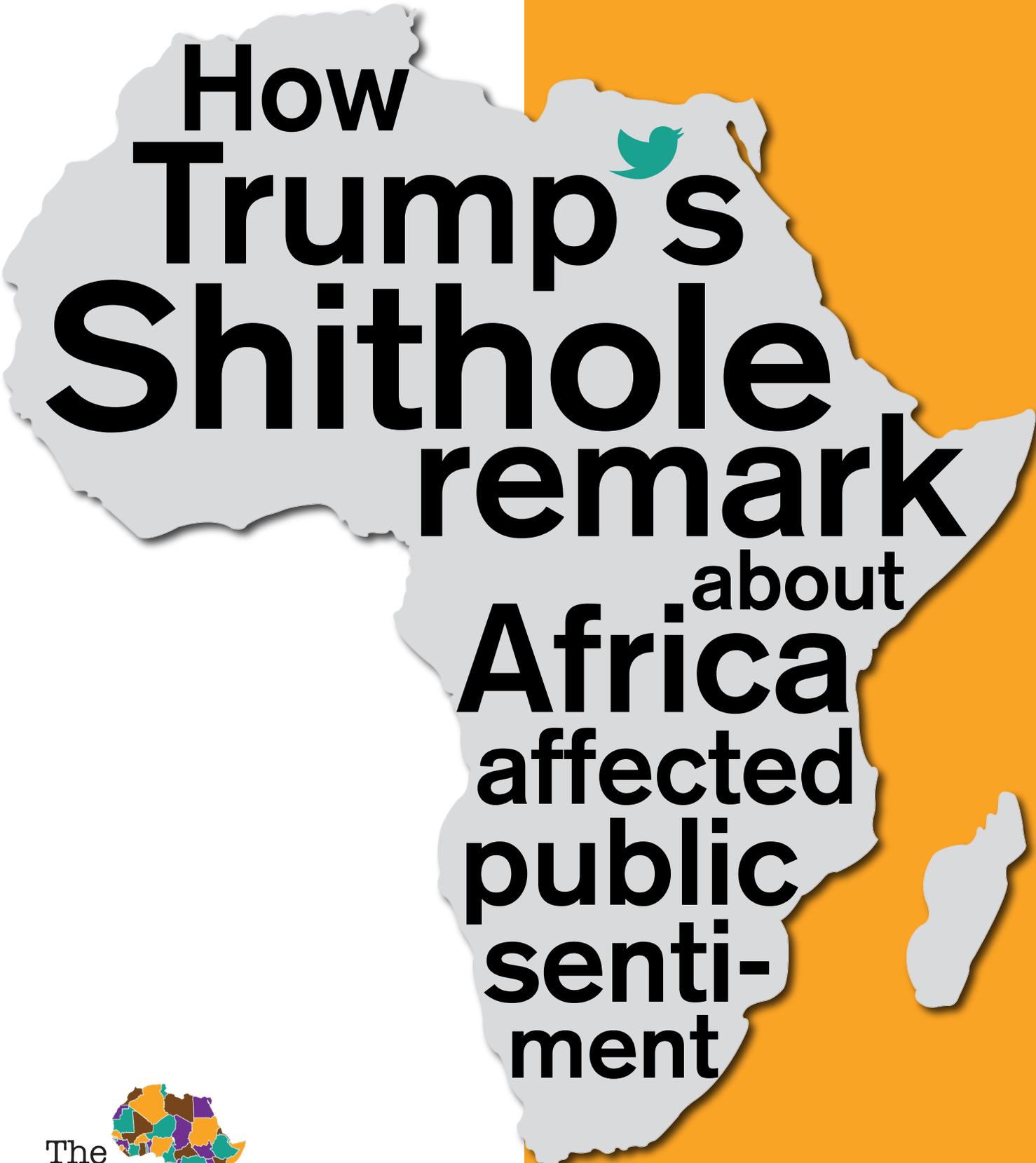


September 2018

How  
Trump's  
Shithole  
remark  
about  
Africa  
affected  
public  
sentiment



a project of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An analysis of Twitter sentiment in the wake of news reports that President Donald J. Trump had characterized some African nations as “shithole countries” reveals a substantial 66% increase in negative tweets about Trump, and a dramatic increase of over 3,000% in the volume of mentions of Africa. However, there is no indication of a shift in American sentiment toward Africa or Africans. Rather, the tweets focused predominantly on using the episode as a prop for partisan sniping, while any substantive discussion about Africa was largely absent. This suggests a largely missed opportunity by Americans to counter the disparaging remark with information spotlighting the success, diversity and opportunities within Africa.

After a January 2018 closed-door meeting in the White House Oval Office, several lawmakers reported that President Donald J. Trump responded to a discussion on protecting immigrants from African countries and Haiti by asking, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?”

[Note: With a few exceptions because of context, subsequent references in this report to that expletive will not repeat it.]

Trump denied saying the vulgarity, but impassioned responses to the remark were widespread. The African Union and leaders of several African nations condemned it, and citizens across the globe took to social media to weigh in. Google Trends shows that the combination of the January remark and the February release of the film *Black Panther* resulted in the highest number of Google searches on “Africa” since the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa.

This uptick in inquiries about the continent was of particular interest to us, because earlier this year at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, we launched The Africa Initiative. With support from The Ford Foundation, this initiative aims to foster greater public knowledge and understanding of Africa and engagement with the continent, through research, creative communications campaigns and collaborations with private, public and non-profit partners.

Media depictions play an important role in influencing knowledge about and attitudes toward regions, nations and people, yet there is a lack of research about how Africa and Africans are portrayed in United States media, and little is known about U.S. opinion of Africa. The Africa Initiative aims to fill that gap. In the fall of 2018 we will release our first *Africa in the Media* report, which analyzes how U.S. television depicts the continent and its countries. Mining over 134,000 mentions of Africa in a vast variety of TV shows, news and commercials, the report aims to provide seminal data on how U.S. media represents the continent and its 1.2 billion people.

# INTRODUCTION

After witnessing an explosion of news coverage and online conversations in the wake of Trump's remark, we realized that we had an unprecedented opportunity to gather data on public sentiments about Africa. We teamed up with BrandsEye, an opinion mining company in the United Kingdom and South Africa, which shared our interest in public attitudes toward Africa and agreed to help us investigate how media organizations, influencers and everyday Americans responded to the episode on Twitter. BrandsEye made international headlines in 2016 by using social media sentiment analysis to accurately forecast the results of both Brexit and the U.S. presidential election. The company strengthens their mechanical sentiment analyses with the use of crowd-sourced human intelligence to better account for sarcasm and nuance in a wide variety of user generated content. For this study, BrandsEye's human coders verified the sentiment of over 45,000 U.S.-based tweets before and after Trump's remark to provide insight on how Americans responded to it on Twitter.

# METHODS

Focusing on Twitter, we monitored tweets from January 4-23, 2018, and we analyzed sentiment before and after the reported remark.

Over 26.5 million tweets from U.S.-based users mentioned President Trump during this period. BrandsEye conducted a sentiment analysis on 1% of these tweets and then human coders verified the sentiment on over 16,000 of these tweets. The results were calculated at a 2% margin of error at a 95% confidence level.

In the same time period, “Africa” or “African” (without “American” to prevent results about “African Americans”) was mentioned in over 2 million U.S.-based tweets. BrandsEye’s human coders verified sentiment on 29,255 of these tweets.

## RESULTS

Negative sentiment toward President Trump on Twitter substantially escalated after the remark. Trump's vocal #MAGA (Make America Great Again) Twitter supporters remained engaged in the conversation, but largely the insult led to an increase in negative tweets about him. The substantial negative increase cannot be attributed exclusively to Trump's remark: he was also in the news for a controversial *Wall Street Journal*<sup>1</sup> interview about North Korea, as well as an announcement that he would extend Iranian sanctions. However, according to Google News, the remark about Africa was the biggest news story of the 20-day time period by far.

While the incendiary remark offered Trump's critics a perfect opportunity to lash out at him, few seized the opportunity to celebrate or defend Africa in their condemnation of him.

Trump's remark was effective at increasing U.S. attention on Africa, but an overwhelming majority of tweets after the remark that mentioned Africa — almost 90% — expressed a neutral sentiment about the continent. Our hypothesis, which we intend to explore in further research, is that Americans know so little about Africa that they would find it difficult to make substantive comments — positive or negative — about its 54 nations.

The perceived lack of American knowledge about Africa is often written about<sup>2</sup>, but very few polls have confirmed it. Glimpses are found in issue-specific polls, like the 2017 International Rescue Committee poll<sup>3</sup>, which revealed that only 15% of Americans were aware of the African hunger crisis affecting 20 million people. Americans are unlikely to have visited the continent (only South Africa and Morocco are among the top 39 countries<sup>4</sup> visited by Americans); many have commented on the lack

<sup>1</sup> Bender, Michael, Louise Radnofsky, Peter Nicholas, and Rebecca Ballhaus. "Donald Trump Signals Openness to North Korea Diplomacy in Interview." *Wall Street Journal*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Sept. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Amin, Julius A. "America's Legendary Ignorance about Africa Persists." *The Conversation*. N.p., 19 Sept. 2016. Web. 11 Sept. 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Summers, Hannah. "Poll Reveals 85% of Americans Oblivious to Hunger in Africa and Middle East." *The Guardian*. N.p., 13 July 2017. Web. 11 Sept. 2018.

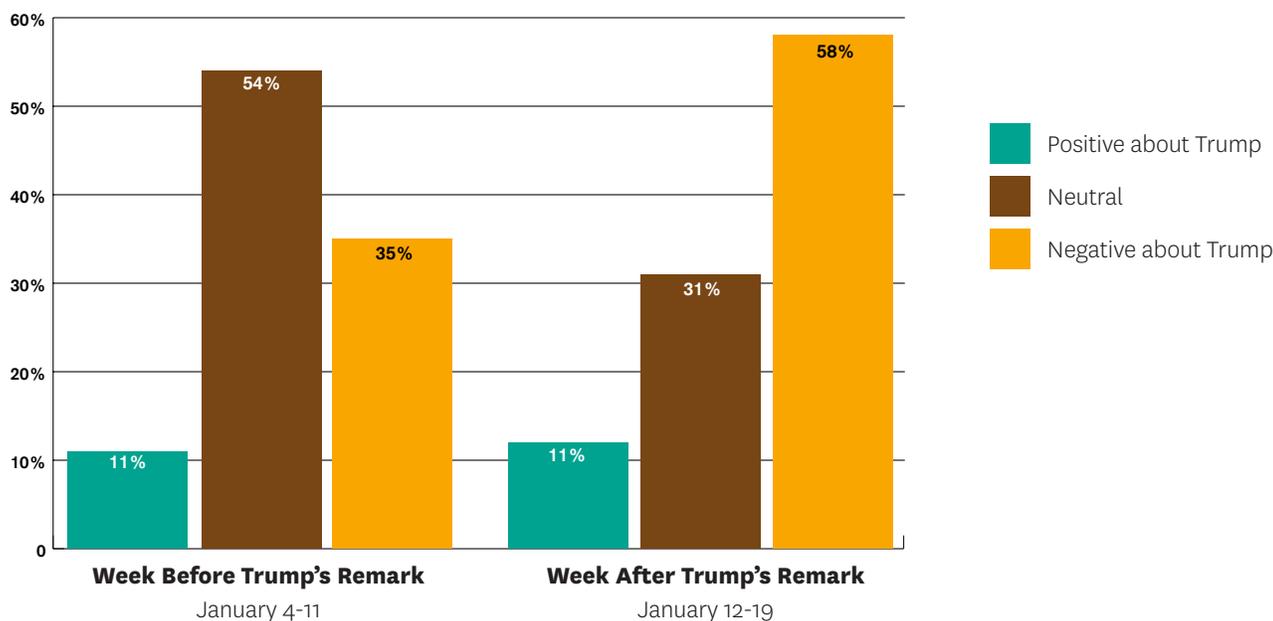
<sup>4</sup> "Where Do Americans Travel Most Often? These 39 Top Spots Contain Surprises." *NWI Times*. N.p., 8 Mar. 2018. Web. 11 Sept. 2018.

of information about Africa in U.S. schools; and Africa experts bemoan meager coverage of the continent in mainstream media. In the absence of overall data on American knowledge about Africa, we interviewed two dozen elite stakeholders with expert knowledge of the continent. Interviewees made numerous references to the fact that Americans are, broadly speaking, inward-looking; so, it takes an event like the remark or the killing of American Green Berets in Niger to garner U.S. interest in Africa. However, the deficit of knowledge about Africa is so deep that, even when Africa became the subject of conversation on Twitter, the comments focused on partisan sniping rather than information about Africa.

## SENTIMENT TOWARD TRUMP

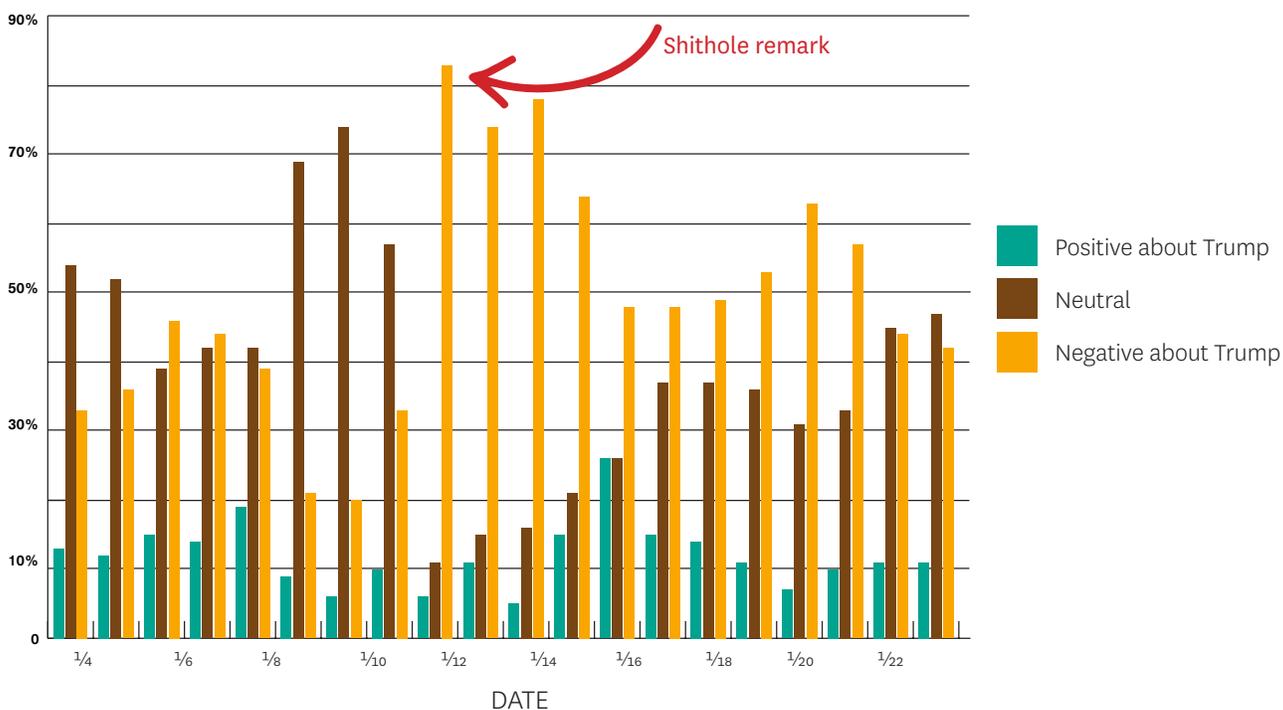
Between January 4-23, 2018, BrandsEye human coders analyzed the sentiment of over 16,000 U.S. based tweets about Trump. Negative tweets about him substantially escalated in the wake of the remark, jumping from 35% in the week preceding the remark to 58% in the week following — an increase of 66%. Tweets in support of Trump remained static within the margin of error after the remark (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. BrandsEye Verified Sentiment Tweets About Trump**



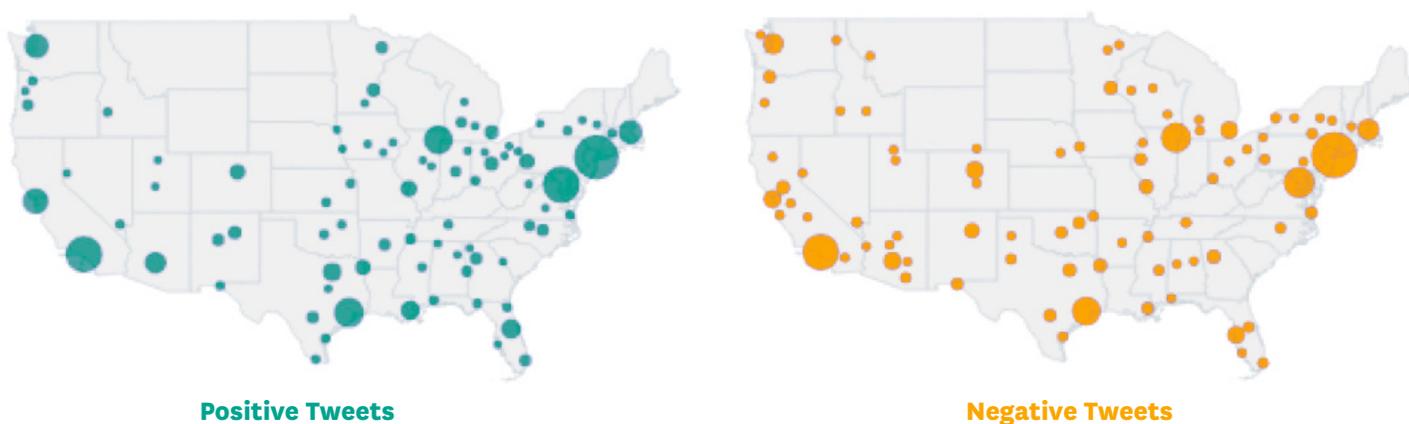
Prior to the remark, neutral tweets about Trump substantially outnumbered tweets expressing sentiment, but the remark was followed by 10 straight days of predominantly negative tweets about him (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Verified Sentiment About Trump Over Time**



Positive and negative tweets were both distributed across the country with no significant correlation to states Trump did or did not carry (Figure 3).

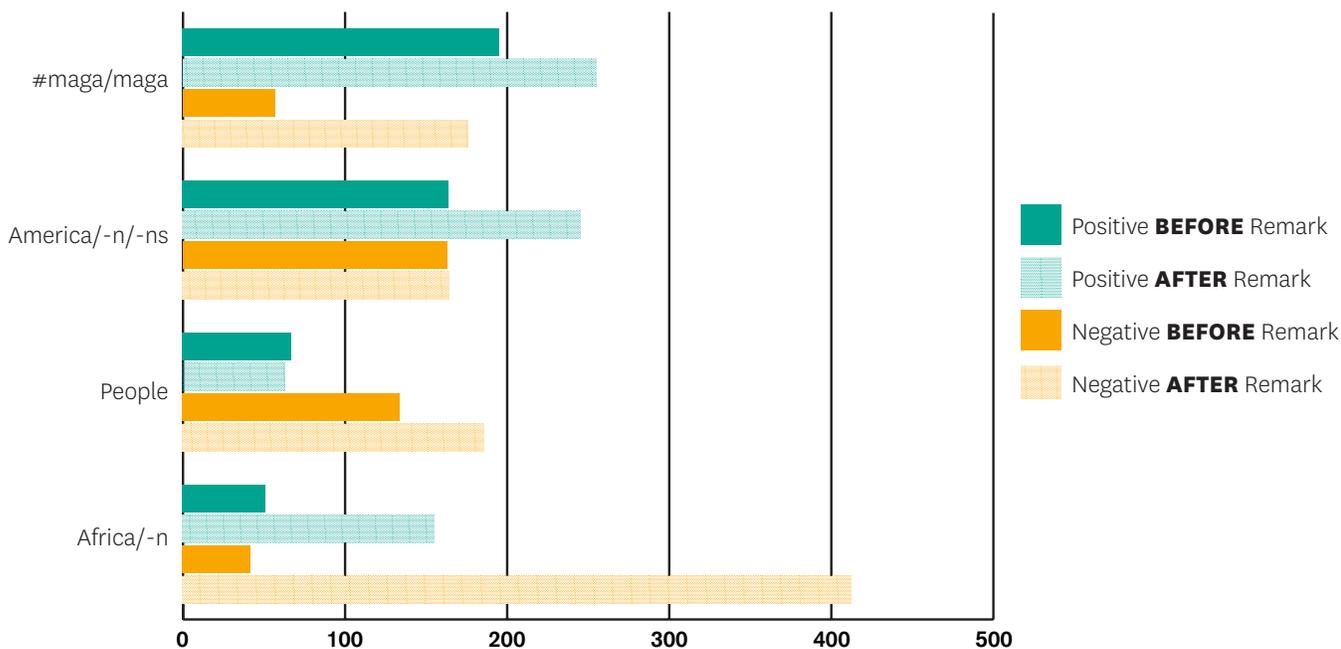
**Figure 3. Location of Tweets About Trump**



Positive and negative tweets about Trump use a lot of the same keywords, but the sentiment of the terms used is different. For example, hashtags such as #MAGA may be used to either support or mock Trump; hence the

benefit of BrandsEye’s system incorporating human-coders to detect nuances such as sarcasm and irony that AI-only systems lack the ability to detect as reliably (Figures 4, 5 and 6).

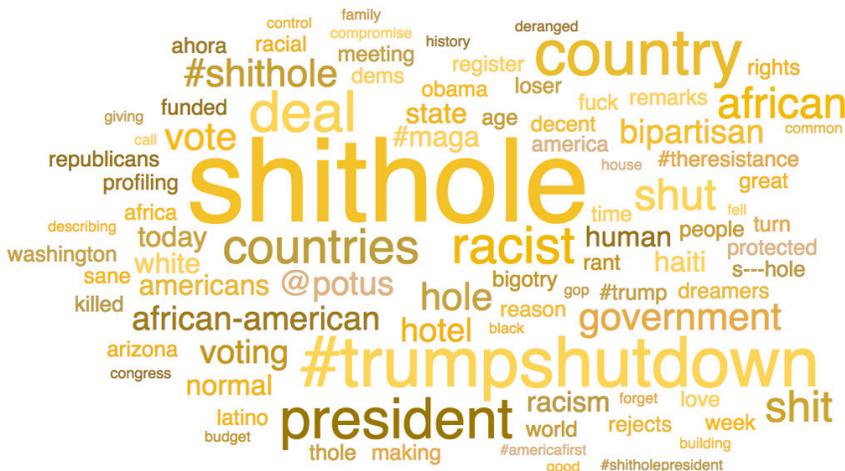
**Figure 4. Frequently Used Terms in Tweets about Trump**



**Figure 5. Top Terms in Positive Tweets About Trump**



**Figure 6. Top Terms in Negative Tweets About Trump**



# POSITIVE TWEETS ABOUT TRUMP

Among the 11% of US tweets supportive of Trump’s remark, these themes arose:

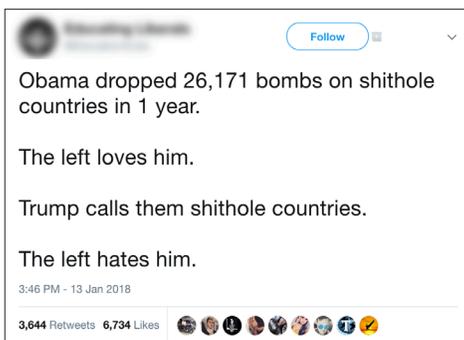
## FAKE NEWS

Many Trump-supportive tweets questioned whether the remark was even said in the first place. Senators Dick Durbin (R-IL) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) were the first two meeting participants to confirm the remark, so they received significant attention on Twitter. (Note: Unless their accounts were verified, we blurred their Twitter handle and photo.)



## HYPOCRISY

Many Trump-supportive tweets called the criticism of his remark hypocritical: they pointed out that President Barack Obama previously used “shit show”<sup>5</sup> to describe a conflict in Libya, which prompted no firestorm, and that his use of the remark is insignificant compared with actual foreign policy decisions made by the Obama administration. It appears that Trump’s remark was used to attack individuals and media outlets perceived as liberal for using a double-standard to disparage him.



<sup>5</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. President Talks through His Hardest Decisions about America’s Role in the World.” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

## HYPOCRISY, CONTINUED



## MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR'S NIECE

Alveda King, the niece of Martin Luther King Jr., was interviewed on Fox News' "Fox & Friends" two days after the remark. She explicitly stated that Donald Trump is not a racist and that there are countries in Africa that are "hell holes." This message and messenger were very popular among Trump-supportive tweets.



## NEGATIVE TWEETS ABOUT TRUMP

One week after Trump's remark, negative tweets about him increased from 35% to 58%. Among them, these themes emerged:

### WHO IS LYING?

While tweets supportive of Trump accused Senators Durbin and Graham of lying about the remark, many tweets against Trump cast doubt on the stories told by Senators Tom Cotton (R-AR) and David Perdue (R-GA), who said they didn't recall the remark being made in the meeting. Additionally, many negative tweets about Trump criticized the narrative about the remark emanating from both the White House and Trump supporters.

### WHO IS LYING?, CONTINUED

**Amy Siskind** @Amy\_Siskind

On Friday, Cotton and Perdue couldn't recall. On Sunday, both claim Trump didn't say "shithole."

The great gaslighting of America!



**Hopes Dim for DACA Deal as Lawmakers Battle Over Trump's Immigration R...**  
Senator David Perdue, who attended the White House meeting, said Senator Richard J. Durbin's account of President Trump's language was a "gross misrepr..."  
nytimes.com

12:17 PM - 14 Jan 2018

640 Retweets 1,378 Likes

108 640 1.4K

**Charles Johnson** @Green\_Footballs

Trump supporters now:

- 1) Trump never said "shithole countries."
- 2) And it's going to help him with the base.
- 3) And there's nothing racist about it anyway.
- 4) And it was private and reporting it makes YOU the villain.

We need a stronger term than "cognitive dissonance."

1:54 PM - 14 Jan 2018

1,188 Retweets 3,342 Likes

311 1.2K 3.3K

**Judd Legum** @JuddLegum

To summarize the White House's position: Trump's "shithole countries" comment, which he did not make, will be helpful with his base

1:46 PM - 14 Jan 2018

1,664 Retweets 5,846 Likes

121 1.7K 5.8K

**Ted Lieu** @tedlieu

Why Senators Cotton & Perdue are likely lying:

- Trump did not initially deny saying shithole
- Trump bragged to friends he made stnt
- WH did not initially deny stnt
- Senators Graham & Durbin confirm stnt
- Original story came from sources in the room other than Graham or Durbin

1:54 PM - 14 Jan 2018

14,009 Retweets 34,538 Likes

1.5K 14K 35K

### RACISM

The most common theme among negative tweets about Trump was racism. Many users juxtaposed the remark with Trump's previous remarks on attendees of the Charlottesville alt-right rally and his description of Mexican immigrants as drug dealers and rapists.

**Shannon Watts** @shannonwatts

Trump's guide to diversity

- Africa: Array of shithole countries
- Haitians: Have AIDS
- Nigerians: Live in huts
- Puerto Ricans: Lazy
- Black Americans: Ingrates
- Mexicans: Criminals and rapists
- Muslims: Evil terrorists
- Women: Treat them like shit

White supremacists: VERY FINE PEOPLE

2:18 PM - 11 Jan 2018

68,849 Retweets 152,596 Likes

1.6K 69K 153K

**[Blurred Name]**

Speaking out against a man who calls African countries "shithole countries" and white supremacists "very fine people" is not a complicated matter. It's called doing the right thing. Defending a man who says these things is not a complicated matter either — it's called racism.

10:24 AM - 14 Jan 2018

1,926 Retweets 4,767 Likes

102 1.9K 4.8K

## RACISM, CONTINUED



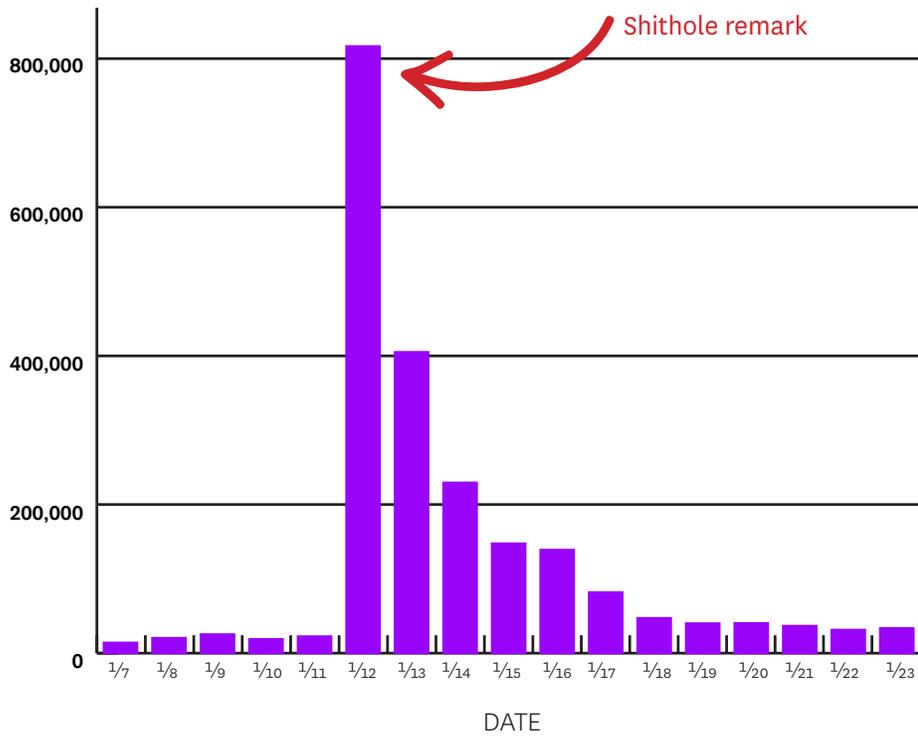
Other tweets that called Trump racist focused on how the remark contrasted people from African countries with people from Norway.



## SENTIMENT TOWARD AFRICA

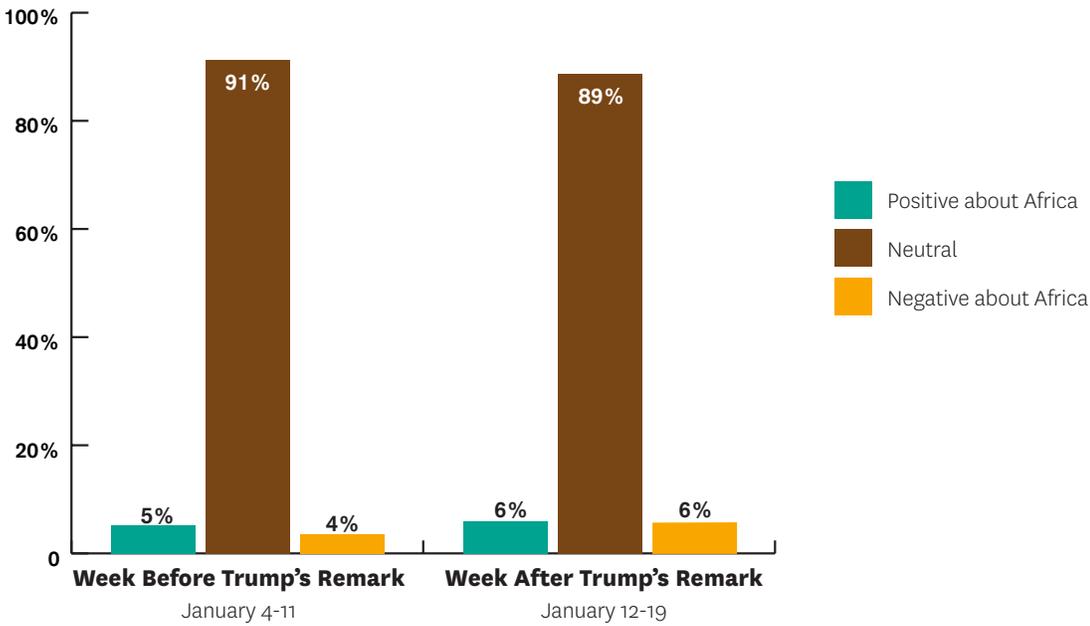
There were over 2.1 million tweets from U.S. Twitter users that either said “Africa” or “African” (removing references to “African Americans”) between January 4-23, 2018. BrandsEye human coders verified sentiment on just under 30,000 of these tweets. The remark substantially increased online mentions of Africa — U.S. tweets about Africa went up over 3,000% when news of the remark broke. Even 11 days later, “Africa” was mentioned on Twitter 45% more than the day before the remark was reported (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Volume of Tweets about Africa**



While the remark caused a divisive Twitter reaction to Trump, the vast majority of tweets mentioning Africa didn’t have a positive or negative sentiment before or after the remark was publicized. Neutral tweets toward Africa decreased negligibly from 91% to 89% after the remark, and both positive and negative tweets increased slightly after the remark (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Sentiment in Tweets about Africa**



## POSITIVE TWEETS ABOUT AFRICA

Trump’s remark did not shift the sentiment of tweets about Africa, despite generating a tremendous volume of negative tweets about him. Positive tweets about Africa stayed within the standard deviation one week after his remark. Despite the outrage, very few users took advantage of a rare opportunity to focus American attention on the success, diversity, opportunity and vibrancy of Africa.

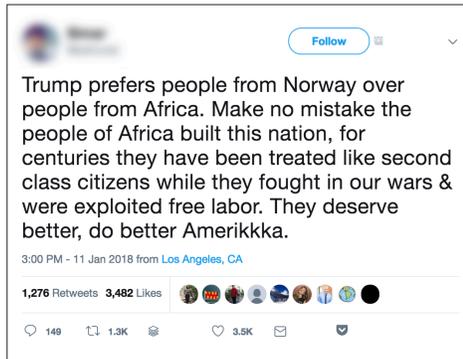
### CELEBRATING AFRICA

Some users commented on Africa’s diverse assets such as its culture and civilization; natural beauty; technology and innovation; solutions-driven culture; its emerging middle class; and its growing economies.



## AFRICANS BUILT THIS COUNTRY

Another prominent theme among positive tweets about Africa focused on slavery and colonialism, how Africans built this country and the contributions of African immigrants to America.



## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS

Among the positive tweets about Africa, many countered the remark by focusing on the contributions of African immigrants to America. These tweets not only came from African immigrants and their friends and families; it was a common theme among conservative influencers who spoke out against the remark. Republican presidential candidate Evan McMullin, conservative pollster Frank Luntz and conservative pundit Erick Erickson all tweeted about the value of African immigrants.



## CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS, CONTINUED

**Erick Erickson** @EWErickson

So the President would prefer we allow Norwegian socialists with no special love of America into the country, but not the Ghanan who will work his ass off with a grand appreciation for our free market system and raise his kids to be proud Americans.

3:30 PM - 11 Jan 2018

1,854 Retweets 7,402 Likes

1.1K 1.9K 7.4K

**Melissa Santos** @MelissaSantos1

My husband is an immigrant from Uganda -- you, know, in Africa. He arrived as a refugee, served 21 years in the U.S. Navy and now is studying to be a doctor in the United States. FYI @realDonaldTrump

**The New York Times** @nytimes  
Breaking News: Using vulgar language, President Trump said the U.S. should welcome immigrants from Norway, not places like Haiti or Africa  
nyti.ms/2EzG67V  
Show this thread

3:12 PM - 11 Jan 2018

63 Retweets 265 Likes

16 63 265

I'm an immigrant from Africa Mr President. I've created over 25 jobs in the USA and a cybersecurity company that proudly pays it's taxes. Today you called my birth country a #shithole. Today you insulted my family and heritage. Today I become #silentNoLonger on politics.

3:39 PM - 11 Jan 2018

18 Retweets 54 Likes

4 18 54

Hey @realDonaldTrump—El Salvador, Haiti and African countries aren't shitholes.

Both my parents came to America from West Africa when they were teenagers with \$50 in their pockets, seeking a better life for themselves and their children.

You know what that makes them? American.

3:18 PM - 11 Jan 2018

7,407 Retweets 31,708 Likes

947 7.4K 32K

I am one of those immigrants from #shithole\_countries in Africa. More than half of the patient's I take care of; voted for this #shitholegenius Take doctors who are from shithole countries out of the U.S. and the health system will crumble. #Haiti #shithole

7:39 PM - 11 Jan 2018

## NEGATIVE TWEETS ABOUT AFRICA

Sentiment about Africa shifted slightly negative after the remark, though it was mostly driven by a large volume of retweets that mentioned Africa, its countries and/or its people, only to criticize or support Trump. Among 1,659 human-verified negative tweets about Africa, 795 contained the word “shithole.” A majority of these directly or indirectly restated the remark, which essentially contains negative sentiment toward Africa, in order to criticize and/or disagree with Trump.

It appears that regardless of the intention or position of media outlets, the media’s numerous restatements of Trump’s remark likely reinforced a negative image of Africa. Few of their tweets presented actual facts about Africa, or specific African countries, so they neither highlighted positive aspects about the continent or provided substantial support to Trump’s negative opinion of it.

## AGREE WITH TRUMP

One theme dominated negative tweets about Africa: agreement with Trump's remark.



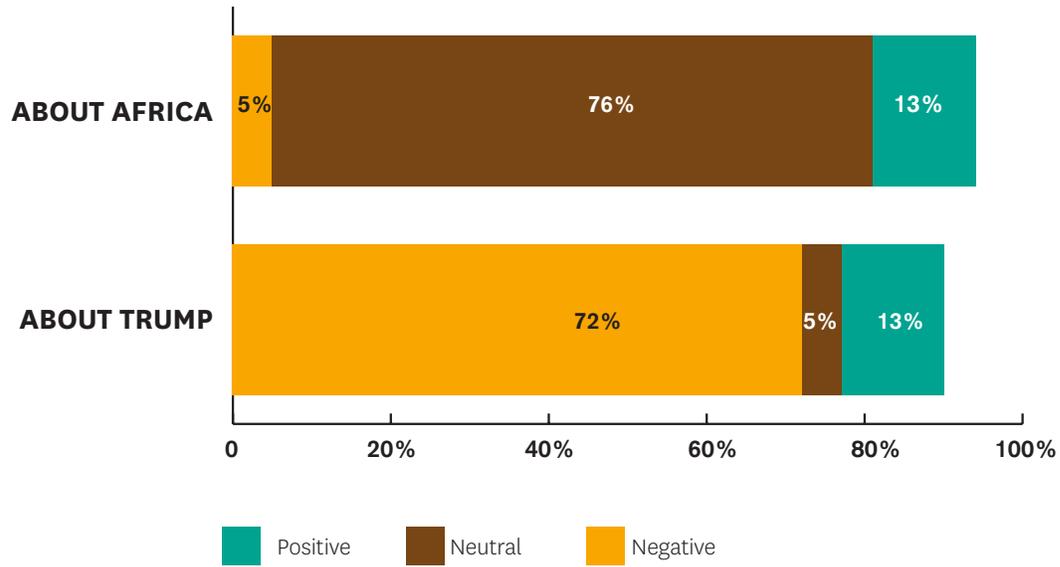
## ANALYSIS OF MOST INFLUENTIAL TWEETS

A random representative sample constructed using probability sampling methodology was used to represent the total population through crowd verification. In order to understand the sentiment and themes of the most prominent tweets about Africa during that time period (January 4-23), we performed a supplemental analysis of the top 100 U.S. tweets relating to Africa and Africans. Two metrics were used to identify these tweets: 1) the highest number of BrandsEye's "Opportunities to See" scores, which are based on the number of followers of an account and the follower counts of those who retweet that post; and 2) the highest "Engagement" scores, defined by BrandsEye as the number of times a piece of online content is replied to or shared. BrandsEye does not use "likes" in its calculation of engagement, which they perceive as an inadequate indicator of interest.

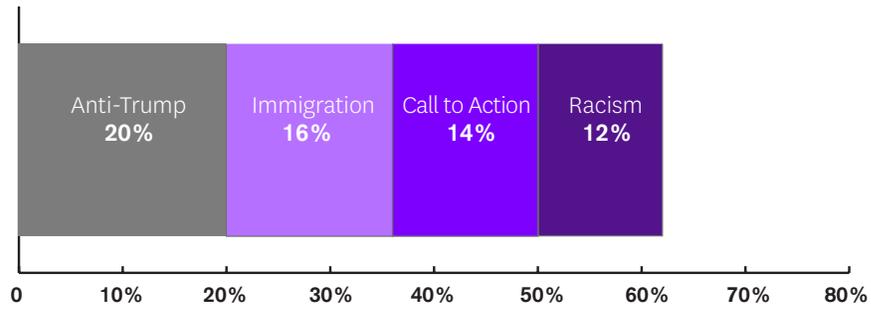
Notably, only 9 of the top 100 tweets appeared the week prior to Trump's remark on January 11, indicating how little influencers (primarily media outlets and celebrities) discuss Africa. While influencers were far more likely to mention Africa after Trump's remark, they had very little to say about the country or its people, but a lot to say about him.

Much like tweets from average Twitter users, the vast majority of tweets about Africa from influential Twitter accounts were neither positive nor negative in sentiment (Figure 9). Instead of using the reported remark as an opportunity to provide meaningful information about Africa's nations and people, the most influential tweets focused on criticism of Trump (20%), immigration (16%), calls to action (12%), and racism (10%). Only 6 of the top 100 tweets contained information or opinions about Africa (Figure 10).

**Figure 9. Sentiment of Top Tweets**



**Figure 10. Topics of Top Tweets**





# ABOUT

## USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center is a nonpartisan research and public policy center that studies the social, political, economic and cultural impact of entertainment on the world. The Lear Center translates its findings into action through testimony, journalism, strategic research and innovative public outreach campaigns. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. Its Founding Director is Marty Kaplan. For more information, please visit: [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).

## Media Impact Project

At the Lear Center's Media Impact Project ([www.mediaimpactproject.org](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org)), we study the impact of news and entertainment on viewers. Our goal is to prove that media matters, and to improve the quality of media to serve the public good. We partner with media makers and funders to create and conduct program evaluation, develop and test research hypotheses, and publish and promote thought leadership on the role of media in social change.

## BrandsEye

BrandsEye, the world's leading opinion mining company, combines AI and human intelligence to accurately understand public opinion. Using a proprietary mix of search algorithms, crowd-sourcing and machine learning, BrandsEye successfully mines online conversations for sentiment and the topics driving that sentiment. In 2016, BrandsEye gained international attention for predicting the outcomes of the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election, proving the predictive value of analysing social media data at scale.

## The Africa Initiative

The Africa Initiative, which is based at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, was established to create greater public knowledge and understanding of and engagement with Africa, through research, creative communications campaigns, and collaborations with private, public and non-profit partners. Recognizing the pivotal role of media and entertainment in shaping perceptions and opinions of Africa, the Initiative seeks a deeper understanding of their impact and a richer telling of Africa's story. Combining opinion research and content analysis of news and entertainment programming, Africa in the Media is the Initiative's inaugural research project. It will focus on illuminating how Africa is depicted in media and entertainment, with an aim to generate a deeper understanding of the impact on opinions and attitudes toward Africa, and more broadly, on US engagement with Africa.

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