



Last WORD

Rewriting the African editorial narrative

Are news organisations reporting Africa accurately or falling back on cliché? Do African stories get a fair hearing in the international press, or even in the media inside Africa? Are Africans seeing a fair representation of themselves on screen?

By Peter Horrocks

As Director of Global News for the BBC, an organisation whose largest single audience is on the African continent, these are crucial questions for me.

Earlier this year I joined African colleagues at a seminar co-hosted by the BBC and the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism in Johannesburg. Our brief was to explore the African editorial narrative and how it should be rewritten. I was keen to pick up input from colleagues in the media and academia on the BBC's reporting of Africa, both internationally and in Africa itself.

The starting point for the seminar was the claim that for too long international news about Africa has been dominated by images of famine, war and poverty.

One participant characterised the existing editorial narrative as “the man in camouflage with mirrored sunglasses and an AK47, the fat cat politician, and the woman, hungry from drought, with her dying children in her arms”.

Many Africans would simply not recognise their continent as it is portrayed on international television screens, but now a new and rival African narrative is emerging, that of booming Africa, a continent on the rise.

This is a story about a continent which is experiencing a period of sustained economic growth and which boasted six of the world's 10 fastest-growing countries in the last decade, a continent where foreign direct investment has rocketed. A continent whose growth regularly outstripped that of East Asia's in the first years of the new millennium.

The challenge for media now is to reflect these new realities and do justice to the continent; to show Africa in all its various aspects.

What stops media organisations from doing justice to Africa?

An obvious, but vital, point to make is that Africa is a vast, complicated place. With 54 countries extending over nearly 12 million square miles, this means a large-scale news operation. The BBC's operation in Africa reflects this, with 150 reporters and producers based in 46 African countries.

Our international news services have a weekly reach of 81 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. We broadcast in Arabic, English, French, Hausa, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Somali and Swahili. Listeners and viewers can access BBC news via TV, FM, shortwave, or satellite radio, and through partnerships with radio stations and mobile-phone operators. Our websites provide audiences with news, information and analysis in text, audio and video.

For smaller organisations, Africa's sheer scale can present some stark logistical challenges. An African newspaper colleague pointed out that when a plane ticket from South Africa to Rwanda is as expensive as one to London, the London assignment will be the winner every time. African coverage then means a reporter going from one crisis to another, with some African countries dropping off the news map altogether and never being reported from or upon.

Other participants talked of different geographical challenges, knowing just where “Africa” begins and ends. They spoke of not knowing whose beat North Africa was on, should it be covered by an Africa correspondent or a Middle East correspondent?

We all agreed that building up relationships with local correspondents, be they staff members or freelance stringers, is a vital part of the solution. The panel agreed that without local knowledge, contacts, and expertise, the African agenda is at risk of being dictated by an editor many miles away, covering an increasingly small range of stories. And even when there are “voices on the ground”, they are not always being heard.

This is the starting point for the BBC's Live the Story initiative, which demonstrates how our journalists are not just reporting on, but living in, the world they are describing.

Live the Story means Anne Soy, our bilingual reporter in Kenya who works for our English and Swahili programmes, knowing that backstreet abortions are one of the major issues facing Kenyan women, and using her local contacts to discover the scale of the illegal abortion trade.

It means we have Tomi Oladipo in Nigeria making films about how that country's new-found prosperity means more champagne is consumed there than in any other country outside France.

It's about Nomsa Maseko sharing her passion for street racing and car spinning which has become a major sport in the Johannesburg township where she lives.

And it's about Ghanaian Komla Dumor, the presenter of our TV “Focus on Africa” and one of the key faces of the re-launched BBC World News channel, sharing his passion and pride in Africa.

Live The Story is about our 150 African reporters and producers revealing to the world their continent, how they live and what it means to live in Africa in the 21st century, and the management of BBC Africa, by the renowned Kenyan journalist Solomon Mugeru. These are stories of Africa for Africans, told by Africans.

We want to bring this story to our audiences in Britain, too.

Earlier this year all of the BBC's news services moved into one new headquarters in central London, creating the World's Newsroom, a melting pot of international journalism. Journalists working on

We want to
“live the story”
and capture the
human element
of Africa’s
economic rise,
to report on the
entrepreneurs
and the
innovators, and
to picture the
aspirations of
Africa’s growing
middle-class.
And we need to
listen to its young
people.

UK news bulletins sit and work alongside colleagues from services around the world. We are making a concerted effort to bring these international voices to our domestic channels, giving them airtime for our British audiences.

During the London Conference on Somalia earlier this year, colleagues from the BBC’s Somali service not only produced programmes for their own service, but appeared on several other BBC outlets to share their knowledge and insight. BBC Somalia journalists produced a “Need-To-Know” guide for the BBC website and interviewed the UK’s Minister for Africa about his expectations for the conference and the future of Somalia.

This represents a truly different way of working for the BBC, with international and domestic services that have for too long been very separate entities.

For me, bringing more African voices into British news bulletins is another key part of rewriting the narrative. It is not just the story which is being told, but who is telling it, and to whom.

Of course, training new journalists is crucial. This is one of the functions of BBC Media Action, the BBC’s not-for-profit organisation which uses media and communication to help reduce poverty and support people to understand their rights. This work also includes supporting the development of African media, through work with African journalists, broadcasters, government agencies and non-governmental organisations. This can quite literally be life-saving work; for example providing vital information during emergencies or informing people about health issues.

It helps to encourage free and fair elections. Before the Johannesburg seminar I was in Nairobi where I visited the set of *Sema Kenya* (Kenya Speaks). *Sema Kenya* is an audience-led debate show broadcast in Kiswahili. In the run-up to the Kenyan elections, the programme had been touring the country, giving Kenyans the chance to engage with the issues in a safe, informed environment.

On programmes like this we work with local partner stations whose journalists get the chance to work on editions of the programme and receive mentoring from us, so we train the journalists of tomorrow.

It’s not just the narrative which is changing, but the way it is being communicated, and consumed. With Africa’s

economic growth has come a rapid increase in the use of mobile technology. Africa has three mobile phones for every four people and is the world’s fastest-growing mobile phone market. It is mobile technology which links Africa to the rest of the world.

While I was in Kenya I had the uplifting experience of visiting the iHub, an innovation centre for new technologies, where I watched a team of executives from Google being lectured on the latest apps by a young Kenyan woman. This was a stark reminder for me of how we need to stay relevant to our African audiences.

With this new technology comes greater audience engagement.

As well as our flagship global discussion programme *World Have Your Say*, and programmes such as *Sema Kenya*, there are more opportunities than ever before for audiences to interact with our news services.

All of our services have Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, meaning the audience can interact directly with programmes and presenters as never before. This day-to-day dialogue can help to provide us with stories or comments which help us do our journalism effectively, including feedback which tells us what people think we’re getting right or wrong.

Of course, there is a danger that the rush to focus on “rising Africa” simply replaces one set of clichés with another, ignoring the realities of everyday life for the overwhelming majority of people on the continent.

And that, as one panellist at our seminar warned, rural Africa is increasingly under-reported as the focus swings to the big cities.

The BBC will not neglect its responsibility to report to Africa and the world the more unpleasant aspects of life on the continent, especially when many media organisations in Africa lack the desire or willingness to face up to that side of life. After all, this is still a continent where the majority of people are living on less than two dollars a day. The problems of disease, poverty and violence still remain.

It isn’t the BBC’s job, or that of any other news organisation, to solve these problems, but it is our job to report on them accurately and fairly. For me, the most important thing to remember is that Africa is a subtle, vast, complicated place. We need to reflect the differences of its 54 countries.

The seminar left me optimistic, but threw down a challenge. For me, a few things about the new narrative are clear.

I don’t believe we can tell the African story without telling the business story. This is why the BBC has launched a new African business team in Johannesburg.

We want to “live the story” and capture the human element of Africa’s economic rise, to report on the entrepreneurs and the innovators, and to picture the aspirations of Africa’s growing middle-class. And we need to listen to its young people.

The night before the seminar in Johannesburg I hosted a dinner with 20 of Africa’s brightest young people from One Young World and Brightest Young Minds. Hearing the voice of this young generation is crucial to our understanding of Africa. The average age of an African is now just 18. And it’s estimated that in the next decade 40% of the world’s working population will be African.

Unless as media we record the lives, experiences and views of Africa young people then we risk losing our relevance. I believe the BBC is uniquely placed to tell this story, and I am determined we do it justice.



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