African Countries Need to be More Savvy in their Dealings with the International Media

LSE alumnus Waiswa Nkwanga argues that, in order to reduce the negative effects of international media exposure, African countries may have to copy the example of countries such as North Korea.

North Korea is notorious for its tight control of the media, even during major humanitarian crises. During the great famine in North Korea (1994-98) in which an estimated 600,000 to 2.5 million people died from starvation, the regime of Kim Jong-il refused to open its doors to international reporters to cover the crisis. The regime was heavily criticised for that, and justifiably so. A brief survey of the way the Western media has covered recent events in Africa – portraying countries as failed states, a mere "white man's burden" and as places of neverending misery and barbarity-makes one wonder whether its leaders should consider restricting international media access. Bad exposure can be as bad, perhaps worse, than no exposure at all.

International coverage of the recent conflict in the Central African Republic propagates the idea of the continent as a "white man's burden".

African elites, desperate for western aid and approval, frequently pander to international media: every drought, disease outbreak or conflict makes for good prime time TV and major newspaper headlines. What these leaders fail to recognise is that the media frenzy is often a double-edged sword.

Indeed the idea of Africa as an ungovernable space and a "white man's burden" is the understanding one gets from Jon Anderson's recent article, published in the New Yorker, about the conflict in Central African Republic (CAR). It reads like a scene in a zombie fiction movie, except that it is not.

"In the central market, women sell smoked bat and monkey, alongside pirated films from Nigeria and plastic jugs of locally distilled gin…One man posed for news cameras with the half-cooked leg of a Muslim man he had murdered, and took ravenous bites out of it…On one wall, near where the Empress Catherine had once slept, a soldier had drawn a scorpion in charcoal…Since 1960, France had sent its military some fifty times to intervene in its former African colonies, but an

engagement in Mali the previous year had ended in a messy stalemate. The French public was wary of another intervention."

The article is superbly written, but like many other stories on Africa in the Western media, its graphic details seem to underscore the way Africa has historically been portrayed. The writer could have written about the resilience of the displaced women and children trapped in this mayhem and trying to make ends meet for instance, but he chose not to. The article also speaks, more broadly, to how the media can tell the truth while simultaneously advancing insidious derogatory narratives that can sometimes seem as bigoted as they are dated.

I remember my country Uganda being at the centre of a media storm two years ago. In 2012, in a bid to expose the atrocities of the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony and the LRA, a US charity, the Invisible Children launched a film Kony2012 that went viral online. The film was a big success and culminated in international response to the "crisis" the most notable of which was the decision by the US to send troops to CAR to hunt Joseph Kony. To the people of northern Uganda, though, an intervention after more than twenty years of war was too little too late.

Nonetheless, just as the film succeeded in drawing international attention to the LRA and Kony's madness, it also presented Uganda as a country too fractured along tribal lines and the government there as too weak to govern. This contradicts the fact that years before the film was made Uganda had single-handedly flushed the LRA completely out of the country. Yet this did not stop the filmmakers from giving the impression that there was still an ongoing war in northern Uganda. So much for educating the world and for humanitarianism.

There is no doubt that in this age of globalisation international media networks play an important role in informing us about major events in distant places. Indeed, more than developed countries, poor countries almost entirely depend on large international media companies such as the BBC for global news.

But when the media fails to bring about substantive discourses and understanding and instead focuses on stereotypes and sensation — as is often the case— it does more harm than good. Issues get polarised, communities get divided, fear, suspicion and tensions deepen, and stereotypes crystalise.

Even when it manages to mobilise the world to act, as in the case of the US response to Kony's madness and to the kidnapping of schoolgirls in Nigeria, such hasty moves are often indecisive, poorly planned, and end up being more about face-saving than about helping people. There is also the danger of sensational media coverage provoking a backlash on the communities that are often most vulnerable. Reckless media exposure and threats against unscrupulous violent groups can trigger retribution on local communities. Recent experiences in Iraq, Somalia, Kenya, and Nigeria prove this.

Moreover, in Africa the exposure has often come with huge price tags for ordinary Africans who must constantly deal with the psychological trauma, humiliation and even stigma outside caused by the media. Perhaps it is time for African elites to learn something that it is a dog-eat-dog world. A little control of the narrative about major crises that break out on the continent may be warranted to protect the continent's image outside as well as that of its people.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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