How Not to Write About Africa

The media shamefully neglects Africa -- until it decides to swarm a story with terrible coverage.

BY LAURA SEAY | APRIL 25, 2012

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It's hard out here for us old Africa hands. We are desperate to see more coverage of important stories from the continent and for our neighbors to become more educated about the places where we study and work. Yet when we get that coverage, it tends to make us cringe.

Take, for instance, the current violence in northern Mali. In the last six weeks, Mali has experienced a coup d'état and a declaration of independence from rebels who now loosely control half its territory. The recent conflict has displaced approximately 268,000 people as various groups of Islamists and separatist rebels jostle for control of desert oasis cities as a drought-driven food crisis looms with the arrival of the country's hot season. The situation in Mali is by far the worst unfolding humanitarian crisis in the world today, but compared with say, Syria or Afghanistan, you probably haven't heard much about it.

Or consider the flurry of coverage of Central Africa that followed March's "Kony 2012" phenomenon. First of all, it is frustrating that it takes a viral Internet video or the involvement of Hollywood celebrities to bring attention to the depredations of groups like the Lord's Resistance Army. Even worse, many Africa correspondents file stories that fall prey to pernicious stereotypes and tropes that dehumanize Africans. Mainstream news outlets frequently run stories under headlines like "Land of Mangoes and Joseph Kony," seemingly without thinking how condescending and racist such framing sounds.

Western reporting on Africa is often fraught with factual errors, incomplete analysis, and stereotyping that would not pass editorial muster in coverage of China, Pakistan, France, or Mexico. A journalist who printed blatantly offensive stereotypes about German politicians or violated ethical norms regarding protection of child-abuse victims in Ohio would at the least be sanctioned and might even lose his or her job. When it comes to Africa, however, these problems are tolerated and, in some cases, celebrated. A quick search of the Google News archives for "Congo" and "heart of darkness" yields nearly 4,000 hits, the vast majority of which are not works of literary criticism, but are instead used to exoticize the Democratic Republic of the Congo while conjuring up stereotypes of race and savagery. Could we imagine a serious publication ever using similar terminology to describe the south side of Chicago, Baltimore, or another predominately African-American city?

To Africa-watchers, there is a clear double standard for journalistic quality, integrity, and ethics when it comes to reporting on the continent. It's enough to make us want to scream, or at least crawl into a corner and long for the days when Howard French covered West and Central Africa for the *New York Times*. Although he had to cover some of the continent's worst post-Cold War violence, French's mid-1990s reporting for the *Times* was nuanced and balanced, and reflected the reality of Africa as a place that is not simply a land of war and poverty, but rather a complex system of societies like any others filled with normal people doing their best to make a life.

Why is there so much bad reporting on Africa? Part of the problem has to do with the limited number of journalists assigned to cover the continent. Many major Western media outlets assign one correspondent for the entire continent -- more than 11 million square miles. He or she will be based in Johannesburg or Nairobi, but be expected to parachute into Niger, Somalia, or wherever the next crisis is unfolding, on a moment's notice. At best, larger publications will have two or three regional Africa correspondents who are each responsible for covering 10 to 15 countries. The wire services tend to have broader reach, but even they cannot station a correspondent in every country.

This is insane. Africa is a continent of 54 distinct states, all with multiple languages and ethnic groups and unique political dynamics. Nowhere else in the world -- not even in undercovered Latin America -- would one person be expected to report on so many complicated situations. Yet in Western media coverage of Africa, such a state of affairs is common. It could be argued that these limits are the product of declining revenues for traditional media outlets in the age of the Internet. It is true that foreign correspondents are expensive and revenues are down, but that ignores the fact that Western media coverage of Africa has always been done this way. Twenty years ago, most major Western media outlets also only had one to three Africa correspondents. Very little has changed.

There is an easy solution to this problem: Hire local reporters. One notable exception to the history of poor coverage of Africa is the BBC, whose World Service has long maintained correspondents in most of the continent's capital cities. Although the World Service's budget has been slashed repeatedly due to declining government support, the BBC has managed to keep much of its Africa coverage afloat by relying largely on local reporters to get the story. This has been particularly important in Somalia. For two decades, it has been nearly impossible for Western reporters to fully and freely report from Somalia due to safety concerns, but the BBC Somali Service's team of local correspondents and producers do an excellent job of getting the news out from their own country. There's no reason that other major media providers couldn't hire local reporters to improve their coverage as well. Rather than relegating them to second-tier or co-author status, why not hire Africans as country or regional correspondents? A reporter does not have to be Caucasian to provide objective and well-written reporting from the continent, and in many cases, this reporting is more nuanced than that of an international correspondent who spends five days reporting a story. For example, by far the most thoughtful reporting and analysis on Ugandan reactions to the Kony 2012 viral video came not from American journalists, but from Ugandan reporter Angelo Izama who, to

the *New York Times*' credit, was able to publish an opinion article in its pages. Why can't the *Times* hire Izama or someone equally qualified to report on Uganda full time?

Hiring local reporters also addresses the problem of language barriers, another key reason so much reporting on Africa is so bad. This is evident in the Anglophone-Francophone divide: Coverage of the Mali crisis by outlets such as Agence France-Presse and France 24 has been considerably better than that of much of the English-language media. They had the best information from the battlefront and were able to interview non-Anglophone Malians with ease. The problem is not simply that reporters cannot be expected to speak all of Africa's 3,000-plus languages; it is that foreign correspondents tend to rely on the same small group of fixers to arrange interviews, interpret, and manage logistics.

Yet fixers tend to take reporters to talk to the same subjects, over and over and over again. An echo chamber often results, as the same interviews are done with essentially the same questions and the same answers. The echo-chamber problem is much worse in conflict zones, where NGOs often arrange safe travel for reporters in a bid to get their stories out (and to raise funds for their humanitarian operations). Given the challenges of reporting in the midst of open conflict, this symbiotic relationship works well for both parties: The journalist gets the story, and the NGO gets good press for its campaign.

The problem is that this tends to produce very one-sided and nonobjective reporting. For example, much of the recent coverage of the conflict in Sudan's Nuba Mountains has been facilitated by the U.S.-based NGO Samaritan's Purse. Many of the reporters traveling with Samaritan's Purse have used the same fixer for their stories, Ryan Boyette, a former employee of the group who is married to a Nuba woman and runs a local effort to document atrocities occurring there. In the space of just a few weeks, Boyette also became the subject of a fawning *New York Times* profile by Nicholas Kristof, was a centerpiece of Jeffrey Gettleman's reporting for the same publication, and was interviewed by Ann Curry for NBC's *Today*. This is not to question Boyette's credibility or challenge his analysis (though he is far from a neutral observer), but rather to point out one of many examples of the way the West's Africa reporting becomes biased due to a lack of access and local language skills. As Karen Rothmyer noted in a *Columbia Journalism Review* article, many reporters working on Africa rely "heavily, and uncritically, on aid organizations for statistics, subjects, stories, and sources." It is thus no wonder that much reporting on Africa is so heavily focused on crises and that many pieces read like little more than NGO promotional materials.

Another major issue many Africa hands have with media coverage of the continent is the lack of journalistic ethics employed by some reporters working in the continent. Standards for the depiction and identification of victims of conflict, rape, and child abuse are frequently handled very differently from how they would be were the victims American or European. It is very common to see pictures of starving children or rape victims in the pages of Western newspapers. The most egregious example was Kristof's 2010 identification of a 9-year-old Congolese girl who had been gang-raped. The *New York Times* printed the girl's real name along with a facial photograph and even a video of her online. After a firestorm of controversy, Kristof blogged a response in which he

promised not to do it again, but disagreed with critics who accused him of putting the child in danger by identifying her. He acknowledged, however, that printing her name violated *Times* policy, even though he obtained permission from a woman acting as her guardian.

It is hard to imagine a situation in which any editor would have let such a "slip" occur had the story been about a Western child-rape victim. Such a story never would -- or should -- have made it to the publication stage without changing the name to an alias, removing the photograph, or replacing it with a non-identifiable shot and noting that the *Times* does not print rape victims' names as a matter of policy.

It is precisely these kinds of double standards that infuriate Africa-watchers and those who care about the ethics of reporting on victims of violence. Yet such abuses are too often tolerated in the Western media when it comes to Africa. Is it because Africa is still in many Western minds the exotic "other" of movies and imagination? Or perhaps because many Western reporters still approach Africa with a mixed sense of excitement at being somewhere so "unique" and fear of the Heart of Darkness? Or is it simple ignorance about an Africa that, as Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina notes, is never going to look like what the West wants it to look like? I don't have a definitive answer. But I do think we can do better.