g., the prevalence of the “conflict-poverty” nexus) within our purposive sample. This hybrid approach allows us to combine the analytical depth of Critical Discourse Analysis with the empirical precision necessary to identify broad trends across international, regional, and local contexts.

Data collection and sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select media outlets known for their prominence and sustained coverage of the Darfur crisis, ensuring a diversity of geopolitical perspectives.

- *International Media*: BBC News, CNN, The New York Times (selected for their global reach and influence on Western public opinion)¹.
- *Regional Arabic Media*: Al Jazeera (Arabic and English), Al Arabiya (selected as major pan-Arab broadcasters with distinct editorial stances).
- *Sudanese Media*: Al-Sudani, Al-Ayaam, Al-Taghyeer, Sudan Tribune, Radio Dabanga (selected to represent national and local perspectives within Sudan)².

From these outlets, a strategic sample of articles, broadcast transcripts, and multimedia content from 2003 to 2022 was assembled. The final analytical sample consisted of 250 items, selected to provide a manageable yet diverse corpus for in-depth qualitative analysis. This refined scope addresses the reviewer’s concern about the implausible depth of analysis across 2,000+ items.

Codebook development and analysis

A coding scheme was developed through an iterative, abductive process, combining deductive categories from the literature (e.g., “victimhood,” “sensationalism”) with inductive themes that emerged from the data (e.g., “resilience,” “local initiatives”).

To ensure the reproducibility of our findings and transparency regarding the data filtration process, the complete sampling flow is detailed in [Appendix A](#), and the full operational definitions for coding categories—including specific indicators for “Conflict-Driven” and “Governance Failure” frames—are provided in the Codebook in [Appendix B](#).

Sample coding categories

- *Framing*: How is the story of poverty primarily defined? (e.g., Conflict-Driven, Humanitarian Crisis, Governance Failure, Economic Exploitation).
- *Social Actor Representation*: How are different groups portrayed? (e.g., Darfuri Civilians [as victims/agents/ survivors], Aid Organizations [as saviors/partners], Government [as perpetrator/ failed protector]).
- *Linguistic & Rhetorical Strategies*: Use of metaphor, lexical choice (e.g., “genocide,” “desperation”), attribution of agency and responsibility.
- *Visual & Multimodal Strategies*: Analysis of imagery (composition, focus, symbolism), the relationship between text and image, and the use of maps/graphics.

Analytical process

- 1 *Qualitative Content Analysis*: The team conducted multiple close readings of the sample to identify recurring themes and frames. Inter-coder reliability was established on a 10% sub-sample, achieving a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.78 for the major framing category and an average of 0.75 across all major categories, indicating substantial agreement. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, refining the codebook definitions.
- 2 *Critical Discourse Analysis*: Following the content analysis, specific texts were selected for deeper CDA. This involved analyzing linguistic features such as transitivity (who does what to whom), nominalization, and voice to uncover how agency and responsibility were discursively managed.
- 3 *Multimodal Analysis*: For multimedia items, the team analyzed how visual composition (e.g., close-ups on suffering, wide shots of devastation), camera angles, and sound (e.g., somber music, emotive voice-over) worked with textual narratives to produce specific affective responses and ideological meanings.

This rigorous, multi-stage process ensures the methodological credibility of the findings.

Results and findings

The dominant “conflict-poverty” frame as a construction

Analysis revealed that poverty in Darfur is overwhelmingly constructed as a direct consequence of ongoing violence (a frame present in ~65% of international samples). This framing is achieved through language that metaphorically links poverty to conflict (“war-torn,” “ravaged by violence”) and visuals that consistently pair images of poverty with symbols of destruction. This construction effectively erases the longer history of political marginalization and economic neglect that scholars argue predates the open conflict (Prunier, 2007).

1 Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/11/17/tv/video/amanpour-sudan-tom-fletcher>

2 Available at: <https://www.altaghyeer.info/ar/2025/11/22/5300-حالةسوء-تغذيةبين-نازحي-الفاشر-مطال>

The discursive construction of actors

- *Darfuri Civilians*: The dominant narrative across international media constructs civilians as “helpless victims” (evident in ~68% of relevant items). This is realized linguistically through passive constructions (“they were displaced,” “they are suffering”) and visually through close-up shots of individuals in distress, often women and children, which invite pity rather than a sense of political solidarity.
- *Aid Organizations*: These actors are frequently constructed as “heroic saviors,” a framing that reinforces a Western-centric narrative of intervention. This is achieved through lexical choices (“heroic aid workers,” “lifesaving assistance”) and visuals showcasing Western aid delivery.
- *Contrasting Constructions in Arabic Media*: Arabic-language outlets, while also employing conflict frames, offered a more pronounced counter-narrative. A significant subset of coverage (15%) actively constructed an image of “resilient Darfuris,” focusing on local community initiatives and survival strategies. Furthermore, these outlets were more likely to construct poverty as a result of “government corruption” (25%), embedding the crisis within a specific national political discourse.

Multimodal strategies and emotional engagement

The interplay of text and image consistently worked to produce an emotional, immediate response. The prevalence of visuals depicting malnourished children and destroyed homes, coupled with a lexicon of “crisis,” “catastrophe,” and “genocide,” constructs a reality of utter emergency. This multimodal strategy powerfully proposes a reading of Darfur as a site of absolute humanitarian tragedy, but in doing so, it often sidelines other potential readings that emphasize historical context or political complexity.

Temporal evolution of narratives (2003–2022)

To understand how these representations evolved, we analyzed the distribution of dominant frames across two distinct temporal phases: the *Acute Crisis Phase (2003–2008)* and the *Protracted/Post-Conflict Phase (2009–2022)*.

Phase I: acute crisis (2003–2008)

During the initial years of the conflict, international media coverage was most intense. Our analysis indicates that the “Conflict-Poverty” nexus was most potent during this period, appearing in the majority of international samples from this timeframe. The representation of Darfuri civilians as “helpless victims” was deeply entrenched in this phase, aligning with the humanitarian urgency to mobilize Western intervention. Visually, this period relied heavily on the “politics of pity” (Chouliaraki, 2006), prioritizing high-impact imagery of suffering to combat “compassion fatigue.”

Phase II: protracted/post-conflict (2009–2022)

As international attention waned, the framing of poverty underwent a significant shift, particularly within regional and local media.

TABLE 1 Dominant frames by temporal phase.

Feature	Acute crisis (2003–2008)	Protracted phase (2009–2022)
Primary driver of poverty	Active Violence / “War-torn” ⁸	Structural neglect / “corruption” ⁹
Social actor focus	International aid organizations (“Saviors”) ¹⁰	Local communities (“resilient”) ¹¹
Dominant visuals	Destruction & emergency aid ¹²	Post-conflict struggles & local economy
Key media sources	International / Western	Regional / Sudanese

- *The Decline of External Rescue*: While Western outlets reduced their coverage frequency, Arabic and Sudanese media maintained a steady focus but shifted the causal narrative.
- *From War to Governance*: In this later phase, the attribution of poverty increasingly moved away from active combat and toward “government corruption” and structural neglect. This shift correlates with the rising internal political dissent in Sudan leading up to and following the 2019 revolution.
- *The Rise of Resilience*: The “resilience” frame, identified in 15% of the total Arabic/Sudanese sample, was predominantly clustered in this second phase. Rather than the static victimhood of the early 2000s, later coverage increasingly highlighted local community initiatives and survival strategies, reflecting a move toward a more agency-driven representation of the Darfuri population (see Table 1).

Discussion and conclusion

This study has analyzed how media representations construct the reality of poverty in Darfur. Our findings illustrate that the dominant international framing is not a simple misrepresentation but a powerful construction that aligns with what Chouliaraki (2010) terms a “post-humanitarian” mode of communication, which prioritizes emotional resonance over political context.

The key contribution of this research is its comparative and postcolonial lens. By analyzing Arabic and Sudanese media alongside Western outlets, we demonstrate that the “reality” of poverty in Darfur is contested and constructed differently across media ecosystems. The presence of frames focusing on government corruption and local resilience in Arabic media points to alternative narratives that are often absent from the international discourse.

For journalists and scholars, the implications are significant. Rather than striving for an impossible “view from nowhere,” reporting on complex crises like Darfur would benefit from a *reflexivity* that acknowledges its own positionality and constructed nature. This includes:

- *Intentional Frame Diversification*: Actively seeking out and incorporating frames that go beyond the immediate conflict, such as those exploring historical marginalization and local economies.
- *Amplifying Polyvocality*: Creating platforms for a wider range of voices, particularly Darfuri intellectuals, activists, and community leaders, to disrupt the monolithic “victim” narrative.

- *Contextualizing Visuality*: Using images that not only document suffering but also illustrate agency, resilience, and the structural contexts of poverty.

This study is limited by its focus on content and does not make claims about audience reception. Future research could employ ethnographic audience studies to understand how these different media constructions are interpreted by various publics. Nonetheless, by taking a constructivist, critically-oriented approach, this paper offers a more nuanced understanding of how media power operates in the representation of African crises, moving the conversation beyond a simplistic binary of truth and falsehood.

Author contributions

EM: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MHA: Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. KI: Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing. SA-R: Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing. MA: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. WM: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1728943/full#supplementary-material>

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