

Opinion – COVID-19: Why is the World Singling Out New Zealand for Praise?

Written by Housseem Ben Lazreg and Adel Dhahri

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Whether it is in the Business Insider, the Guardian, The Washington Post, Deutsche Welle, Time or the CBC, New Zealand has been widely lauded as the COVID-19 “success story” par excellence. On June 8th, the island nation announced that its last person known to be infected with COVID-19 has recovered. In total, New Zealand (4.8 million inhabitants) has confirmed just 1,157 cases and 22 deaths because of the coronavirus. Although there have been a small number of subsequent quarantine breaches, this success can be traced to three major factors: a harsh lockdown, geographical remoteness, and widespread testing. We do not aim at questioning and belittling the success of New Zealand, yet contend that the international media’s approach of singling out of New Zealand in its analysis of COVID-19 is unfair, dismissive, and problematic. This raises a burning question of why some countries are more newsworthy than others?

The answers to this question can be addressed on two levels: on the one hand, western media bias underlies both a sense of a white savior narrative and structural racism. The embattled Global North – equipped with a powerful media machine – desperately needed some hope and New Zealand managed to offer it. Culturally, New Zealand is closer to the western world than countries in Africa, Middle East or South-East Asia who managed to suppress the virus despite limited resources and the lack of adequate technologies.

Italy, France, and the UK have failed and the American President told his citizens to drink bleach. In a New York Times piece, the lack of American leadership during the pandemic was bemoaned, but little or no mention of the countries setting examples actually was made. For instance, only one story by VOX mentioned Jordan as a success story in addition to Iceland, and Slovakia. As a small country with almost double New Zealand’s population, far less wealth and an enormous refugee overload, the Kingdom had 915 cases, 671 recovered, and only 9 deaths. The remaining stories related to Jordan reported on how it flattened the curve.

In the same vein, only one piece by the American magazine Foreign Policy praised Taiwan, As an island state of 23.8 million people in Southeast Asia located at less than 150 km see route from the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak, it has recorded only 443 cases, 431 recovered, and only 7 deaths. It is worth mentioning that Taiwan does not enjoy membership of the WHO. The island relied on its capitalized experiences in fighting the SARS pandemic and has shown a great adaptability in dealing with the COVID-19. The Taiwan case would be a case that can be studied, discussed, and duplicated if it had better media exposure.

That is what success in fighting coronavirus looks like. Instead of having international media outlets amplifying the voices of these successful models, we get romanticized stories of how Germany is an “exception”, all while studiously ignoring the big death toll in it. Iran was covered as if it was a “complete disaster”, and yet the death toll there is almost exactly the same as Germany. While reports from The Telegraph, Time Magazine, CNN and *Ci Radio Canada* have all widely lauded the leadership and competence of two white women leaders, Angela Merkel and Jacinda Ardern, they fell short of extolling the achievements of women leaders from the Global South such as President of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen and the Tunisian Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Nissaf Ben Alaya.

On the other hand, while these aforementioned countries belong to the Global South, international news flow has

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historically remained in favor of the developed world or the Global North. The unequal and under-representation of the Global South have been already of a great concern as it influences the way people perceive the image of countries. Western Media are still unable to understand and admit that there are other civilizations, cultures, models, and societal structures out there. It praises a “western civilization” that they believe it is to be adopted by the whole universe. Praising New Zealand, Germany and others is not just a media representation issue. It is also an ideological, political, and historical phenomena reflected in the international scenes and global politics.

To illustrate, south of the Mediterranean sea, many African countries have been successful at containing COVID-19 and proving apocalyptic media narratives wrong. Frequently, the reflexes of international media are strongly tuned to pessimism and doom when covering Africa. Afua Hirsch, a Guardian columnist, expressed her discontent on how Africa’s coronavirus successes were overlooked on the international scene.

Taking Senegal (4996 cases, 52 deaths) and Ghana (11,118 cases and 48 deaths) as successful models in mitigating human losses, she attributes that lack of coverage to Eurocentric patronizing attitudes towards Africa. Another example that is worth mentioning is Tunisia. With a population of 11.8 million it had, as of today, 1093 cases, 995 recovered, and only 49 deaths. With almost triple the population of New Zealand, a stagnant economy and political instability, the small country in North Africa managed to achieve remarkable results. The Tunisian model was hailed only in the French newspaper *Le Point* as “exemplary” and as “exceptional” in the French edition of the Moroccan electronic newspaper Hespresse. This could be understood in terms of Tunisia’s profound historical, cultural, and political connections with France and the francophone cultural spaces. In this context, it could be argued that African journalism failed in negotiating its place — and the continent’s stories — in the global news narratives. Recent empirical studies by Professor Elad Segev have examined the relationship between the news prominence of a country and its physical, economic, political, social and cultural characteristics.

Other media scholars such as Wayne Wanta and Guy. J. Golan outline three newsworthiness factors: location in the World System (a nation’s location within the world system is measured through the nation’s gross national product and export volume), international interactions (which countries have close ties with the developed/core nations), and international attributes (core nations have newsworthiness because of their international economic and political infrastructure). Based on these classifications, most of the African nations that achieved successes in its combats against COVID-19 (Tunisia, Senegal, Ghana, Rwanda) are peripheral countries with small economies, not fully integrated in the international market. Furthermore, three of them are francophone countries where the French language is used on a large scale and in different sectors.

This creates an issue of accessibility to the global news flow that uses predominantly English. Moreover, the African media landscape remains stifled and inefficient in propagating and disseminating its own stories and achievements in the world today. David Styan states that in the overwhelming majority of newspapers across the continent, news about Africa comes via the usual sources, principally Reuters, the Associated Press, *Agence France Presse* (AFP) and the BBC. As a result, the continent falls behind in crafting its own narratives as it lacks a well-funded skilled pan-African media outlet equivalent to CNN, Euronews, or China Global Television Network.

Western international media outlets need to recalibrate their coverages of what constitutes a success in combating COVID-19. They must acknowledge the obligation to learn from the best wherever and whatever color they are, religions they are practicing and political systems they are adopting. Let me also be clear: the coronavirus has debunked the myth about ‘First’ and ‘Third’ world competence. Ironically, some of the countries that were once labeled by Donald Trump as “shitholes” outperformed the USA and despite that their success stories have been sidelined in the Global news flows.

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