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Representing African cities in Wikipedia: The case of Lagos and Kinshasa

Introduction

The role played by representations in the lives of cities endows the study of their production and distribution in various media with importance. Today, the Internet, that amorphous network linking much of the world, is a powerful new media for the imagination of city spaces and hence in need of investigation. In this article, I focus on the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, one of the most popular websites on the Internet. My aim is to explore in a preliminary way the representations of two of the largest sub-Saharan African cities, Lagos and Kinshasa, in their respective Wikipedia articles.

Wikipedia has been described as the encyclopaedia anyone can edit, suggesting that it is open to multiple perspectives on any particular topic. Given the history of how Africa in general has been either marginalized or conjured as an exotic or miserable "other" by much media work this potential for wider range of representations should not be overlooked. Does Wikipedia live up to its reputation in the case of Kinshasa and Lagos?

After introducing Wikipedia in the next section I will first briefly describe two common approaches taken to the representation of Africa in general and these cities in particular. Afterwards the Wikipedia articles are examined. The article ends with a discussion of some of the implications of the images of the two cities portrayed in Wikipedia.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a key element of our information infrastructure. It is among the top ten visited websites on the planet (and the only non-profit among them) (Alexa 2017), contains close to 5.5 million articles in the English version alone, has ten language versions holding at least a million articles

(Welcome to Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) and is increasingly a common source of information with Google search results placing Wikipedia articles on the first page of results in up to ninety-nine percent of searches (Goodwin 2012). More recently the dominant search engine has been extracting snippets of Wikipedia text to use as answers to specific user queries. Given Wikipedia's success to date it is a logical choice for an investigation of city representations on new mediaⁱ.

Representing cities

The importance of city representations to an understanding of urban forms is a theme that has occupied a number of scholars. Meriam Greenburg writes that "alongside and in dialectical relation with the 'real' built city exists what may be called the 'urban imaginary': a coherent, historically based ensemble of representations ..." (Greenberg 2000, 228). Sharon Zukin et al. specifically demonstrates through case studies of Los Vegas and Coney Island the importance of representations to the economic rise and fall of cities (Zukin et al., 1998), while Michael Smith reminds us that "the global city is best thought of as a social construct, not as a place, or an object consisting of essential properties that can be readily measured outside the process of making meaning" (Smith 1998, 485). For Rob Shields city representations are important since "by revealing only specific aspects of the city and focusing our attention on these rather than others they have the power to limit the courses of action which we will follow or to frame problem in such a way that only certain solutions are likely to occur to us" (Shields 1996, 237). And finally James Donald goes so far as to state "there is no such thing as a city" (Donald 1992, 422) by which he means that it is constructed through "the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication" (Donald 1992, 422). What the city is, then, according to Donald, "is, above all, a representation" (Donald 1992, 422).

Given its importance to the life of cities, representation is an important issue to address. One point of departure would be to examine the imagery produced about Africa more generally. From very early times Europeans have looked upon Africa as a place of exoticism, the home of the 'other' (Mudimbe 1988). But it was only during the course of the 19th century that exoticism became paired with more negative imagery. Africa during that imperial century became the Dark Continent – the opposite of Europe. Whereas Europe was enlightened and civilised, Africa was backward and savage (Bassil 2011). Only during the immediate post-war decades, the period that saw the dissolution of much formal European empire did a more positive view of Africa take shape, only to be crushed by the economic and political implosion of many African states in the 1980s coupled with a decline of interest in African issues as the Cold War faded. Africa became dark once again so that up to recent years media coverage of the continent could be described as “a recurring template of bad news” (Franks 2010, 75). Recent years have seen, to a certain extent at least, a counter-balancing of this Afro-pessimism with an equally polarizing or misleading optimistic portrayal that uses positive imagery to suggest that, as the title of one critical article on the subject puts it, Africa is now rising, hopeful and in the process of rebirth (Nothias 2014)).

Much writing on Kinshasa and Lagos tends to follow the same polarized pattern. They are either seen as hells on earth; dystopias of the first order, or alternatively, as crucibles of innovation and paeans to the indestructibility of the human spirit, so before examining Wikipedia's treatment of Lagos and Kinshasa these two dominant representational frames will be briefly surveyed.

The African cities of Kinshasa and Lagos

Perhaps the key text representing not only African, but many other cities in Asia and Latin America as places of dystopia is Mike Davies' *Planet of Slums*. Although global in its scope, Robinson points out that *Planet of Slums* grounds its notion of dystopia in real existing places, noting "It is frequently instantiated in Kinshasa ... Not a city of the dead, but a dead city" (Robinson 2010, 227). But Davies is

not alone in describing Kinshasa in negative terms. Thomas Yocum, for example, organizes his story for the *Guardian* newspaper around a spiral of decline that he traces back to the euphoric high point in the city's history in 1974 when it hosted Rumble in the Jungle, the famous fight between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman. The "glory" of those days is long gone and as proof Yocum tells us that the stadium "is slowly rotting" and that the once proud symbol of modernity, the airport "is as tumbledown as most of the rest of the sprawling city, with derelict planes littering its margins" (Yocum 2014).

Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria and one of the largest in Africa, is also frequently used as an example of dystopian urban forms. George Packer in a 2006 article appearing in *The New York Times* writes of Lagos as a hell on earth: "Beyond the sawmills, the old waterfront markets, the fisherman's shanties, the blackened facades of high-rise housing projects and half abandoned skyscrapers of downtown Lagos Island loom under a low, dirty sky. Around the city, garbage dumps steam with the combustion of natural gases, and auto yards glow with fires from fuel spills. All of Lagos seems to be burning" (Packer 2006).

But alongside the dystopian African city there exists a more positive discourse that stresses innovation and potential. One of the earliest examples, albeit focused on the entire continent rather than urban areas alone, is a *Wired* article written by John Perry Barlow about his African tour and the enthusiasm he perceived among its peoples for all things digital. This enthusiasm and the almost magical capabilities of digital technology was, in Barlow's mind, Africa's ticket to a more prosperous future (Barlow 1998).

But perhaps the most famous example of this discourse as applied to Lagos is the work of Rem Koolhaas who sees Lagos as revealing different aspects of itself depending on the perspective of the viewer. Although it may appear that the city presents itself with "an aura of apocalyptic violence", it is, from another perspective "much less improvised , much less chaotic" and in fact functions well (Koolhaas 2002, 177). Koolhaas is not alone in celebrating Lagos and predicting a grand future for

the city. Howard French writes in the *Atlantic* of Lagos as being engaged in "laying the foundation of one of the world's biggest megalopolises" and "the start of a potentially powerful new city-state" that will, in the future redraw the political map of west Africa inherited from the European colonial ventures of the past (French 2013).

Kinshasa too is portrayed by some as a site of innovation, especially in music and fashion, rather than just misery. Few speak of Kinshasa as engaged in a process of becoming a powerful city-state, rather there is an admiration for how the inhabitants of the city survive and sometimes prosper. Robert Draper writing in *National Geographic* writes that "Kinshasa seethes like primordial ooze across a 250 square mile patch of tropics" and goes on to recite a litany of problems the city faces, but concludes that "the miracle of Kinshasa is that it has not discarded hope along the way. On the contrary: this is a city of frenzied entrepreneurship, where everyone is a salesman of whatever merchandise comes along, an uncertified specialist -- self-employed, self-styled -- a creator amid chaos, an artist in a shed" (Draper 2015).

The Wikipedia articles

We have briefly surveyed two discourses representing Kinshasa and Lagos that appear in popular literature. Either could provide a model for the editors of Wikipedia to follow in their writing. But when we turn to this writing it is rather surprising to find little trace of any of them. What we do find is explored below through a comparative thematic analysis. Both Wikipedia articles were accessed and downloaded on July 12, 2015 so that the analysis which follows is based on the text as it stood at that date. Focus is on the actual article content, but insights derived from a reading of the talk pages is included when relevant.

Lagos on Wikipedia

In the case of Lagos, the Wikipedia article is divided into a number of thematic sections. Within the sections are either statements of superlativity, lists of institutions or buildings, or references to what

could be referred to as symbols of modernity. The introduction gives us an example of the first category when it declares Lagos "the largest city in Africa". But there are others. The Island of Ikoyi (a section of Lagos) is home to "one of Africa's largest golf courses"; Lagos is "one of the fastest growing cities in the world"; it has "one of the highest standards of living in Nigeria"; and its port is "one of the largest and most extensive road networks in West Africa."

More numerous than the superlative lists are references to Lagos' modernity. Victoria Island is described as having "expensive real estate" with "many new luxury condos and apartment ... blooming up everywhere" as well as "several sizeable shopping districts while Ikoyi has an "increasing number of offices, banks, and shopping complexes". In the section on administration and demographics, a vague declaration is made that "Lagos City has a considerable number of high-rise buildings which dominate its skyline". The transportation section is especially rich in these kind of statements. We learn of the Lagos-Ibadan expressway and that the city is the endpoint of three trans-African highways. We are also told that the city possesses suburban trains and a rapid bus system.

A third characteristic of the article are sets of lists, usually names of institutions. We find these in the geography section which provides a list of key buildings: the National Museum of Nigeria, Central Mosque, Glover Memorial Hall, Christ's Church Cathedral and the Oba's Palace. In the section on education we are provided an annotated list, subdivided by institutional type, of Lagos' schools. A final list is to be found in the sports section: a list of the city's major football clubs.

What are we to make of this account of Lagos? To begin with, it is remarkable that there is so little discussion of what those who would describe Lagos as a dystopia would label as the city's severe problems: unemployment and underemployment, sanitation, water and power supply, and crime. Other than a mention of the city's massive traffic jams or "go-slows" the narrative is content to note that the city during the 1970s experienced "a population explosion, untamed economic growth, and unmitigated rural migration and that "there is a huge spectrum of wealth distribution". It is equally

clear that views such as expressed by Koolhaas, who looks on Lagos' surface chaos and finds admirable structure are also absent. What we find instead in the superlatives, institutional lists and symbols of modernity is an attempt to project onto Lagos an image of a "normal" city; a city much like those in the rest of the world, especially perhaps like a city in the "developed" world. Hence the emphasis on showing that Lagos has all of those things that other developed cities are supposed to have: skyscrapers, vibrant business districts, an active real estate market, expressways, cultural events, and centres of education. The desire to project Lagos as a "normal" city, as defined by the developed world, is perhaps most evident in the statement that the city "is currently taking steps to become a global city" -- certainly a key aim of many cities around the world, but one which involves a celebration of convergence rather than a recognition of difference in urban forms.

Kinshasa on Wikipedia

If we turn to the Wikipedia article on Kinshasa, we find much the same overarching structure, sections dealing with various themes ranging from history to sister cities. Within these sections there are also lists of institutions, superlatives, and signals/symbols of modernity, but the proportion is rather different, with fewer symbols of modernity and more lists of institutions. Superlatives make their appearance in statements such as: Kinshasa is the "third largest urban area in Africa after Cairo and Lagos"; it is the "only place in the world where two national capital cities face one another ..." and it is "the major river port of the Congo". But symbols of modernity are much scarcer. Only two can be clearly identified. We are told in a section on notable buildings and institutions that "the face of Kinshasa is changing as buildings are being built on the Blvd. du 30 Juin ..." and that the city "is home to a large number of media outlets ... that broadcast to nearly the entire country".

What is most striking are the number of lists of institutions in the article. The buildings and institutions section, not surprisingly, takes the lead: Cite de l'OUA, quartier Matonge, the L'ONATRA building, Gombe, central market, Kinshasa Fine Arts Academy and the Kinshasa Museum, among others. The section on education provides a list of institutions and we are also provided a list of the

facilities of Monkole Hospital. There is also a list of television and radio stations, another list of bus and air lines in the transport section and a very large list of famous Kinshasans, in a section of its own.

Unlike the article on Lagos, the article devotes more space to Kinshasa's problems, but it is still not much. It notes that the city exhibits "sharp contrasts, with affluent residential and commercial areas ... alongside sprawling slums". There is also a section devoted to social issues where it is noted that "Kinshasa was rated as one of Africa's most dangerous cities in terms of crime ... Muggings, robberies, rape, kidnapping and gang violence are relatively common". There is also a section on street children, noting that they are "subject to abuse by the police and military" and that some "are accused of witchcraft".

The Kinshasa article, like its Lagos counterpart exhibits the same desire to normalize the city. The utopian discourse of African cities as exemplified by Koolhaas is certainly not visible. And it cannot be said either that the dystopian discourse is a major source of inspiration for the editors. What we see instead is an article that presents a checklist of sorts that enables the pegging of the city to certain norms of "cityness", for example, processing educational institutions or famous buildings.

Discussion

It is surprising that elements of either the utopian or dystopian discourses on African cities are not present in these articles. As we have seen there is a popular literature in this vein that could have been tapped by the editors. There is a tendency to present more problems in the Kinshasa article, perhaps due to its recent history of armed conflict, but given the immensity of the problems facing the majority of the city's inhabitants it is still an underrepresented component of the article.

One reason for why neither of these discourses are found in the articles may be the Neutral Point of Point (NPOV) policy of Wikipedia. This policy is considered fundamental to the operation of the encyclopaedia, is considered "non-negotiable" and "cannot be superseded by other policies or

guidelines, nor by editor consensus". The policy stipulates that Wikipedia content needs to represent "fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible, without bias, all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic". It could be that the utopian and dystopian views are considered by editors too extreme for inclusion and the academic work as not significant enough. But if this was so one would expect that the talk pages would contain at least some reference to these perspectives. This is not the case with a few exceptions, discussed below. Tables 1 and 2 presents for each archived thread on the talk pages of the Lagos and Kinshasa articles the general topic of discussion. In terms of content, the debates mostly focus on the size of the city in terms of population or area (for example, whether the article should include Lagos State or just the city itself). And for the Kinshasa article, quite a number of threads address the removal of external links.

What appears more likely is that there is a consensus on what constitutes appropriate subject matter for a Wikipedia city article so that debate is precluded. This consensus is mostly unspoken, but we can see it at work in two instances. On the Lagos talk page there is a thread labelled "Lagos is a hellhole" dating from March 2016. In it, a contributor wrote: "It might be good to have the article mention some of the downside of Lagos: the pollution, the crime, and police checkpoints, how dirty it is, how all the cars look have crinkled [sic] bodies, the poverty ... right now the article is biased". But although appealing to the NPOV policy, the suggestion did not fare well. Only the issue of crime was taken up -- another contributor wrote a paragraph on the topic, but it was deleted two days later. The other topics were not touched on at all, suggesting that they were beyond the consensus of opinion on what constitutes appropriate content for a Wikipedia city article.

We get further evidence of the existence of an informal consensus from a second attempt to add a section on crime a year later. This addition was only a sentence, but was deleted a day later. On the talk page the contributor responsible for the deletion argues two points -- that the claim being made did not have an appropriate source and, more importantly for our purposes, "that crime references are not included on other country or city pages and their inclusion on this page would be an

exception" (Ajisekanla 11:14, 30 November 2007). The point was accepted. Although a number of editors had previously supported the section on crime, this was not translated into an attempt to reinstate it. Of course, it cannot be claimed that the consensus found among the editors of the Lagos article applies uniformly across Wikipedia's articles on cities. The Kinshasa article itself would contradict this because a section on the city's crime does exist. The point of these examples is that the editors of the Lagos and Kinshasa articles do seem to have internalized a template of sorts that precludes much attention to the specificity of the two cities. Hence "undue" attention to either the dystopian or innovative aspects of African cities generates little interest. A final example, again, from the Lagos article serves to further illustrate this point. If one searches the previous editions of Wikipedia (each change, large or small, that is made to any Wikipedia article is saved as a separate edition), one finds a reference to Koolhaas dating from November 28, 2006. It was added by an anonymous user, attracted no attention whatsoever on the talk page, and was deleted May 7, 2008, again by an anonymous user, and again with no debate on the talk page. Clearly Koolhaas and the utopian strand of thought regarding African cities more generally did not spark any interest among the editors.

If portraying Lagos and Kinshasa as fundamentally different from cities in the rest of the world is problematic, so is ignoring what makes them unique and which may be of use in working towards better futures for both these and other cities. Robinson writes, in reference to the discourse on global cities, which may be the model Wikipedia editors are unconsciously following, that it ignores the unique situations facing many cities and leads to "substantial limitations on imagining or planning the future of cities around the world" (Robinson 2002, 531).

There is another body of literature that tries to steer a middle course between optimism and pessimism over the conditions of African cities (Pieterse 2010; Roy 2011; Zeiderman 2008). It suggests that African cities need to be understood on their own terms; that although the problems they face are large and worrisome, Africans are devising ways to make the most of their situation.

This body of work has developed a number of concepts that would be useful in describing African cities as unique entities grappling in more or less successful ways with the problems besetting them.

Writing on the basis of his ethnographic work in Kinshasa, for example, Filip de Boeck suggests that its inhabitants rely less on a well-developed infrastructure, than what he calls an "invisible architecture" (De Boeck 2011). He writes: "many of the activities in the city become possible not because there is a well-developed infrastructure ... but rather, because that infrastructure is not there, or only exists through its paucity. People's lives in large parts of the city unfold around truncated urban forms, fragments, and figments of imported urban technologies, echoes of built environments from the colonial period, and recycled levels of infrastructural accumulation" (De Boeck 2011, 271). What this invisible architecture makes possible is "a multiplicity of relationships" some of which are constituted out of the traditional bonds of family and kin, but others involve a more ad hoc "insertion" of the individual "in multiple, complex, often overlapping, networks that include friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances ... and so on" (De Boeck 2011, 273). These networks are what enable "a life worth living in this kind of urban environment, in economic as well as social terms" (De Boeck 2011, 273).

The notion of "people as infrastructure" is another example of an insight into the operation of African cities that helps focus our attention on what else other than decay is taking place. According to Abdoumalig Simone, the concept describes the "flexible" and "provisional" constructions of networks linking the inhabitants of the city which allow them "to engage a complex combination of objects, spaces, persons and practices" which in turn become "a platform providing for and reproducing life, in the city" (Simone 2004, 408). But Simone, in another article, also notes that despite these innovations in sociality they do not "replace the need or belie the fact that substantial developments in formal institution-building are taking place. Nor do they compensate for the limitations of these developments" (Simone 2001, 104)

Like De Boeck, Simon sees in African cities something far more than chaos and disorder. But although Africans have been able to construct innovative social mechanisms to keep their cities working in the face of the huge problems confronting them is equally not a cause for undue celebration in the face of the suffering those problems continue to bring to the inhabitants of these cities. What is needed instead is an approach that acknowledges both realities.

It is disappointing that the work of scholars such as De Boeck and Simone do not appear among the sources used by the Wikipedia's editors as they could help to substantially add and enrich the content of these two articles, moving them past a facile normalization of these cities on a pattern inspired by Western norms of cityness but without falling into either being overly optimistic or pessimistic about their current being and potential.

In other work I have shown that, similar to this case, Wikipedia editors ignore or are unaware of many sources that could helpfully inform their work and that there appears to be a systemic lack of awareness of the entire range of reliable sources available on a subject (Luyt 2012). This lack of awareness has a lot to do with the penchant of editors to use that which is most easily available – free, online sources (Luyt 2009). But in the case of the portrayal of Lagos and Kinshasa, the problem has a further dimension, for as noted previously, there appears to be an unspoken convention at work which specifies how cities are to be represented on Wikipedia. This 'template' acts to normalize the representation of a city to a uniform evenness, helping to obscure much of what is unique about the two cities both in terms of potential and peril.

Wikipedia's editors appear caught up in the wider discourse of city branding which as Greenberg notes, involves positioning the city so that it comes to symbolize certain values and conjures up particular images and emotions capable of attracting "foot-loose middle and upper class consumers". The emphasis on city superlatives would appear to fit this project nicely while the lists offer the reader some assurance that the appurtenances of a modern city are in place.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the article I asked whether Wikipedia lived up to its reputation as a potential source for a wide range of representations. The answer, at least in the case of its articles on Lagos and Kinshasa, is that it does not. Although Wikipedia avoids falling into the trap of being either overly pessimistic or optimistic in its representations, its normalization in fact presents us with an equally one-sided view of these two cities.

Whether Wikipedia is caught up within the dominant discourse of city branding that has dominated much work on the subject of cities will require further examination of how it represents cities others than Kinshasa and Lagos. But it would not be surprising if it was, for Wikipedia is a part of our world, it does not stand outside it.

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Table 1: Talk page threads for the Wikipedia article, Lagos

Thread name	Topic
Capital distinction	Confusion as to the date the capital was moved to Abuja
Confusion between Lagos and Lagos State	Discussion over scope of article
Lagos is a hellhole	Request to add material on negative topics
Gallery of street photos	Request to add photos to the article
Contradiction	Confusion as to the date the capital was moved to Abuja
How can you have a place without picture	Debate over whether a particular link to a photo should be included

History source	Call for sources for the section on history
Better pictures	Request for better photographs
Interactive maps	Spam
Map	Request to add map
City infobox	Request to complete the info box data
Capital status	Confusion as to the date the capital was moved to Abuja
Population	Debate on population statistics
Size relative to Ibadan	Reversion of edit
Scam Central	Debate on whether material on 419 crime should be included
Thanks for advancing IPAs	Short comment on an edit
Lagos as a municipality	Debate on scope of article
Map of Metropolitan Lagos	Notes an error on the map
Crime section	Debate on whether material on crime should be included
Lagos city, Lagos island, or Lagos State	Debate on scope of article
The former municipality of Lagos	Request for date former municipality was disbanded
Lagos population	Request for clarification on city's population
August 2009 edits	Notes removal of dead hyperlinks
Administration	Request to add information to infobox
Collage	Request for insertion of a collage image
Education	Reporting possible case of vandalism
Lagos population	Debate on population figure

Map caption	Request to fix the map caption
Ferries	Request to clarify a sentence
Population	Request for clarification on city's population
Most populated city in Africa?	Debate on city's population
Referencing	Request for more verification work
GA review	Report of the GA reviewer
File: Lagos, Lagos State. png nominated for speedy deletion	Announcement of photo to be deleted due to unknown copyright status
Climate	Request for clarification of the climate chart
Timeline Lagos	Request for more content for the timeline

Table 2: Talk page threads for the Wikipedia article, Kinshasa

Thread name	Topic
History POV	Origins of Kinshasa
Current events	Removal of claim that Congo is still at war
Kinshasa city or province? Skyscrapers or highrises?	Clarification of geographical scope of article and whether the city has tall enough buildings to be classified as skyscrapers
Second-largest French speaking city?	Queries whether claim is accurate or not
Kinshasa-Brazzaville conurbation?	Queries whether claim is accurate or not
Transportation	Wants traffic congestion issue noted
Penis snatching and witchcraft	Not appropriate topic for the article; should be moved to Penis snatching article
Population of Kinshasa	Query on source

Crime rates	Query about source and accuracy
Superlatives	Notes another example, hence the claim is inaccurate
Capitals across rivers	Query about accuracy of claim
Dutch dropped as official language	Could not find source
City proper	Query over boundaries of the city
Population (third largest city in Africa)	Notes that three cities are claiming this status; wants a reliable source
Infobox text at top of article	Technical error noted
Orphans being shot	POV claim
Timeline of Kinshasa	Request for others to help add content
External links modified	Technical issues
Street children	Claims section needs updating as sources are six years old
External links modified	Technical issues
External links modified	Technical issues
External links modified	Technical issues

ⁱ One author who has explored the representation of cities on the Internet is Florian Urban who examines official city websites (Urban 2002).