READER RESPONSE: AMERICANS AND KENYANS INTERPRET D’SOUZA’S ANTI-OBAMA POLEMIC

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Introduction

Many factors inform and shape our political knowledge. Chief among the shapers of how we follow and understand politics are the news media. We keep track of what is unfolding in the world of politics through watching television news, reading newspaper news, or listening to radio talk shows. But, is mere consumption of political information from newspeople enough? Or is, for example, reading a conservative opinion article excoriating President Obama’s leadership enough? The answer to these questions is a strong NO. I say so because, media audiences are neither passive, nor are they depositories of political information. Audience research shows that media audiences are very active group of any population. Morley (1993) dismisses the notion of a passive audience as “a thing of the past” (p. 13). He contends that the audience is always active and the media content is open to interpretation. For example, reading a newspaper is an interactive process which involves the text and the reader. It means the latter reads actively and creates meaning of the text. Thus, the audience or a newspaper reader no longer plays the traditional role of a passive receiver in the communication process. Nord (1995) explains that the text-reader interaction process “involves the reader in replenishing the text, in making the sense with it; it involves the reader seeing the text through a prism of interpretive strategies provided by interpretive communities; it involves the codes and canons of culture” (p. 67). Flynn (1986) says reading texts involves a confrontation between the reader and the text (p. 267). Rather than clinging on the old role of receiver, reader response envisages a more substantive role for a reader. That is, within the broader realm of interpretive communities, who Fish (1980) defines as “collectivity of persons who share strategies for classifying and decoding certain texts.”

This qualitative study compares reader response by Americans and Kenyans to an anti-Obama polemic published in Forbes magazine. In the article – “How Obama Thinks” – Dinesh D’Souza insinuates that Obama is an “antibusiness” president and a “socialist” who is driven by an
“anti-colonialism ideology.” The study compares how the two groups of nationalities interpret or make meanings of the article published on September 27, 2010. And, based on the varying interpretations of the article, the study further examines the pattern of themes emerging from discussions after the groups’ participants read six passages extracted from the article. Racism, politics of fear or propaganda, and lack of objectivity in writing are themes which recurred throughout the groups’ deliberations held separately at Indiana University, Bloomington campus. The readers’ interpretations of the article were overwhelmingly similar and revolved around an anti-Obama agenda waged by Republicans. The study contributes to the scholarship in reader response in relation to political knowledge. It brings a new dimension of how members of different nationalities with completely different geo-cultural backgrounds make sense of a piece of writing in American politics. Do, for example, Americans and Kenyans share similar or different views about D’Souza’s article? Do these groups feel the article is objective journalism? Positioning the two groups as interpretive communities, the study also explicates commonalities and differences in decoding the text.

**Literature Review**

This work is informed and shaped by scholarship in interpretive social science, reader response and audience studies in qualitative research. The three fields are closely related and have been used interchangeably in audience research. From an interpretive social science perspective, this study investigates how Americans and Kenyans read and responded to D’Souza’s opinion article about President Obama. “Interpretation” is the key term here because readers make sense of meaning of the texts they read through different interpretations. That is why the interpretations of “How Obama Thinks” emerged along the contours of racism, politics of fear or propaganda, and D’Souza’s lack of objectivity. Taylor (1971) says that interpretation is “an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study,” adding that “interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense” (p. 3). In the same vein, Geertz (1980) points out that “interpretive explanation trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances,
events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are” (p. 167). To make text communicative, Eco (1979) says the author has to “assume the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader” (p. 7). Tompkins argues that reader response “is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation” (p. ix). But studies in audience research identify audience or reader as a key player in the reading process. Some of the studies holding this view include: Jensen, 1993; Lindof, 1991; Hoijer, 1990; Carragee, 1990; Anderson and Avery, 1988; and Gibson, 1980.

Gibson (1980) identifies two types of readers in literary experience – “real readers” and “mock readers.” During the interpretation process, Jensen (1993) says audiences “rearticulate and enact the meanings of mass communication” (p. 26). Lindof (1991) observes that reception analysis is concerned with how audiences “contribute to social meaning production and cultural patterns generally through their membership of social specific interpretive communities” (p. 222). Hoijer (1990) adds that a reception study is “distinguished from other style by its interest in the text-audience encounter” because such encounters “produce interpretations which are then compared to the text in order to explain how auditors construct its meaning.” On the same note, Anderson and Avery (1988) point out that interpretive research is “distinguished by its move to empower the audience” (p. 84). Supporting these views, Carragee (1990) writes:

Interpretive approaches center on the interpretive processes employed by audience members in their decoding of media content. Meaning is viewed as a product of the interaction between media texts and the varied, at times contradictory, interpretive strategies employed by audience members.

Nord (1995) examined reader response to journalism during an important period in the history of the American newspaper. His study drew on a collection of letters sent by readers to James Keeley, editor of the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Herald in the early 20th century. Nord argues that reader response was often not idiosyncratic, but rather it was linked to interpretive communities, and these communities were influenced by political organizations. He found that
“readers constructed their own meanings as they read, but this creative process was often guided by organized cultural and political power” (p. 66). Parameswaran (2001) used an ethnographic approach to explore the significance of Western romance reading for young middle-and-upper class women in India’s Hyderabad City. Specifically, she studied the “embeddedness” of romance reading in India within discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, and modernity. Findings show the contradictory character of women’s interpretations of sexuality in Western romance novels as they identified with the sexual awakening of virginal White heroines (p. 70).

The above literature review on reader response and audience research, paves the way for this study’s research questions:

1. Which themes emerged from the discussion about D’Souza’s article in the Forbes magazine?
2. Were there major similarities or differences in the way the two groups read and made sense of meaning in the article?
3. What were the main influences in the way the two groups interpreted the article?

Methods

Focus group as a qualitative research method was used in this study. Morgan (1997) says that focus groups have a reputation for being “quick and easy” as well as their relative efficiency in comparison to individual interviews in terms of gathering equivalent amounts of data (p. 13). These features of being quick, easy and efficient are the reasons why focus groups were best suited for this reader response study. The two focus groups used in the study comprised of four participants in each. There were three males and one female in each group. In the American group, three readers were pursuing PhD studies, while one was an undergraduate student. Their ages ranged between 21 and 43. In as far as political views are concerned; one was a strong liberal, one liberal, and a centralist. One participant didn’t identify with any political view. Three participants identified themselves as Democrats, while one wasn’t affiliated with any party. All were White, and their approval ratings for Obama ranged between 55% and 85%. They all had come across the news that Obama was a “socialist” who was driven by an “anti-colonialism
ideology." This focus group was convened on November 12th, 2010 and deliberations about the D’Souza’s article took 51 minutes. Participants in the group were assigned letters A, B, C, and D as their pseudonyms.

Turning to the Kenyan group, three participants were pursuing PhD studies, while one was an undergraduate student. Their ages ranged between 32 and 42. Their favorability to Obama ranged between 50% and 101%. All of them said they had heard the news that Obama was a socialist. This focus group met on November 19th, 2010. Deliberations took 64 minutes. Participants were assigned letters E, F, G, and H as their pseudonyms. See Appendix 1 and 2 for more details about the participants’ demographics, media consumption, and political interests.

Participants were provided with D’Souza’s article – “How Obama Thinks.” They were asked to read the six most critical passages identified by the researcher. After reading, the moderator asked them several questions pertaining to what they had read. See Appendix 3 for a complete list of questions used to guide discussions. The following are the six passages extracted from D’Souza’s article:

Passage 1:
Barack Obama is the most antibusiness president in a generation, perhaps in American history. Thanks to him the era of big government is back. Obama runs up taxpayer debt not in the billions but in the trillions. He has expanded the federal government’s control over home mortgages, investment banking, health care, autos and energy. The Weekly Standard summarizes Obama’s approach as omnipotence at home, impotence abroad.

Passage 2:
Theories abound to explain the President’s goals and actions. Critics in the business community—including some Obama voters who now have buyer’s remorse—tend to focus on two main themes. The first is that Obama is clueless about business. The second is that Obama is a socialist—not an out-and-out Marxist, but something of a European-style socialist, with a penchant for leveling and government redistribution.

Passage 3:
These theories aren’t wrong so much as they are inadequate. Even if they could account for Obama’s domestic policy, they cannot explain his foreign policy. The real problem with Obama is worse—much worse. But we have been blinded to his real agenda because, across the political spectrum, we all seek to fit him into some version of American history. In the process, we ignore Obama’s own history. Here is a man who spent his formative years—the first 17 years of his life—off the American mainland, in Hawaii, Indonesia and Pakistan, with multiple subsequent journeys to Africa.

Passage 4:
It may seem incredible to suggest that the anticolonial ideology of Barack Obama Sr. is espoused by his son, the President of the United States. That is what I am saying. From a very young age and through his formative years, Obama learned to see America as a force for global domination and destruction. He came to view America's military as an instrument of neocolonial occupation. He adopted his father's position that capitalism and free markets are code words for economic plunder. Obama grew to perceive the rich as an oppressive class, a kind of neocolonial power within America. In his worldview, profits are a measure of how effectively you have ripped off the rest of society, and America's power in the world is a measure of how selfishly it consumes the globe's resources and how ruthlessly it bullies and dominates the rest of the planet.

Passage 5:
For Obama, the solutions are simple. He must work to wring the neocolonialism out of America and the West. And here is where our anticolonial understanding of Obama really takes off, because it provides a vital key to explaining not only his major policy actions but also the little details that no other theory can adequately account for.

Passage 6:
But instead of readying us for the challenge, our President is trapped in his father's time machine. Incredibly, the U.S. is being ruled according to the dreams of a Luo tribesman of the 1950s. This philandering, inebriated African socialist, who raged against the world for denying him the realization of his anticolonial ambitions, is now setting the nation's agenda through the reincarnation of his dreams in his son. The son makes it happen, but he candidly admits he is only living out his father's dream. The invisible father provides the inspiration, and the son dutifully gets the job done. America today is governed by a ghost.

Findings
Members of the two groups were both heterogeneous and homogeneous. Their heterogeneity was to do with their nationalities because one group comprised of Americans and the other Kenyans. Racially, the American participants were White and the Kenyan participants were Black from Africa. This means the two enjoyed different cultural experiences and orientations. The participants were homogeneous in the sense that they were all students at Indiana University-Bloomington. Findings show that the participants' homogeneity and heterogeneity accounted for their similarities and differences in the way they interpreted the Forbes magazine article. Surprisingly, their responses to the article were overwhelmingly similar. There were minimal differences in their interpretations. Though their interpretations were hugely similar, one thing was very clear: their cultural differences and political affiliations influenced how they made sense of the article. The Americans' responses were influenced by their political view leanings – the liberal versus conservative politics. Incidentally, all members of this group except
one identified themselves Democrats. The political views of the reader who wasn’t affiliated to any party were strongly critical of conservative politics. He strongly defended President Obama against the charges from the conservative side. All in all, their views were very critical of Republicans. They saw the article as part of a wider conservative propaganda machine bent on tarnishing the image or credibility of Obama, a Democrat. The Kenyans’ interpretations were racially influenced. They saw the attack on Obama whose father was a Kenyan as racially motivated. They felt the article was a White conspiracy aiming at frustrating America’s first black president.

Their similarities in the manner in which they understood the article revolved around three themes, namely: racism, politics of fear or propaganda, and lack of objectivity in the article. The anti-Obama agenda came out as the thread connecting the three themes. Whether it was racism, politics of fear appeals or partial journalism, readers felt D’Souza’s diatribe was serving the agenda of the conservative America. They reasoned that Republicans were bent on killing Obama politically, have him lose the 2012 presidential election, and have him suffer the ignominy of being a one-term president.

The theme of racism was prominent throughout the discussion across the two groups. Participant C said that the rhetoric around anti-colonialism agenda was racially motivated. She said the article framed Obama as the Other in America’s racial politics. This struck her as “really American-centric.” Participant F said D’Souza was a racist because he framed many of Obama’s initiatives as “African.” Sharing the same view, participant E felt D’Souza was telling his readers that Obama is black. The same participant introduced an interesting dimension about the racial hatred pitting Indians against Blacks. She contends that D’Souza has some Indian roots; thus, in authoring the article, he was driven by the old Indian-Black enmity. Here are what respondents C, E, and F said in relation to the theme of racism:

Participant C:
I thought there were several sections that came across as pretty racist, pretty anti-European, pretty anti-African. Just the rhetoric around colonialism, anti-colonialism, neocolonialism sort of struck me as really American-centric and really Western-centric.

Respondent E:
I think he just means Obama is black. I just think the black people are the poor people in this country. They are the ones who don’t have much and so when he says he is European socialist……in fact, he moves away from referring to him as a Marxist. He doesn’t call him a Marxist which most people were calling him earlier. He moves away and he says he is not an out and out Marxist. So, he doesn’t want people to see Obama as a Marxist. He wants them to see him as a socialist, and they hate socialists. I think the word socialist is another overturn, like if you look at it on the other side is another word for black. The black people are the ones who don’t have much. They were slaves.

Respondent E:
When I just look at Indians the way we relate with them back at home they hate us. They hate black. And, so am just thinking if this guy is Indian, it is part of the whole entire hatred thing. Because here is an Indian, he is just another nonwhite person. So, why all this hatred? This hatred is not that he is ganging up with white people. It is the Asian hatred toward black. It is not even white hatred toward black. I think…..now, this is minority against minority.

Respondent F:
But then the other thing I want to add is that…..maybe this will be harsh. I think in a way he is racist, you know. This is why I think he is racist because he has taken everything that a lot of Americans think is wrong with this country. For example, just look like the healthcare debate; everyone thinks that the insurance companies, you know, like they prey on the weak. OK. Or, things like the bailouts, for example. He takes all these things which people think are not right in this country, and then he changes them around and makes them African, OK. I think that is racism in a way. He does that.

Politics of fear or propaganda is the other theme which came out prominently. Participant C said the author strategically used the rhetoric of fear so as to set Obama as the “scary Other.” She doesn’t believe the choice of words such as “debt in trillions” and “socialism” was accidental, but a well-hatched scheme to scare and tell Americans that Obama is not one of them. Participant D said the article was spreading “politics of fear,” while readers A and B described the article as a “propaganda piece.” A Kenyan participant said that the article is part of the wider conservative agenda to spread fear and propaganda so as to discredit Obama ahead of the 2012 general election. They felt the article created fear, directly appealing to the emotions of American people. Fear is known to be very effective in politics. This is so because people respond to strong emotional appeals. Schnur (2007) writes that in politics “fear is the most effective way of discouraging the most virulent opposition” (p. 368). To heighten fear among Democratic voters, Leege and Wald (2007) say Republican campaigns have deployed cultural appeals that stress the threat posed the moral order by Democratic policies and politicians (p. 299). Here is what participants C, D, and B said:
Participant C:
I think he also uses rhetoric fear. I think he uses it strategically so that when we read about Obama
debt in trillions, when we read about Obama and impotence, when we read Obama and Marxism,
Obama socialism.......he drops country names like Indonesia and Pakistan to Americans as scary
places where terrorists live. He talks about the Luo tribesman. He describes his dad as
philandering......and just a lot of that language of fear. Regardless of the context, I don’t think those
words are accidental. I think they are strategic. And he is trying to set Obama as the Other. He is the
other. He is the scary Other who is not one of us because he didn’t grow up here.

Respondent D:
So to me this is outdated politics of fear. This is anti-Obama. They all say he is a socialist. And my
reaction to that is: this is not in the 1980s anymore. That doesn’t scare me. And if he is a socialist what
do you mean by that. And a lot of them can’t spell it or define it. And, so when I hear that particular
political buzzword I just chuckle a little because is like they are trying to strike fear into me with
something which scared me when I was a kid.

Respondent B:
OK, they have gotten to this level of propaganda where they are getting academics to actually
take up a propagandist type of mountain and are able to place it in a publication such as Forbes
and we are still two years away from the general election. I wonder what is in store for next two years
in terms of the sophistication of messaging machine that they gonna try to get out there, trying to
spin the election. This is really, I think setting a kind of an early tone, much earlier than I expected.

The readers trashed the article as a piece of journalism lacking in objectivity. Members
from the two groups felt the article was full of innuendos, speculations, and lacked crucial facts
to back the claims made against Obama. Participants A, B, D, F, and G reacted:

Respondent B:
He uses the term theory a lot. No facts, a bunch of theories, a bunch about his father’s anti-colonialist
views. I pretty completely disagree with whole premise of it. If he threw a little more facts, and opens
my mind to it, and see, well is it valid. But I am looking for facts here.

Respondent D:
Well, and that is another thing. The entire article pursues some false premise. He keeps talking about
Barack Obama’s father felt this way, so Barack Obama must feel this way as well. No, probably not.
I mean Barack Obama was with his mother. I think she remarried….right? His influences had nothing
to do with his father really. Although I haven’t read Dreams From My Father, to pick out Barack
Obama’s father as his main influence that would be like to say his pastor Jeremiah Wright must be
his main influence.

Respondent A:
And also as B mentioned I did not see a lot of factual stuff. I didn’t read the whole article but what I
did read; it seems more of an opinion piece. A clearly opinion piece to the right.

Respondent G:
I think he is trying to use, I think corrupted journalism or writing or scholarship to justify some......a
good word is pathological hatred for Obama, because most of the statements he makes here are
misstatements. They are pure allegations. But you see to a person who doesn’t know the factual
source may imagine that these are true.
Reader F:
I think the article is very alarmist in a sense and I think he wrote it with an agenda. Of course, I don't know anything about journalism, but I'll say this is scrappy journalism, because he is writing with an agenda. He obviously, he is writing because there is something he is trying to pass across. I am sure even the author knows that most of what he is saying isn't even true, because America itself is built on principles of anti-colonialism anyway.

As noted earlier, there were minimal differences in the way the two groups created meaning of the article. Notable among these differences coalesced around who the article targeted. A reader in the American group felt the article targeted American business people. He reasoned that the article had taken a business angle, hence why it was published in Forbes. In fact, the opening sentence takes an economic angle: “Barack Obama is the most antibusiness president in generation.” The participant clarified that businesspeople abhor big government which Obama has been tied to by Republicans. Terming the article as “dangerous,” participant C felt it targeted the “intellectual voting population” like her. She says the article targeted intellectuals because it came from an academic source, and is at the same time laced with academic language. Kenyans thought that the article targeted the uninformed section of the American population. Such people, they reasoned are an easy target who would believe in anything circulated in the media. Two Kenyan readers said the following:

Reader E:
Do you think he is also playing on the field of vast majority of Americans who really know nothing because they are not informed at all? There is a group of people in this country who really believe Obama is a Muslim and stuff like that. This group of people who are baseless, clueless – I mean they would buy anything if they were given.

Reader G:
I think I’ll go by what this professor is saying……that this writer is appealing to a certain class of people, not everyone, but the majority. He is appealing to people who do not have the time or capacity or anything to think about issues through. So that when you read that Obama is the most antibusiness president that becomes a fact.

Conclusion

This study compared how two groups of nationalities (Americans and Kenyans) read and interpreted D’Souza’s article published in Forbes magazine. The author made scathing attack on President Obama, describing him as antibusiness, socialist and driven by an anti-colonialism agenda. Based on the readers’ responses, the study analyzed themes that emerged after reading
the article. Three themes were detected, namely: racism, politics of fear or propaganda, and lack of objectivity in the article. The study shows that the Kenyan and American readers created varying meanings from the article. In fact, Nord (1995) argues that “newspaper stories, like poems, do not have fixed meanings” (p. 67). Despite the readers’ heterogeneity in terms of geo-cultural differences, their interpretations were similar. For example, they were unanimous that the article carried an anti-Obama agenda message, pushed by the conservative America. It is this anti-Obama agenda where their interpretations revolved around. How the American group responded to the article was informed by American politics, largely pitting Republicans against Democrats. The Kenyans’ responses were influenced by racial politics. They felt Obama was an unfortunate victim of covert racism in America. Kenyans also reasoned that the article targeted the uninformed Americans. On the other hand, Americans said the article targeted businesspeople and intellectuals.
References


### Appendix 1

#### American Focus Group Participants' Information

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### Appendix 2

**Kenyan Focus Group Participants’ Information**

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Appendix 3

Questions for the participants

1. After reading paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5 extracted from Dinesh D’Souza’s article in Fortune magazine, what stood out to you? What did you notice?

2. How does D’Souza build his arguments?

3. What does D’Souza mean when he talks about “socialist”, “anti-colonial ideology” and “neocolonialism” in connection to President Obama?

4. Do D’Souza’s observations raise concerns about President Obama?

5. Does D’Souza’s article have a long-term impact on your opinion of President Obama? Or is it short-term; where you read it and forget it?

6. Do you agree with D’Souza’s observations? Is the president a socialist driven by anti-colonial agenda? Please elaborate your answer/response.

7. After reading the article, have your feelings (favorable or unfavorable) changed about President Obama changed?

8. Any other general comment/observation?