

African Politics, Descriptive Research, and Public Policy at The Monkey Cage
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Introduction

What is the value of public-facing scholarship for public policy practitioners and other, mid- and high-level decision makers? This project aims to explore the importance of descriptive research for policy practitioners through an examination of “explainer” posts about African politics at *The Monkey Cage* (TMC), a leading blog about political science research hosted by the *Washington Post*.

Background

Founded as a blog about American politics in 2007, in the early 2010s, TMC expanded its coverage to include international politics. The blog’s leadership decided to include African politics coverage in 2014. To that end, Kim Yi Dionne and I were brought on board as Africa editors.¹ The expansion of TMC’s coverage to include perspectives on current events and global scholarship led to a large increase in readership, particularly in Europe and Africa. Over the last fifteen years, TMC has published posts by over 5,000 authors, almost all of them political scientists.

TMC posts use political science research to explain current events to an audience of general readers. Importantly, TMC does not run op-eds or policy advocacy pieces; rather, our mission is to use research findings to inform policy makers about causal relationships, historical

¹ TMC took its name from an H.L. Mencken quote: “Politics is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage.” Well aware of the negative, historic associations of primates with people of African heritage, Dionne and I have pressed for a name change for most of our time at the blog. I am happy to share that TMC will soon be rebranding under a less offensive name.

trends, and basic information that may lead to more informed and thoughtful policy choices.

Posts fall into two broad categories: breaking news and simmering issues. Breaking news posts seek to explain rapidly changing events like a coup attempt or a comment by the president in a timely fashion. Simmering issues deal with ongoing crises and other subjects like climate change, racial injustice, and long-term disputes.

Both types of posts can also fall into our “explainer” category or can provide deeper analysis of new findings about a topic. Explainer posts aim to give readers the basics about a situation that is likely unfamiliar to non-specialist readers: what happened, who are the important actors, and what existing and new research tell us about why this happened and what is likely to come next.

Africa Coverage at TMC

Because of broader ignorance about African affairs among general readers and non-specialist policy actors, a large percentage of our Africa coverage falls into the breaking news category, and we run explainers almost every week. Some of these explainers are about routine issues like elections coverage. Others deal with more unusual events like coup attempts, mass protest movements, and new conflicts.

Unlike analysis post, explainers tend to be very straightforward and may not reference new research in explaining a series of events. Whereas most of the research scholars write about for TMC has already been peer reviewed and is published or forthcoming, we are far more flexible with explainer posts. On occasion, we have even found it most useful to have writers who are currently (or very recently) doing research prepare explainers based on their observations, simply because there is no substitute for on-the-ground knowledge as events

evolve. Explainer posts of this nature are almost entirely descriptive, relying on the scholar's deep, contextual knowledge of a particular place at the current moment. They are not journalistic reporting; these scholars have linguistic, historical, and cultural knowledge that goes well beyond that of a typical reporter. Moreover, these posts, which rely on research that is the least complete by traditional academic standards, tend to be among our most popular, especially among readers in capital cities of the Global North.

Understanding Who Reads Our Africa Coverage and Why

This project seeks to explain these readership patterns. Is the fact that explainer posts about breaking news tend to be heavily read in European and American capitals evidence that policy makers value them more than posts that are based on peer reviewed journal articles or books? Would policy makers rather rely on analysis based on thick description than that based on more popular paradigms of analysis in the political science discipline?

To answer these questions, I plan to use a mixed-methods approach. Because of my editorial position, I have access to viewership data on each TMC post. I will construct a database of our Africa coverage from 2014-2022 using this data to confirm the popularity of certain types of posts over other ones, as well as to identify patterns of readership (especially location) for different types of posts. As it will be impossible to identify causal patterns from this data alone, I will complement these descriptive statistics with key informant interviews with 25 policy makers in Washington, DC. who focus on African affairs. I will seek to conduct semi-structured interviews with current and former policy makers working in government, think tanks, and other associated positions in order to ascertain the extent to which they read and use TMC posts to inform their knowledge and decision making.

Potential Challenges

This research faces a number of potential challenges. First, the data may show that my perception that explainer posts are most popular is incorrect, raising questions about the validity of my line of questioning. Second, although I will strive to balance political party representation among interview subjects and to locate as many subjects as possible, it is likely that not every key informant I target will be willing to speak with me. Should there be a partisan imbalance or a lack of a significant number of participants, I could have significant selection bias problems. Finally, avoiding endogeneity issues is likely to be a significant challenge in pursuing this research.