

The Scramble for African Media: The British Government, Reuters, and Thomson in the 1960s

By John Jenks

With the wave of independence in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the British government sought not only to maintain influence in former colonies but also to expand it in the rest of the continent. One lever of influence was news media. The British government encouraged and subsidized London-based media to expand in Africa to block the Soviets, forestall competitors, and preserve British influence in a classic example of media imperialism. The Reuters news agency used a secret subsidy to greatly expand its Africa coverage and sign up new national governments as clients. Anglo-Canadian newspaper millionaire Roy Thomson, who sought a peerage, cooperated closely with the government as he invested heavily in African newspapers and television systems and journalism training.

During the imperial era, Britain dominated the access to news and information in its African colonies through official news services, the British Broadcasting Corporation's overseas broadcasts, and newspapers run by European settlers or London companies. Indigenous African political newspapers were usually tolerated and sometimes suppressed, but they never had access to much capital, equipment, or world news. Political independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s presented information challenges to the new nations' old masters and new leaders. Nationalist leaders wanted to access the world's news, to mobilize and educate their people, and to shake off the substantial legacies of European dominance. The British government wanted, at best, to create a benevolent hegemony among its new Commonwealth partners in sub-Saharan Africa, influencing culture, education, trade, and politics. At a minimum, they wanted to forestall the possibilities of their former colonies

slipping into Marxism and leaning toward the Soviet side of the Cold War.¹

In this transition from formal empire to an empire of influence, the British held a major advantage: news media. Some of it was the legacy of imperialism. London had served as the hub of the global telecommunication system for a century, creating powerful news and information infrastructures, a deep pool of journalistic talent, and a global habit of looking for a London date-line. British “quality” newspapers and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) became the models for media throughout the empire, and the Reuters news agency marked off a large chunk of the world as its exclusive territory for news gathering and sales. On top of that, the Anglo-American style of “objective” fact-based journalism had become predominant over much of the world.²

These advantages gave the British government and media businesses a head start, but not a guarantee. The question then arises: How did the British media influence remain strong in post-independence Africa? This study uses archival evidence and contemporary publications to answer the question in two instances involving the powerful Reuters news agency and the Roy Thomson chain of newspapers and television stations. The evidence will show that in both cases the British government created partnerships with the media companies, judiciously doling out money and honors to achieve their goals. This reinforces the theory of media imperialism, which arose in the 1970s to explain continuing American, British, and French dominance over Third World media, but it also shows the importance of contingency and personality.³

Although historians have not neglected African news media, few have written about the history of outside structural influences on African media in the 1960s.⁴ Many of the contemporary accounts of African media seemed to take for granted the continued predominance of British news media influence. Rosalynde Ainslie, Graham Mytton, and William A. Hachten surveyed the

¹John Darwin, *End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

²Jean Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 133–140; John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 11–12; Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 28–37.

³For an updated version of media imperialism, see Oliver Boyd-Barrett, “Media Imperialism Reformulated,” in *International Communication: A Reader*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu (London: Routledge, 2010), 150–152.

⁴One of the exceptions is Harold A. Fisher, “International Cooperation in the Development of West African Mass Media,” in *Mass Communication, Culture and Society in West Africa*, ed. Frank Okwu Ogboajah (Munich: Hans Zell, 1985). Also, the history of the Kenyan newspaper the *Nation* contains detail on outside influence. See Gerard Loughran, *Birth of a NATION: The Story of a Newspaper in Kenya* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

media in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, but they did not have access to government records about the collusion between Reuters, Thomson, and the government.⁵ There is little specifically about Thomson's African expansion in a 1984 survey of his empire or in his 1965 biography, which attributes his dive into the very expensive African ventures to the crusading zeal of his deputy, James Coltart.⁶

There has been a great deal written about global news agencies such as Reuters, but much of it has a social scientific focus and does not rely heavily on the archival evidence. Controversies over Western domination of the global media and call for a more balanced relationship, associated with UNESCO's proposed New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), informed much of the work in the 1970s and early 1980s.⁷ The most valuable work from this era was Oliver Boyd-Barrett's 1980 *The International News Agencies*, which relied on published works, interviews, and surveys to give a thorough and detailed account of global operations; only a few pages, however, were devoted specifically to Africa.⁸ Later, concerns about Western domination under the rubric of globalization prevailed in the literature.⁹ Donald Read's *The Power of News*, Reuters's official history, mined the Reuters archive extensively and emerged with a frank account of the agency's first one hundred and forty years, including the collusion between the agency and the British government in Africa. However, the facts are scattered and buried in the 431-page volume.¹⁰

In Africa, the British were not working in a vacuum. In West Africa, indigenous newspapers had been in press since the nineteenth century, and in 1937 American-educated Nigerian nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe founded the *West African Pilot* and expanded into a chain of vigorous political newspapers with a peak circulation of twelve thousand. The *West African Pilot* was the only indigenous newspaper that could afford to take the Reuters

⁵Rosalynde Ainslie, *The Press in Africa: Communications Past and Present* (London: Gollancz, 1966); William A. Hachten, *Muffled Drums: The News Media in Africa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971); Graham Mytton, *Mass Communication in Africa* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983).

⁶Russell Braddon, *Roy Thomson of Fleet Street* (New York: Walker, 1965), 276–277; Susan Goldenberg, *The Thomson Empire* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1984).

⁷*The New World Information and Communication Order: A Selective Bibliography* (New York: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations, 1984).

⁸Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *The International News Agencies* (London: Sage, 1980), 177–180, 212–213.

⁹See, for example, Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Terhi Rantanen, "The Globalization of News," in *The Globalization of News*, ed. Oliver Boyd-Barrett and Terhi Rantanen (London: SAGE, 1998).

¹⁰Donald Read, *The Power of News: The History of Reuters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 279–280, 326–332. The second edition, published in 1999, added little to that story. See Donald Read, *The Power of News: The History of Reuters*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

news service. Other nationalists in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Gold Coast (later Ghana), such as future Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah, founded newspapers to fight for self-government and independence. Although circulations were comparatively small, readers shared newspapers and read them to groups, thus magnifying their effects.¹¹ The London *Daily Mirror* group joined the fray in 1947, with the British Colonial Office's blessing, starting in all three countries slickly produced, professional, and apolitical newspapers that quickly eclipsed the nationalist papers in circulation.¹² In Central Africa, South African mining interests had a major stake in the press, largely through the Argus Group.¹³ In East Africa, authorities had suppressed most nationalist newspapers in 1952 at the onset of the anti-colonial "Mau-Mau" rebellion. Asian immigrants and Christian missionaries published small newspapers, but the big, prosperous, and globally connected press—most notably, the *East African Standard*—was published by and for the sizeable number of European settlers in Kenya.¹⁴ Africans despised it.

International news largely came through a tight colonial funnel. Reuters had few correspondents on the ground and only served a few newspapers outside of South Africa, most of which were European settler newspapers. The French government-subsidized news agency, Agence France-Presse, largely ignored Anglophone Africa, and the American news agencies ignored the entire continent. The official British Information Services (BIS) and the BBC supplied most of the international news.¹⁵ (However, the BBC had been exporting its template and training Africans in radio technology and production since the 1930s.¹⁶) Communist, pan-African, and other anti-colonial international news could get through postal censors but generally was too slow to be useful for daily or weekly newspapers.¹⁷

By the end of the 1950s, the leisurely pace of decolonization sharply accelerated, and the British government viewed intensifying its news media influence in Africa as a way to influence not only its former subjects but also the other countries shaking off—to various degrees—French and Belgian rule. Others saw the opportunities as well, from old imperial rivals such as France, new Communist threats from the Soviet Union and China, indigenous nationalists, and various pan-nationalists such as Ghana's Nkrumah and

¹¹Ibid., 495.

¹²John Chick, "Cecil King, the Press and Politics in West Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 34, no. 3 (1996): 375–393.

¹³Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 222–223.

¹⁴Ibid., 200–204.

¹⁵Ibid., 57–70.

¹⁶Louise M. Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 68–72.

¹⁷James R. Brennan, "Communications and Media in African History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History*, ed. John Parker and Richard Reid (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 498.

Egypt's Gamal Nasser.¹⁸ By the time the dust had settled in the 1970s, it was clear that the former colonial powers had prevailed in the competition for news to, from, and about Africa.

As a recent survey of African media history points out, “there remains much research to be done on the production of control of postcolonial news,” including the role of news agencies such as Reuters, as well as “newsroom cultures and the business of journalism.”¹⁹ This article seeks to show how government and private interests worked together to foster a new version of British influence in Africa in the postcolonial era. It makes use of largely untapped archival resources—primarily the Reuters archive and the Public Record Office of the British National Archive—to fill in the blanks, explore the motives, and lay bare the connections in these two contemporaneous scrambles for African media influence.

Reuters and Thomson were far different organizations with different goals in sub-Saharan Africa. Self-made Canadian businessman Roy Thomson started his empire with a string of small-town newspapers in Canada and expanded relentlessly. In 1953 he crossed the Atlantic to buy the *Scotsman* newspaper chain. Over the decade he expanded into Scottish television and English magazines, publishing houses, and newspapers, including the *Sunday Times* of London. In all of his ventures, Thomson's editorial policy was autonomy—as long as his newspapers largely reflected local opinion and made enough money, he left his editors alone to pursue whatever policies they liked. That was a profitable policy. Thomson was worth an estimated \$100 million by 1965 and personally owned the majority of his company's shares.²⁰ His talented deputy James Coltart loved the business and hated Communism; he was looking for a crusade.²¹ Thomson added a catalyst to this mix when he set his sights on gaining a title of nobility, a peerage, which meant he would have to contribute to British culture, society, or national interests in a substantial way.²² Just owning influential British newspapers would help, but creating a network of British-oriented newspapers and television stations in the volatile Third World could clinch the deal.

The London-based Reuters news agency had spread Anglo-American fact-based journalism and a British-influenced view of the world since the 1850s. In the late 1940s Reuters had forty-two bureaus and two hundred correspondents around the world. Its Fleet Street headquarters processed

¹⁸Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 64–65.

¹⁹Brennan, “Communications and Media in African History,” 498.

²⁰John Tebbel, “The Amazing Communications World of Roy Thomson,” *Saturday Review*, 9 October 1965, 66–68.

²¹Braddon, *Roy Thomson*, 277.

²²“The Thomson Group,” February 1962, PR10554/31, Foreign Office [hereafter FO] 1110/1564, National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office, Kew (hereafter cited as National Archives UK).

about 500,000 words a day.²³ British newspapers and a few Commonwealth news agencies owned Reuters in a complicated trust arrangement designed to keep the agency free, independent, and unbiased.²⁴ Although it ranked among the top world news agencies alongside Agence France Presse, Associated Press, and United Press International, it had fallen on hard times by the 1950s and was relying more on secret government subsidies.²⁵ African independence presented a challenge. For years, Reuters largely had ignored African colonies as either sources or markets of news, but with independence that was no longer possible. Giving up an entire continent would endanger its status, its standing as a global agency, and—perhaps down the line—its profitability. But expanding into Africa would be expensive, so the British government paid a hidden subsidy to Reuters to allow it to cover the heavy financial losses expected during the initial expansion.²⁶ The stories of these two ventures are essential to understanding how Britain managed to gain a new sort of media influence in the continent long after the last colonial official had lowered the Union Jack and returned to Britain.

Roy Thomson's Money Discovers Africa

From 1960 to 1965, Roy Thomson invested in newspapers and television operations in Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa and heavily endowed a foundation that helped train African journalists. Thomson loosely coordinated his efforts with the British government—both wanted to keep British influence predominant, seeing Communism as the feared alternative. Thomson was an unusual ally for money-losing African journalism. In most of his newspapers he had a notoriously tight-fisted approach—letting reporters have only one pencil at a time, for instance.²⁷ But after his expansion into London, media rumors were that he was interested in a peerage.²⁸ This confluence of interests overcame Thomson's inveterate cheapness. As his biographer notes: "Coltart was fortunate at this time that his missionary fervor coincided with Thomson's desire for well-publicised philanthropy."²⁹

Thomson's money and motivations were attracting attention by early 1960 as newspapers from Nigeria, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Ghana, Kenya,

²³Read, *The Power of News*, 253.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 241–245, 258–262.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 264, 277–280.

²⁶Read, *The Power of News*, 279–280.

²⁷William Prochnau, "State of the American Newspapers in Lord Thomson's Realm," *American Journalism Review*, October 1998.

²⁸"The Thomson Group," February 1962, PR10554/31, FO1110/1564, National Archives UK.

²⁹Braddon, *Roy Thomson*, 277.

and South Africa had approached him with offers. They had their own motives as a Downing Street official noted: “It seems clear that many overseas interests are hoping that money and the magic touch of Thomson’s management will pull ailing newspapers round. The extent to which Mr. Thomson himself is seriously interested in building up his newspaper empire in Africa and Asia is not yet clear.”³⁰

It soon would become clearer. The first serious move came from Nigeria, where the Action Group wanted Thomson’s money and help to revitalize its flagship *Daily Service* and associated regional papers. All were losing money—about £50,000 a year. The Action Group’s London public relations agent highlighted for Thomson the future Nigerian market, the threat from Communism or Egyptian Nasserism, and his clients’ commitment to a democratic Nigeria within the Commonwealth.³¹ After denigrating the competition as either “without any guts and without any heart” or simply “not worth worrying about,” the adviser pitched Thomson the idea of investing £200,000 as a partner—for equipment, training, and general upgrading. One condition, however: the newspaper would be expected to continue supporting the Action Group “very much like the *Sunday Times* supports” the Conservative government of Prime Minister Harold MacMillan [*sic*].³²

Thomson and Coltart liked the idea but wanted Macmillan’s blessing first.³³ Lower-level officials were mixed about the idea: after the success of the *Daily Mirror*’s African papers they did not think West Africa needed the example of another British-owned newspaper. They also worried that Thomson gave too much freedom to editors at his other papers to pursue their own agendas.³⁴ Meanwhile, another offer arrived in May. The Ismaili Muslim spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, had bought into a Kenyan Swahili newspaper and was planning to expand by creating an English-language daily.³⁵ He needed money and approached Thomson. Thomson again reached out to Macmillan asking advice. He pointed out that the Aga Khan had made great progress but was losing money and would probably continue to lose money: “In going into such a venture, we would have to be reconciled to accepting

³⁰Pearson to Wyndham, 22 March 1960, Prime Minister’s office [hereafter PREM]11/4404, National Archives UK.

³¹“Nigerian Project,” Dolan to Thomson, 18 January 1960, PREM11/4404, National Archives UK.

³²*Ibid.*

³³Coltart to Wyndham (PM’s office), 16 March 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

³⁴H. to MacMillan, 21 March 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK, “Brief for Interview with Mr. Roy Thomson” [ca. 1960], PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

³⁵Many of the Aga Khan’s followers lived in East Africa, where they formed a large percentage of the commercial class. Both he and his followers had an interest in stability and moderation along the road to independence.

losses. However, we are quite prepared to do this if, in your opinion, we will be rendering worthwhile service.”³⁶

Macmillan’s advisers urged him to express general goodwill without “positively pushing him” in that direction, while acknowledging that money from a “responsible United Kingdom source” into the *Nation* “is to be welcomed.”³⁷ Macmillan also brought up the need for an attractive British-oriented magazine for West Africa.³⁸ That probably led Thomson to toy with the ideas of setting up a Nigerian magazine publishing company and buying a fifty percent share in *Drum* magazine, a South Africa-based, African-produced glossy that circulated widely in western and eastern Africa as well.³⁹ Throughout the following year, both Thomson and Coltart were in regular contact with Macmillan’s chief information guru in the cabinet, Charles Hill, who was “constantly urging them to do more” overseas.⁴⁰ But according to Foreign Office strategists, there was “no agreed policy or plan of action.”

Shortly after the meeting with Macmillan, Thomson announced his acquisition of a fifty percent share of the *Daily Service* group and renamed it the *Daily Express* (with a weekly *Sunday Express*).⁴¹ In East Africa, Thomson put £25,000 into the Aga Khan’s *Nation* group and had his employees give detailed advice on setting up the English-language daily.⁴² The *Nation* was hemorrhaging money, but in the years before independence, it was having some of the political effect that Thomson, the Aga Khan, and British officials wanted. As one official noted: “For the first time African politicians have had a medium for publicising their views. In consequence they have been grateful and reasonably moderate.”⁴³ In addition, Thomson took credit through its financial connection with the *Nation* group for having “resuscitated” *Mwafrika*, the Tanganyikan ruling party’s newspaper and developing

³⁶Thomson to Macmillan, 19 May 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK. A history of the *Nation* newspaper estimates that the Aga Khan lost £1.2 million by 1963. Loughran, *Birth of a NATION*, 18–22.

³⁷J.W. to Prime Minister, 23 June 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

³⁸MacMillan to Thomson, 23 June 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

³⁹Note on Mr. Roy Thomson of Thomson Newspapers Ltd., 30 August 1960 PREM11/4404, National Archives UK; Note for the Record, H.E. 19 January 1961, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK; Note for Prime Minister, 30 August 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

⁴⁰“Thomson Newspaper, Radio and Television Interests in Africa,” 2 May 1961, PR10554, FO1110/1435, National Archives UK “Thomson Press and Television Interests in Africa,” 18 August 1961, PR10554, FO1110/1435, National Archives UK.

⁴¹Press release, “Unique New Commonwealth Newspaper Enterprise Announced,” 13 August 1960, PREM 11/4404, National Archives UK.

⁴²Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 104.

⁴³“Thomson Press and Television Interests in Africa, 18 August 1961, PR10554/21, FO1110/1435, National Archives UK.

“cordial” relations with Tanganyikan President Julius Nyerere.⁴⁴ But after the initial burst of activity, Thomson apparently pulled back from his Kenya venture.⁴⁵

But in the intense political atmosphere of Nigeria, Thomson was having problems. Action Group leaders were not the best business partners. They clashed with Thomson and the ruling party, which led to some of them being jailed on treason charges, while others just wound up broke. That left Thomson paying all the bills.⁴⁶ Complications increased in 1962 when an inaccurate leaked document implied that Macmillan had directed Thomson to use his clout to promote the Action Group. (He had not.)⁴⁷ Thomson’s staff, however, tried hard with the *Daily Express*. The newspaper was professionally produced, attractive, and Western-oriented, but it could not overcome the competition and its intense political problems. Circulation peaked in 1963 and declined rapidly afterward.⁴⁸ Thomson’s troubles led the other British African press lord, the *Daily Mirror*’s Cecil King, to warn him about dragging down King’s papers as well as his own, adding tartly, “...your political mistakes will reflect on me. At this rate your chances of survival are slight and even mine are not too rosy.”⁴⁹ In November 1965 Thomson pulled his support, and the paper collapsed.⁵⁰

Thomson was also negotiating seriously with the Ethiopian government to take an interest in the English-language *Ethiopian Herald*. In 1961, Coltart told the British ambassador to Ethiopia that his company would easily lose £150,000 during the first three years. He went on to say: “We only attempt this seemingly foolish commercial venture in the hope that we can prevent the media of Africa from getting into the wrong hands.”⁵¹ Coltart had proposed providing the Ethiopians top-of-the-line equipment, journalistic training, and help setting up an Ethiopian News Agency. Editorial control would rest

⁴⁴“Thomson Newspaper, Radio and Television Interests in Africa,” 2 May 1961, PR10554/21, FO110/1435, National Archives UK.

⁴⁵By the early 1980s, no record of the *Nation* investment showed up in Susan Goldenberg’s comprehensive account of his business holdings. See Goldenberg, *The Thomson Empire*. Loughran’s account of the *Nation* also makes no further mention of Thomson. Loughran, *Birth of a NATION*.

⁴⁶R. A. Burroughs minute 12 May 1961, PR10554/21, FO110/1435, National Archives UK; Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 69–70.

⁴⁷Telegrams No. 636 and 637, 23 July 1962, PREM11/4404, National Archives UK.

⁴⁸Gunilla L. Faringer, *Press Freedom in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 28.

⁴⁹Letter from Cecil King to Roy Thomson, 22 March 1963. Quoted in Chick, “Cecil King, the Press and Politics in West Africa,” 385.

⁵⁰Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 70.

⁵¹Coltart to Wright, 25 October 1961, PR10554/21, FO110/1435, National Archives UK. Coltart said roughly the same thing in public. See “The Influence of Newspaper and Television in Africa,” James Coltart, *African Affairs*, July 1963, 206.

with the Ethiopian government.⁵² Nothing apparently happened with this, as Reuters would make a similar proposal several years later.

Surprisingly, losses also did not matter to the notoriously cheap Thomson. In a televised interview in 1961, Thomson explained his African investments in ideological terms.

They're developing countries, they can go any direction, and I think if we want to have them with us, that is with the West, I think that we've got to help them, we've got to do things that are an advantage to them. I think that the field of newspapers and television is probably the most effective field we can have in that respect—it will do the most good.⁵³

Not all of Thomson's acquisitions were political, but most of the African ones wound up being so anyway. He owned a group of profitable South African magazine publishers and in 1961 bought the (Southern) Rhodesian *Daily News* and the *Nyasaland Times*, along with their smaller affiliates and distributors. The *Daily News* tried to build up a readership among Africans, but it was banned for its efforts and saw its editor, Willie Musarurwa, jailed without trial for ten years.⁵⁴ Thomson was also quite active in television, helping to set up or run television systems in fourteen countries, including Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia. In Africa, Thomson set up stations in Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, while running stations in the Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone.⁵⁵

In November 1962, under Coltart's prodding, Thomson deepened his commitment to the developing world when he set up the Thomson Foundation with an initial pledge of £5 million to train journalists from Africa and Asia. There was some field training, but most of the work was done at Thomson's Scottish television operations or at the foundation headquarters in Cardiff.⁵⁶ Coltart led it himself in the 1970s. Since its founding, it has educated thousands of journalists and technicians.⁵⁷

In 1964, Thomson, the self-made barber's son from Toronto, got what he wanted—a hereditary title of nobility as Lord Thomson of Fleet. He continued to acquire newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, and scores

⁵²Coltart to Tekle-Hawariat (Ethiopian Minister of Information), 22 August 1961, PR10554/21, FO1110/1435, National Archives UK.

⁵³"Thomson on TWW," *World's Press News*, 29 September 1961.

⁵⁴Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 76; "Thomson Buys into Africa," *Montreal Gazette*, October 20, 1961; "Willie Musarurwa; Journalist, 62," *New York Times*, April 5, 1990; "Current Activities: Roy Thomson Buys Thirty Odhams Magazines in South Africa and Rhodesia," *International Communication Gazette* 7, no. 2 (1961): 236.

⁵⁵Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 180–181.

⁵⁶Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 154, 203, 224; "Thomson Foundation to Aid Overseas Media," *World's Press News*, November 16, 1962.

⁵⁷Goldenberg, *The Thomson Empire*, 18.

of other companies until his death in 1976. His son and later grandson took over the empire and actually absorbed the other classic British institution of this story—Reuters—into the new financial behemoth of Thomson Reuters.⁵⁸

Reuters Establishes New Footholds

Reuters in the 1950s was an overstretched and underfunded British national institution with a global reach. At the end of World War II, Reuters had regularized its relations with the government through mildly inflated subsidies for transmission to diplomatic missions and other services.⁵⁹ But in the 1950s, the agency continued to operate on a shoestring. It turned to the government. First, Reuters surrendered its Middle Eastern distribution to the Arab News Agency, which the British Foreign Office secretly created in 1941 and continued to fund. Reuters received a very generous £29,800 a year.⁶⁰ In 1957, Reuters General Manager Christopher Chancellor began exploring other subsidies, and the government was open to suggestion. Top officials considered that it was “in the national interest that Reuters should efficiently cover the principal areas of the world” and wanted to support it in a way that would preserve its reputation for independence.⁶¹ Reuters’s Chancellor actually took the first step toward closer liaison, according to Cabinet documents:

Sir Christopher Chancellor had proposed the re-establishment of a closer relationship with the Government comparable with that which had existed between Reuters and the Ministry of Information during the war and between Reuters and the Treasury since the war. In his view Reuters should be considered as a national interest in the political sphere, and he was anxious to institute some focal point within the Government, from which the interests of Reuters could be brought into account in the actions of Departments. Sir Christopher Chancellor at one stage also suggested that a Government representative might attend meetings of the Board of Reuters: this was later modified to an offer to keep Her Majesty’s Government fully informed of Reuters’ affairs.⁶²

⁵⁸Ian Austen, “A Name to Herald Its Merger: Thomson Reuters,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2008.

⁵⁹Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War*, 19–20.

⁶⁰Read, *The Power of News*, 277–279.

⁶¹Overseas Information Committee (Official), minutes of second meeting of 1957, 23 September 1957, CAB 134/2325, National Archives UK. At that time, both Reuters and the government were concerned about coverage in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

⁶²Overseas Information Committee (Official), minutes of fourth meeting of 1957, 21 October 1957, CAB 134/2325, National Archives UK.

Foreign Office propaganda expert and former newsman Ralph Murray became the government's point man with Reuters, and later developed a close relationship with Walton Cole, Chancellor's earthier successor.⁶³

Soon the attention turned to Africa. Up until the late 1950s, Reuters had only spotty business in sub-Saharan Africa outside of the Republic of South Africa. It sold to British-owned papers in Nigeria, Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone, the white settler-owned *East African Standard* in Kenya, and the nationalist Nigerian *West African Pilot*. British colonial officials saw no need to encourage Reuters; they were content with the government's official news services and the overseas services of the British Broadcasting Corporation. French and Belgian colonialists essentially blocked Reuters, and the Agence France-Press (AFP) had a substantial government subsidy and a cozy relationship with the few media clients in the French colonies. Reuters had seen little profit in expanding in such an unpromising market.⁶⁴

Independence changed their calculations as the new nations demanded control of information, or at least their own national news agencies, and Reuters wanted to cooperate. When Ghana (then Gold Coast) neared independence in 1957, Reuters provided training, equipment, and personnel to set up the Ghana News Agency (GNA) under the auspices of the government information services. The GNA gathered domestic news and handled Reuters's foreign news but could not compete with the British agency; the contract between Reuters and the GNA was worth £20,000 annually to Reuters.⁶⁵ When the GNA expanded into a nascent All-Africa News Agency in the early 1960s, with bureaus in London, New York, and African countries, Reuters helped but set strict limits on its assistance.⁶⁶ It is unclear from the records whether Reuters received any official British support or encouragement in either of these ventures.

The independence of nearly twenty other countries in West Africa within the following three years created a larger challenge for Reuters's status as a global agency. Not only did it need to start serving previously neglected Anglophone areas, but it also faced pressure to expand into previously inaccessible Francophone areas. The competition was awake as well. In both zones the AFP was expanding with a service that was faster and more comprehensive than Reuters, and the Soviet TASS agency and its East Bloc allies were looking for opportunities. For British officials it was important that

⁶³Ibid. Overall subsidies continued to grow through various renegotiations and topped out at nearly £300,000 in 1986; that year, the Foreign Office cut its Reuters subscription to £20,000. For details on that, see Read, *The Power of News*, 326–330.

⁶⁴Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 31–73; Read, *The Power of News*, 279–280; Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 199–210.

⁶⁵D. C. Wright memo: "Structure and Policy of the GNA," Archive No. 1/8816901, Reuters Archive, London (hereafter cited as Reuters); "Agreement: Reuters News Service," 5 October 1964, Ghana/Ghana News Agency Administration 1961–1965 file, Box 63, Reuters.

⁶⁶Stockwell to Crosse, 30 March 1961, No. 1/914670, Reuters.

Reuters be competitive in the French sphere of influence, and that it maintain British influence in the former colonies. “We have an interest in seeing Reuters established as a major, preferably the major, news agency service in West Africa.”⁶⁷

The bargain was straightforward: Reuters would intensify its coverage, sell more aggressively, and add a French service; in turn, the government would increase its “subscriptions” to Reuters’s services by about £60,000 a year to cover the extra expenses.⁶⁸ In official correspondence, the quid pro quo was soft-pedaled. For example, in the initial draft proposal the Foreign Office noted that the additional revenue was first for costs, and second “in the context of your and your Board’s policy of maintaining and developing Reuters’ operation and the scope of the services which you provide.” The revised paragraph merely noted that the assurances were “to develop still further your overseas services”; the change came after Murray consulted with Cole “so as not to give him anything which would embarrass him with his Board.”⁶⁹

Reuters sent veteran newsman Patrick Crosse to Africa to set up new bureaus, arrange for coverage, and sign up new clients, which were almost always the national governments and not individual newspapers. Reuters took this approach because newspapers were few and poor; only a government could afford a Reuters subscription. And if there was no national news agency, Reuters sold its services to the government’s ministry of information or helped set up a news agency.⁷⁰ By 1969, there were twenty-seven national news agencies on paper, but many were essentially just part of the official ministry of information and did little reporting.⁷¹

The Foreign Office did not worry about Reuters’s profitability in these new ventures. In preparation for a meeting with Reuters’s Cole, an unnamed official in the Foreign Office wrote: “the important thing for Reuters at present is to establish footholds in as many places as possible, not with a view to immediate profits but with the aim of establishing themselves securely in this rapidly expanding news market.”⁷² And although Reuters’s Cole kept

⁶⁷Overseas Information Committee (Official), minutes of fourth meeting of 1959, 27 July 1959, CAB 134/2328, National Archives UK.

⁶⁸“Revision of Governmental Subscription to Reuters,” 9 March 1961 PE1001/11, FO953/2043, National Archives UK; Murray to Cole, 21 February 1961, PE1001/11, FO953/2043, National Archives UK; Cole to Murray, 27 February 1961, PE1001/11, FO953/2043, National Archives UK. Reuters originally had asked for £160,000. Read, *The Power of News*, 279–280.

⁶⁹Marrett to Cole, 16 February 1961, PR10566/3/G, FO1110/1571, National Archives UK.

⁷⁰Ainslie, *The Press in Africa*, 199–210.

⁷¹Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 41–44.

⁷²“Reuters in West Africa,” 3 March 1961, PE1001/11, FO93/2043, National Archives UK.

the subsidy deal a tight secret from both Reuters staff and the public, he privately emphasized to Murray its importance in driving his agency's policy. In late 1961 Murray wrote, "Cole has told me repeatedly that without the expectation of increased governmental payments Reuters would never have gone into Africa as they have now done with great success (though losing money) and very much to the benefit of UK interests in general."⁷³ In public, Cole told a different story. When Reuters reported record growth in 1962, it attributed its success in Africa to the new countries having "come to appreciate and value a reliable international news service."⁷⁴

Reuters moved quickly in Francophone Africa. The first success came in July 1960 with Guinea, which had broken sharply with its former French masters (and AFP) in 1958 and turned to the East Bloc for aid. The Soviets helped set up the Agence Guinéene de Presse with TASS service, but the Guineans soon turned to Reuters as well. The British Foreign Office wanted Reuters to staff Guinea to counteract the Communist agencies, but the Guineans' habits of not paying their bills, pirating the Reuters news service, and expelling correspondents made the agency reluctant to deal with them.⁷⁵ During testy 1967 negotiations on Reuters re-entry, the Guineans insisted on paying in worthless local currency; Reuters wanted at least half the contract paid in foreign currency. "If we cannot get this then we would rather have no contract and leave to Guinea the odium of stealing the service."⁷⁶

Most of the other former French colonies kept tight links with their former masters, with the other exception being Mali and, later, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville). Almost all of them eventually did sign up for the Reuters service, but mainly as a show of independence rather than a real shift in information focus. They still relied on AFP. The British Foreign Office put it this way in 1965:

In countries which have long standing ties with France it tends to play second fiddle to AFP but is valued as a second string. In Mali and Guinea, which have accepted free Communist News Services, Reuter holds particularly important position and is valued for its efficiency and the objectivity of its news.⁷⁷

⁷³Murray to J. Gibson (Treasury), 3 November 1961, PE1001/25, FO953/2044, National Archives UK.

⁷⁴"Record Growth' Reported by Reuters," *World's Press News and Advertisers' Review*, June 22, 1962.

⁷⁵Conakry (Guinea) to State, 30 June 1964, Box 412, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964–66, RG59, National Archives and Records Administration of the United States, College Park, MD (hereafter cited as National Archives US).

⁷⁶Russell to Mendy, 11 December 1967, Guinea/Administration 1964–1973 file, Box 70A, Reuters.

⁷⁷"Information Policy in Africa," 27 April 1965, P5543/4, FO953/2223, National Archives UK.

Although Reuters and AFP competed for contracts, relations in the field could be more accommodating. When Reuters went into AFP's backyard in Ivory Coast to set up the Agence Ivoirienne de Presse, it led to "violent protests from AFP." In Congo, a 1964 coup led to a new government that wanted to expel AFP and bring in Reuters, which could set up a "direct conflict" between the two agencies. In both cases Reuters preferred collaboration rather than competition. As one Reuters man put it, "On any sort of purely journalistic level the Reuters and AFP men tend to come together, to be doing the same things and to form excellent personal relations."⁷⁸

The American Associated Press and United Press International were minor players in Africa during the 1960s. American diplomats had been pressing for more AP and UPI presence to counteract what they saw as "anti-American" Reuters and AFP news, but most African governments balked at the Americans' subscription costs, and AP and UPI representatives did not think that they could make any money in Africa, even at those prices.⁷⁹ However, the Americans found that just receiving an American wire service did not necessarily lead to more US news. Ivory Coast received the UPI French service, but used little of it. Even news of America generally came through AFP.⁸⁰

Within a few years, the wave of independence hit the British colonies of East Africa, and Reuters shifted its attention to Tanganyika (later Tanzania), Uganda, and especially Kenya. Crosse's successor Shahe Guebenlian set up headquarters in Nairobi and proceeded to sign up as many clients as possible while dealing with Cold War pressures and navigating among nationalists, settlers, and officials.⁸¹ Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta was essentially pro-Western, but key leaders within his governing party favored much tighter relations with the Communist world.⁸² One of those key leaders was Information Minister Achieng Oneko. That internal tension affected

⁷⁸J.T.W. to General Manager, 22 June 1964, Guinea/Administration 1964–1973 file, Box 70A, Reuters.

⁷⁹State to Dakar, 30 April 1963, Box 3272, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1963, RG59, National Archives US; Mogadiscio to State, 27 January 1965, Box 434, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964–1966, RG59, National Archives US; State to Mogadiscio, 25 January 1965, Box 434, Central Foreign Policy Files, Box 434, Central Foreign Policy Files 1964–1966, RG59, National Archives US; Dakar to Secretary of State, 24 September 1968], Box 381, Central Foreign Policy Files 1967–1969, RG 59, National Archives US.

⁸⁰Abidjan to State, 7 October 1968, PPB 9 file, Box 387, Central Foreign Policy Files 1967–1969, RG 59, National Archives US.

⁸¹Guebenlian later recalled that the leading pro-Soviet voice in the government, Kenyan Vice President Oginga Odinga, praised him for not being English. Guebenlian was Armenian. See Shahe Guebenlian, interviewed by John Entwisle, 15 November 1991, recording, oral history, Reuters.

⁸²Christopher Andrew, *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 468, 472.

everything Reuters did in Kenya after the December 1963 British handover of power.

For years, Reuters's only client in the area had been the white settler-run *East African Standard*, a newspaper that the African nationalist leaders despised. But the news would soon be nationalized. Within weeks of independence, Oneko set up the Kenya News Agency (KNA) with TASS equipment and service, a Czech Communist adviser and staff training in the East Bloc.⁸³ The KNA hedged its bets, however, and also signed an exclusive contract worth up to £15,500 a year with Reuters. KNA would now have near-exclusive rights to distribute foreign news in Kenya using a mix of TASS and Reuters dispatches. Reuters canceled its contract with the *Standard*. Oneko ordered the Voice of Kenya broadcasting system to stop using BBC news and strongly encouraged the *Nation* and the *Standard* to sign up with the KNA. They did.⁸⁴

Although European journalists in Kenya saw this as the beginning of the end of press freedom in Kenya, Guebenlian did not.⁸⁵ He managed the KNA's Cold War condominium with aplomb, and he noted how the more timely and objective Reuters news tended to beat out TASS in the KNA dispatches. A spot check in October 1964 showed that Reuters's pieces outnumbered TASS pieces by a four-to-one ratio.⁸⁶ Time also was on Reuters's side. By 1966, political developments in Kenya led to Oneko's downfall, the expulsion of the Czech adviser, and a greater reliance on Western news services.⁸⁷ In 1964, Guebenlian had tended to disregard monitoring by Americans and local white journalists that showed the KNA holding up, altering or killing stories critical of Kenya, or dealing with the white minority regimes in South Africa or Rhodesia.⁸⁸ Guebenlian wrote off those actions as part of the "margin of error" inevitable for the new and inexperienced KNA staff. And the top British representative, Governor-General Malcolm MacDonald, agreed.⁸⁹

Guebenlian, however, wanted to reduce that margin of error. He earlier had offered Reuters training to the KNA but had been rebuffed. But by 1965, the KNA was ready to accept Guebenlian's program of short training

⁸³The Americans reported that Oneko was "bloc-trained" but did not offer details. See "Informal Note of the United States Delegation: External Communist Influence in African Information Media," 27 February. 1964, PR10554/10, FO1110/1822, National Archives UK; MacDonald to Colonial Office, 3 December 1963, PR10585/83, FO1110/1704, National Archives UK; Nairobi to State, 7 May 1964, INF General K, Box 415, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964–1966, RG 59, National Archives US.

⁸⁴Kenya News Agency, 24 February 1964, PR10585/12/G, FO1110/1837, National Archives UK.

⁸⁵Loughran, *Birth of a NATION*, 77–79.

⁸⁶Guebenlian to General Manager, 20 November 1964. Box 88B, Reuters.

⁸⁷Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 206.

⁸⁸Loughran, *Birth of a NATION*, 77–79.

⁸⁹Guebenlian to General Manager, 20 November 1964, Box 88B, Reuters.

sessions over several weeks.⁹⁰ Guebenlian cannily tape-recorded the sessions and invited the KNA director to attend. Each time Guebenlian made a point, he asked the director if he agreed; the director generally did. He recalled later, tongue firmly in cheek: “If they thought that this imperialist, neo-colonialist, slightly fascist news organization (Reuters)—what is he teaching our boys? First of all, they had the tape they could run, and secondly there it is, their own man saying, ‘I agree.’”⁹¹

The Kenya training sessions became a template for Reuters in other African countries. At the time, Guebenlian emphasized their simplicity and portability. “These courses should be so simple in design that after its initial launching by a Reuter[s] man on the spot, the Ministry itself could continue using them, thus securing uniformity of instruction over the years.”⁹² Those courses were in addition to the widespread Reuters technical aid, specialized training, advisers, and “blueprints” for countries setting up their news agencies. Reuters’s Donald Wright moved through Africa—from Ghana to Tanzania to Ethiopia—advising the new news agencies.⁹³ This help brought a tremendous amount of customer loyalty for Reuters, as a top executive noted in 1967: “Apart from being good in itself as a sort of aid project within the world communities of news agencies, it has paid dividends in friends and subscriptions.”⁹⁴

From his Nairobi base, Guebenlian crisscrossed Africa signing up new clients for both the English and the French services. In southern Africa he found that Reuters’s specialized and abridged Africa service was much preferred to the previous dominant news agency—the often-biased South African Press Association. The Malawian Ministry of Information told him, “This is marvelous. That is the service we want. We don’t want this South African stuff.” Guebenlian signed a contract that day worth £7,000 a year. He later remembered that by 1968 “we had all the contracts” in independent Africa.⁹⁵ Despite Reuters’s early losses in Africa, the revenue stream began flowing in the agency’s favor by the mid-1960s. Crosse and Guebenlian’s contracts added up to a great deal of money—£520,700 in 1965—about sixteen percent of all Reuters’s revenue.⁹⁶ In a later interview Guebenlian

⁹⁰Aide-Mémoire: Kenya, 29 October 1964. Kenya/Administration 1964, 1965, 1966 file, Box 88B, Reuters; Guebenlian to General Manager, 5 October 1965, Africa/Middle East Training Project 1961–1963 file, Box 3A, Reuters.

⁹¹Guebenlian Interview, recording, 15 November 1991, Reuters.

⁹²Guebenlian to General Manager, 5 October 1965, Africa/Middle East Training 1961–1963 file, Box 3A, Reuters.

⁹³Memorandum of conversation, 8 December 1964, PPV Tanzania, Box 441, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1964–1966, RG59, National Archives US.

⁹⁴Chipp to Guebenlian et al., 4 April 1967, Box 88B, Reuters.

⁹⁵Guebenlian interview, recording, 15 November 1991, Reuters.

⁹⁶“Reuters Consolidated Profit and Loss Account,” 10 May 1966, General Manager Reports 1964–1966 file, Box 7. Reuters.

recalled, "We were charging quite high rates. Africa was the pride of Reuters at that time."⁹⁷

Conclusions

Reuters and Thomson's scramble for African media in the 1960s had mixed results. Thomson's approach for West Africa was already old-fashioned by the time he started. The *Daily Mirror* chain had made the breakthroughs in that area beginning in the late 1940s. By 1960, even the Colonial Office thought Thomson's Nigerian scheme was unnecessary and out-of-date. Eastern and southern African countries were different because of the colonial-era neglect or suppression of indigenous journalism. Thomson and the Aga Khan clearly made a difference in supporting a capitalist economy and a Western orientation for Kenya. The pattern continued after Thomson left. The British-Rhodesian mining company Lonrho bought the *East African Standard* as well as newspapers in Zambia, also in the hope that they would promote stability and capitalism.⁹⁸ The impact of Thomson's African television ventures is less well documented. However, his foundation's journalism training programs have clearly put a Western imprint on African media.⁹⁹ It may have been the side effect of one man's search for a title of nobility, but it had repercussions across a continent.

Reuters clearly had a more enduring impact through its dominant African services, partnership with national news services, and training programs. Those early connections and Reuters's access to global news flow put it in a powerful position by the mid-1970s when the call for a New World Information and Communication Order began. Attempts to create alternative systems largely foundered. When the Organization of African Unity (OAU) finally launched a Pan-African News Agency in 1979, it took four years for the agency to make its first transmission. But its tight links to African governments, which paid all the bills, left it little credibility among independent African journalists. Hardly anyone used the service, and it began to wind down by the end of the 1980s. In 1993, the OAU decided to privatize it.¹⁰⁰ It is clear that the early help the British government provided was instrumental in Reuters gaining a solid position in the early years of African independence.

⁹⁷Read, *The Power of News*, 280; Guebenlian interview, recording, 15 November 1991, Reuters.

⁹⁸Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, 236–237; Loughran, *The Birth of a NATION*, 92–93.

⁹⁹For details on the Thomson Foundation, see the website at <http://www.thomsonfoundation.org>

¹⁰⁰Margaret A. Novicki, "Interview: Babacar Fall, the Pan African News Agency," *Africa Report* 39, no. 6 (1994): 8; Tony Case, "Striding toward Independence," *Editor & Publisher*, October 14, 1995: 18.

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