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3 International news and the image of Africa: new storytellers, new narratives?

The international news coverage of Africa has long been criticised for its episodic, simplistic and relentlessly negative content. Commentators argue that news content homogenises the continent, places an over-emphasis on African humanitarian issues, simplifies ethnicity and identity, and highlights western-led rescue efforts (e.g. de B’Berl & Louw, 2011; Hawk, 1992; Keane, 2004). Scholars have argued that these representations are both powerful and dangerous: they perpetuate negative stereotypes, reinforce neo-colonial power imbalance and undermine inter-cultural empathy and connectedness (Mbembe, 2001; Silverstone, 2007).

An underlying assumption – and a source of concern – for these critics is that the international news coverage of Africa is written and produced by outsiders: Westerners writing from an occidental perspective. Drawing on the critical tradition of Orientalism, discourse analysts note that Africa is frequently presented as the object of a western gaze; and this gaze objectifies, exoticises, and lingers on traits that are different, noteworthy, and ‘other’ by contrast to the safety, prosperity, and enlightenment of a western ‘home’. As Mengara suggests: ‘the Africa that we know or hear about today is, essentially, a European made Africa’ (2001: 8). Cumulatively, such news coverage creates what Mengara describes as ‘the systematic and systemic manufacturing of a continent’, based on binary oppositions that juxtapose a civilised, democratised West, with a savage Africa: ‘Superiority versus inferiority, civilised versus uncivilised, pre-logical versus logical,

mythical versus scientific among other epithets' (Ibid: 2). Or, as Spencer writes in relation to Western foreign correspondents in Rwanda, there is a 'positional superiority adopted in news coverage' and this reaffirms 'the images of dependency which have become symbolic of the African experience' (2005: 85-6).

Structural changes in the way international news content is collected, however, complicate this characterisation. Over the past two decades, news outlets around the world have systematically cut their foreign news budgets, leading to a radical reduction in the total number of Western foreign correspondents posted abroad (see Carroll, 2007). Rather than expensively posted foreign correspondents, many news outlets now contract local journalists to provide them with news content. The result is that international news – an important source of images and texts in the semiotic construction of 'Africa' – is to a large extent, discovered and written by journalists from the region.

This chapter explores the important role these local journalists play, and asks whether their presence is starting to change how Africa is depicted in the international news media. This question was explored as part of a larger research project looking at the international news coverage of Africa, and the factors that influence foreign correspondents as they go about their work (Bunce, 2013). It draws on 51 semi-structured interviews with local and international correspondents working in Sudan, Uganda and Kenya, between 2007 and 2011. The interviewed journalists worked across all of the major international newswires and news organisations operating in the region, as well as a wide range of newspapers and news magazines. Some chose to speak on the record, and others wished to remain anonymous.

The interviews reveal that local journalists frequently disagree with Western correspondents about what news should be produced: they pursue more localised and empathetic depictions of their countries. However, there remain a number of structural

and organisational barriers that prevent their views from being included in final news content. To explore how these dynamics play out in practice, and shape news content, the chapter presents a case study of the international news coverage of election violence in Kenya in 2007-8, and a discussion of how news production patterns have changed since this period.

The chapter problematises Mengara's claim that, 'the Africa that we know or hear about today is, essentially, a European made Africa' (2001: 8). But it also questions the idea of image control more generally. In the international news industry, where the global and local are becoming increasingly intertwined, notions of image ownership are highly problematic. News production today is a site of struggle where journalists from diverse backgrounds contest the way in which news events should be framed; and their news stories are consumed by an international audience who are themselves active in writing, commenting and disseminating news. It is in the webs of these relationships that the image of Africa is constructed, and imbued with meaning.

The rise of local journalists

One of the most striking trends in foreign news production over the last 20 years is the increased centrality and importance of local 'foreign correspondents': journalists who report on their home country for global news outlets. In the early 1990s, Kliesch found that 63 per cent of the journalists providing foreign news for American outlets were American nationals posted abroad (1991). Ten years later, a comparable survey found only 31 per cent, a dramatic shift that reflected growth in contracts for local journalists who already lived in the news site (Wu & Hamilton, 2004: 521). Large news outlets such as the BBC have announced their intention to further reduce their posted staff in the

future and recruit cost-effective local journalists in their place. Local journalists now provide substantive portions of day-to-day reporting, and particularly in dangerous contexts such as Somalia and Iraq where Western correspondents may be less free to move around (Borden, 2009).

Local journalists play a particularly important role in reporting on east Africa, where there are now very few traditional Western correspondents posted abroad. In this region, the most prolific and important news outlets are the newswires Reuters, AFP and AP and, to a lesser extent, the international outlets BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera (Williams, 2011). Local African journalists constitute approximately half the staff at the Nairobi bureaux of these major newswires and news outlets. At the time of this study, none occupied management positions, but they did play significant roles as senior correspondents and shift managers, overseeing the commissioning and editing of news from around the region.

Local journalists also play an extremely prominent role as ‘stringers’ (contracted journalists) for these outlets in countries around east Africa. The Reuters newswire, for example, has its east African headquarters in Nairobi, and a network of 16 text stringers in countries around the region. Of these 16 journalists, 13 were local nationals: a Tanzanian national reports on Tanzania, a Burundi national on Burundi, and so on. Similarly, at the AFP newswire, 11 of 13 text journalists in the east Africa region are local nationals.¹ These local-national FCs are often the only journalists in the field when an important event takes place. As a result, local journalists are the primary front-line agents who discover and suggest news on east Africa for the world’s media consumers.

¹ Interview with Andrew Cawthorne, Nairobi Reuters Bureau Chief (2/8/09); and John-Mark Mojon AFP News Editor (3/8/09).

The stories are then edited in Nairobi bureaux, and put on 'the wire' – to be disseminated around the world – providing the raw news content for thousands of newspapers and television channels who cannot afford their own foreign correspondents. Their stories also dominate news flows in the online news world, where news amalgamators rely heavily on newswire copy (Paterson, 2006). Finally, they play an important agenda-setting role for the remaining handful of traditional, Western FCs who are working alone to cover the whole African continent from their Nairobi and Johannesburg postings, and are often deskbound.

New correspondents, new narratives?

Initial responses to the rise of local journalists have been mixed. Some commentators have expressed concern that local journalists may be more vulnerable to the persecution of repressive governments (see also Bunce, 2011). More positively – and the focus of this chapter – is the suggestion that the rise of local journalists represents a welcome break to the historic domination of Western perspectives in the international news. As the BBC's James Miles stated: 'I welcome them as colleagues who will give us a fresh perspective on the news from their countries... many see the advent of local reporters as a welcome step towards a post-colonial reporting world' (quoted in Sambrook, 2011: 50). For Anthony Borden, 'the real key to inspired reporting on the world is a well-trained, well-supported local journalist who has finally been empowered to tell his or her own story' (2009: 144).

But to what extent are local journalists able to challenge traditional representations of Africa? Faced with organisational pressures, and the intense editorial demand for news that sells in international markets, will local nationals simply replicate the writing of their Western colleagues? As Nyamnjoh suggests:

Financial hardship leads many African journalists to seek positions as stringers for the major Western media. To be accepted, they have to think, see and write as Westerners do. Their principles are informed by Western epistemological assumptions about truth and practice, even if the reality of the ground should entail a more contextually appropriate system of meanings. (2005: 87)

Hamilton and Jenner are also circumspect:

These ‘foreign’ foreign correspondents offer the potential for greater international perspective in their reporting, but will they deliver, or will foreign nationals instead end up seeing the world through the lens of the home countries of the media companies for which they are reporting, with the only advantage being that they work for less money? (2003: 138)

My interviews in East Africa suggest a mixed answer to this question. At the traditional Western newswires (AP, AFP and Reuters) and outlets (BBC and CNN) a difficult synthesis is taking place. Local perspectives are increasingly included in news stories, resulting in more nuanced coverage. However, structural and organisational barriers mean the news continues to be dominated by a Western-centric mode of reporting, particularly in times of crises. It is only at alternative media – Al Jazeera English, and the unmediated platforms of Twitter – that local voices provide a consistent and genuinely alternative perspective on news events.

A localised perspective

The local journalists interviewed in this research felt their nationality and background distinguished their reporting in three positive ways: it meant they had excellent contacts

and trusted sources; they had a greater knowledge of the economic, political and historical context in which events took place; and they had a high level of emotional investment in their region, which made them both committed to their work, and in some instances, very sensitive to the local reception of their news.² The interviews – both with local and Western-born journalists – suggested that these differences informed the local journalists’ news work: they chose different issues and emphases.

The local journalists felt they had more background knowledge of the events that occurred in their country; they were able to place an event in context, and evaluate its significance. Importantly, local journalists felt that their insider knowledge made them more likely to describe stories in ways that reflected – rather than reified – local realities. As Samson Ntale, a Ugandan stringer working in Kampala for the CNN stated:

Internationals don’t always know as much about the background and history of this place. So for example, yes, we have traditional dress – but that was brought in by outsiders – it hasn’t been here forever. They don’t know things like that, and so they’re more likely to write a simplistic version of things. It’s not malicious or racist – it’s just not knowing [Interview, Kampala, 31/08/2010].

Andrew Cawthorne, the English-national bureau chief of Reuter’s East Africa noted this was the case with his Somali stringer, who suggested and lobbied for stories that he had not considered important:

² It is important to note that these comparisons were particularly made in contrast to visiting or ‘parachute’ journalists – rather than the handful of Western correspondents who had lived and worked in the region for some time (and were often highly regarded by local journalists).

She will say, ‘this is happening, this leader’s been replaced by this leader in this town’. And I say, ‘well, the fact that this Sheik has taken over this Sheik isn’t very interesting to the world’... And she’ll say, ‘well actually it is important, because this leader is more pro-government’, or ‘they might want to introduce this type of new Sharia law’. And I think, oh, ok, so maybe that’s important [Interview, Nairobi, 02/08/2009].

The chief described this as a common occurrence at his outlet, where he felt there was a ‘happy symbiosis’ between the deep local knowledge of his outlet’s journalists born and raised in east Africa, and the international perspectives of the Western correspondents in the Nairobi office.

In a similar vein, Andrew Simmons, a senior British-born producer for Al Jazeera English (AJE) described the way Kenyan journalists’ perspectives challenged Western reporting stereotypes. Simmons recalled writing a report on soaring food prices in Nairobi. His instinct had been to go to the city’s slums and see how the food crisis was affecting Kenya’s poorest; however, his Kenyan producer stopped him, saying: ‘Hang on – the crisis is affecting the middle class too – let’s go to Nakumatt [a large supermarket chain] and see how people are coping.’ [Interview, Nairobi, 14/08/2009]. The producer’s intervention resulted in a story that directly challenged – or provided a counterpoint – to the representation of Africa as exotic and ‘other’. The middle-class supermarket shoppers in the report have more in common with their international news audience than the struggling occupants of slums; the subjects are like ‘us’ – not foreign or ‘other’ – and, as such, occupy a space that encourages a response of empathy rather than mere sympathy. Roger Silverstone called this the ‘proper distance’, and argued it was essential if the news media was to help foster an ethics of care, ‘a sense of the other sufficient not just for

reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding' (2007: 46).

Local journalists also felt that their deep networks, cultural capital and language enabled them to draw on a wider range of sources in their work, meaning there were more local perspectives. The British-national correspondent for the BBC in Khartoum could not speak Arabic, and noted that this limited her potential sources: 'Things you need access to like government officials, you can't' (Interview, Khartoum, 29/08/2007). Without Arabic, and in the absence of a deep network of local sources, international FCs were dependent on translators, who might be difficult to find, and who varied in quality and transparency. Without accessible sources, visiting journalists might find themselves relying on NGO spokespeople for information and quotes, as they are easy to access, and speak.³ Local journalists, by contrast, often had very deep networks of trusted contacts and sources who were particularly valuable in countries where repressive governments – and fear of government repression – might inhibit sources from speaking to journalists.

Some local journalists also described feeling highly invested in their country, and noted that this influenced their work. They described feeling driven to place events in their

³ The symbiotic relationship between foreign correspondents and NGO representatives has been said to result in reporting that over-emphasises humanitarian frames and interpretations of crises, thereby obscuring political and historical dimensions and inadvertently reinforcing the casting of Africa in terms of development, disaster and "humanitarian" concerns (e.g. Cooper, 2011; Mackintosh, 1996).

political context, and hold elites to account. Ben Simon, a Canadian stringer at AFP Kampala, described a Ugandan-national BBC reporter:

He writes important, follow-up stories whenever he has the chance. A group of us were going to cover an LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] story up north. And he decided instead to go to follow up on a landslide story and ask, has the government delivered on its promise to help? I thought that was good – he pitched the less sexy story, but one that's important, and to try and hold people accountable. (Interview, Kampala, 29/08/2010)

Mike Pflanz, foreign correspondent at the UK's *Daily Telegraph* in Nairobi, thought that his Kenyan predecessor at the newspaper was emotionally involved in the local political/media ecology, and driven to hold local elites accountable:

He was consistently angry. About corruption, about the situation in Kenya and so on, and I think that bled into his reports occasionally. No bad thing – he had a great following... I would have been able to write it, but I wouldn't necessarily have had the same compulsion to do it. (Interview, Nairobi, 04/08/2009)

Pflanz by contrast, although concerned with the local situation, felt that his primary ethical obligation – and the purpose of his work – was to describe events to readers 'back home' in terms they could readily understand.

Structural constraints: audiences and news epistemologies

Local journalists are able to influence the content of news stories in a variety of ways. However, their ability to challenge dominant narratives should not be overstated. All journalists operate within the constraints of wider political, economic and organisational

pressures. Shoemaker and Reese influentially suggested that there was a 'hierarchy of influences' (1996). In this hierarchy, the contributions of the individual journalist was at the bottom; above them are the organisational values and demands of their news organization; and above that, factors external to the media world, such as politics, economics, ideology and so on. These organisational and external factors constrain the autonomy of individual correspondents, and their ability to shape news content. Thus, even where local journalists want to make a difference – to tell stories from a more localised perspective – they may not be able to.

Foreign correspondents in east Africa drew attention to two main restrictions to their reporting. The first was the need to produce news stories that sell. This is a particularly strong constraint for stringer journalists who are paid by the story. In order to be commissioned, they must pitch and write stories that cater to their specific news outlet's editorial position and audience interests. Today the international news market is tight, profits are low or absent, and outlets (newswires in particular) are locked in fierce competition to be first with the news. Williams notes that, in this context, 'rather than a set of news criteria, the values of news should be seen in terms of what clients and subscribers are willing to pay for. Giving customers what they want is crucial' (2011: 78).

One of the most significant implications of this customer-orientated approach has been, Williams suggests, a focus on news that is Western-centric: the majority of newswire customer are based in the Global North, they pay for the news, and it is to them that the newswires cater. As a Kenyan newswire reporter in Nairobi commented: 'Ultimately, we've still got to feed London and that's the bottom line.' This meant it was difficult to publish stories that were not of interest to international clients: 'I could send them the story "20 people died in a car crash" and they would still come back with "20 people die

every day in car crashes”. It’s very depressing. African lives just don’t matter’ (Interview, Nairobi, 11/08/2009).

A second major constraint on the work of local journalists is the conventions and professional norms that guide international journalistic production. Chief amongst these is the notion of objectivity, often described as a definitional component of professional journalistic work (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Objectivity refers to a package of ideas that includes the notion of ‘retreatism’ or non-involvement, whereby journalists are expected to be disengaged from their news stories, acting only as a witness to events. The norm of objectivity emerged in European and American news markets, but it has been expanded to the sphere of international news production, where it is so strong that those journalists or news outlets that do not abide by the principle are seen as ‘unprofessional’ in their work.

Journalistic objectivity is not always the first – and certainly not the only – news value embraced in media systems outside the Global North, however. Research on journalists’ news values in Tanzania (Ramaprasad, 2001), Uganda (Mwesige, 2004), Ethiopia (Dirbaba, 2006) and Ghana (Hasty, 2006) reveal that journalists also value professional objectives such as explaining government policy to citizens, giving marginalised people a voice, creating a space for nation-building discourse, supporting peace processes and development aims and acting as an advocate for citizens. These aims are often at odds with the notion of the ‘objective journalist’, who is supposed to be an uninvolved observer, and who purports to have no agenda.

Reporting the post election violence in Kenya 2007-8

The Kenyan post-election violence provides a good opportunity to explore how the divergent values of local journalists interact with, and are constrained by, the news needs and epistemologies of global news outlets. The conflict created a complex situation for the news bureaux in Nairobi where many of the Kenyan journalists took a different position from their Western peers regarding how the conflict should be reported. Ultimately, however, the Western voices in the newswires, enforced through hierarchical chains of command, prevailed over and above dissenting opinions of local journalists.

On 30 December 2007, incumbent Mwai Kibaki was declared the winner of the Kenyan presidential election, amid widespread claims of vote rigging from both local and international electoral monitors. Within an hour, supporters of Kibaki's opponent, Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement, began rioting across the country and attacking Kibaki supporters. The violence began as an expression of outrage at the fraudulent elections but quickly became ethnically oriented, with Luo (Odinga's tribe) mobs venting their anger on Kikuyu (Kibaki's tribe) neighbours. By the end of February 2008, post-election violence had left more than 1,200 dead and some 350,000 displaced.

The post-election violence displayed what the International Crisis Group terms 'a serious ethnic character', but ethnic differences were by no means the single root cause of the conflict (2008: 1). Tribal groupings have long been politicised and manipulated in Kenya by elites, from their construction during colonial contact through to contemporary politics of ethnic nepotism and exclusion. Today, there is a widespread perception that the ruling party's tribal peers receive preferential access to state resources. In December 2007, these grievances combined with weak political institutions, the normalisation of violence, and conflict among elites to create the foundations of the crisis (Cheeseman, 2008: 170).

The violence immediately captured the attention of the international news media. Unusually for an African news story, reports on the crisis reached the front pages of newspapers and were broadcast at the start of television and radio news bulletins around the world. Even more unusually, interest in the crisis was relatively long-lived, and it continued to receive a high level of attention throughout January and into February 2008.

The international news coverage of the crisis has been fiercely criticised by both Kenyan and international commentators. Two critiques, in particular, dominated the post-mortem analyses. First, it is claimed that coverage exaggerated the scale and severity of the violence. As one Kenyan reporter told the BBC World Service Report investigators: 'I watched the BBC and I thought this country was on fire. CNN was playing the same clip from Kibera as if it was a commercial. Part of what I saw was sensational [and created fear]' (2008: 14). The most explicit exaggerations were contained in articles that employed the term 'genocide', comparing Kenya's violence to the cataclysmic events of Rwanda in 1994; they reduced the crisis to an 'atavistic inevitability', and potentially stoked anger and fear (Somerville, 2009). The international news outlets showed little restraint in broadcasting the most explicit images, including burning houses, scared people on the move, the injured and the dead. In some cases, these images were presented without any explanation of their content, conveying the impression that the whole country was in a state of senseless anarchy.

Second, the international coverage was accused of employing tribal language that was incorrect, condescending and potentially inflammatory. Somerville notes that in the UK media the election violence was presented almost exclusively as a result of long-standing tribal hatred, with little or no reference to the political parties that were the source of much of the tension (2009: 530). The use of tribal language in reports concerned analysts who felt this framing generated misleading descriptions, gave insufficient explanations of

the violence, and had pejorative and primitive connotations (Anderson, 2008; Keane, 2008; Somerville, 2009).

Local and International clash: divergent approaches to reporting

In Kenya, the local mainstream media (TV, press and radio owned by the two main media houses) adopted a very reserved approach to reporting. Concerned not to exacerbate the violence, journalists refrained from naming the different ethnic groups involved in fighting, and chose to describe clashes as occurring between different 'communities'. Speaking to the BBC World Service Trust Report Farida Karoney, a Kenyan reporter, stated her outlet's position: 'Here at KTN, when we are reporting conflict we will not refer to people by their tribe because we think that such tribal references will entrench feelings of hate' (2008: 8).⁴

This local coverage contrasts starkly with international reporters' work, and strong differences of opinion are still articulated today. Kenyan journalists argue that the international reporters demonstrated little concern for the wellbeing of Kenya or Kenyans, and were simply trying to break another story for professional gain. Kenyan journalist turned academic George Ogola, for example, writes:

⁴ The Kenyan media were not homogenous in this approach. In particular, some vernacular radio stations were accused of allowing upset and angry callers to vent their opinions, without moderation and thus fuelling violence (Waki, 2008). However, in the Kenyan mainstream media – which is highly trusted by the general population (Maina, 2007) – the approach was uniformly reserved and restrained.

It was not a desire by a section of the international media to tell the world the true story about the conflict that was slowly consuming Kenya. This was about a good story; it was about the exploitation of a people crying out for help. (2008)

Underlying this clash is a fundamental disagreement on the role of the news media during a crisis. Kenyan journalists describe an important ethical obligation to the peace process itself, and argue that the media should not produce reports that are potentially inflammatory, whether they are intended for a primarily local or international audience. This position is sometimes referred to in communications literature as ‘peace journalism’ or ‘conflict-sensitive journalism’ (Galtung, 2000), and it is regarded as being in direct competition with traditional ‘hard news’, objective reporting (Fawcett, 2002). Many traditional foreign correspondent are exceedingly resistant to peace journalism, as it challenges their core journalistic commitment to objectivity. They argue that feelings of attachments and becoming involved in the peace process undermine the ability of journalists to objectively bear witness.

A profound split emerged within the international news bureaux of Nairobi, where Kenyan and international journalists disagreed about how the violence should be covered. Kenyan journalists tended to be more sensitive to language that framed the crisis in exclusively ethnic terms. Moreover, the Kenyan reporters felt that international journalists should be more selective and cautious with what they covered, and more reserved in the language they used.

The bureau chief at Reuters thought that his newswire did a reasonable job of avoiding the worst of the tribal language in its reports and was fairly sensitive to the inflammatory potential of news content: ‘Every meeting we had, every story we wrote, we were aware of that [trying to avoid tribal language]’. However, he believed things could have been reported in a more nuanced way and, to some extent, this reflected the fact that the

Western journalists in the office dominated the editorial meetings and reporting decisions during the crisis: 'We could have done better. Afterwards when we had a big discussion that became clear' (Interview, Nairobi, 2/08/2009).

Time pressures meant that there was little time to reflect or discuss the issues among the staff fully:

I couldn't fuck around – if you'll excuse me – when that was happening. I couldn't spend an hour to sit back and let's think about this and coax out people's ideas. I was like, um, a church is burning with 33 people inside, we need to urgently write about that. 'Is this echoes of Rwanda, isn't it echoes of Rwanda?' I mean, huge questions like that, and we were making split-second judgments on them. And there, unfortunately, those hardened correspondents here, we tended to dominate here. I wanted to make the others speak up, and they weren't. Later on, they had a lot to say, an awful lot. (Ibid)

Although Cawthorne suggests that he would have liked the Kenyan journalists to speak up, it is unclear if this would have made a big difference. It may have added nuance to some language use, but it is unlikely to have altered the general frame in which the election violence was cast. Cawthorne and the Western journalists in the Reuters office are highly intelligent, experienced professionals – most of who have lived and reported in east Africa for several years. These journalists were aware of the ways in which Kenya's ethnic groups have been manipulated by elites; they knew about the multi-level factors that were compounding and driving the conflict. The different positions taken by Western and local journalists were not based on information asymmetry; they appeared to be based on an emotional/attachment asymmetry. The Kenyans wanted the optimal outcome for their country – for the conflict to be resolved, rather than represented at its

worst in a way that might fuel fighting and resentment. This impulse conflicted with the hard news needs of the outlet, and it was ultimately sidelined.

Reuters was not the only divided newsroom. At the BBC, a Kenyan journalist described direct conflict between the BBC's World Service reporters and its international news team over how the election violence should be reported. Kenyan journalist Kevin Mwachito notes:

We were careful not to say it was a Kikuyu and a Lao thing. It wasn't – people from both those groups weren't fighting, and there were a lot more groups of people involved besides.' However, he felt that the organisation's editors in the UK were not as sensitive to the issue as the correspondents based in Nairobi: 'London didn't really understand that, I don't think. They would say, "get me a Kikuyu and a Lao".' (Interview, Nairobi, 27/08/2009)

In particular, a major rift emerged in the lead-up to the signing of a peace deal, which the Kenyan journalists hoped would bring the conflict to an end. The day before the deal was due to be signed, it was leaked that President Kibaki planned to hold a private meeting in State House that threatened to de-rail the peace process. Mwachito explained:

[The peace deal] was the first glimmer of hope that the fighting might end – you know, after months, and we were all so sick of the fighting. And then here's this potential meeting jeopardising the hope. And my African colleagues were very, very upset that the internationals wanted to run that story. They felt it should not be covered – you know, that the whites just wanted a story that they didn't care about this country. And if things got worse, you know, they could just jet out of there. Whereas we couldn't, it was our country.

I asked what happened when there was a rift in the newsroom: whose view prevails?

Mwachito replied:

There are channels of command and they kick in at times like that. People may have vented in private at our news editor, but at the end of the day, it's his decision. You really could tell, though, for the first time, the big gap between [local and western reporters]. (Interview, Nairobi, 27/08/2009)

In normal day-to-day reporting, Kenyan journalists in the Nairobi bureaux have a high level of involvement in decision-making about the stories and angles of reporting. Kenyans run the morning news meetings, report fairly autonomously on their own beats, and contribute to newsroom discussions. They often suggest stories that would not have been told otherwise. In the coverage of the election crisis, however, this symbiosis faltered. Despite their significant numbers, Kenyan journalists were absent from the management level of the newswires and outlets. In addition, there was a state of emergency in the newsroom and decisions were made swiftly, often without discussion or consultation; the hierarchies of management became more visible, and the Kenyan voices were sidelined. Just as crucially, the Kenyan journalists' proximity to the violence became a liability in reporting 'hard' news. As Kevin Mwato stated: 'As a Kenyan journalist, I need to say, "was I impartial?" We wanted change' (Interview, Nairobi, 27/08/2009). According to the norms of these international news organisations – and the strong commitment to objectivity – conflict-sensitive reporting was undesirable, and contrasted unfavourably with the hardened distance of the traditional foreign correspondents. At these traditional, hard-news outlets, it was the need to make profit, and the norms of the international journalistic field that shaped and constrained reporting.

Alternative voices

Two challenges to Western-dominated reporting have arisen in recent years, in the shape of Al Jazeera and Twitter: one providing more nuanced, locally-sensitive coverage of Africa, and the other a forum for local citizens and journalists to comment on events. This section considers the ways and extent to which these media provide space for local voices to be expressed.

Al Jazeera represents an alternative to reporting told through a Western perspective. Funded by the wealthy Qatari state, Al Jazeera is insulated from the need to make profit. Moreover, it has been set up with the articulated, self-conscious goal of offering an alternative approach to news content. Its intention is to provide alternative reporting on events, including controversial and dissenting opinions; and to specifically find and report on untold and under-reported stories. In doing so, commentators note that Al Jazeera often ‘portrays a concealed reality... it gives airtime to the people who will be barred from appearing in any other network’ (Biesla, 2008: 362). Journalists working at the channel echo these sentiments, and describe their desire to tell news stories from multiple perspectives, with a particular emphasis on those who have historically been marginalised (El Nawawy & Powers, 2010). Content analyses of the outlet’s news show that more air time is given to issues and events in the Global South and that it includes more quotes from local, non-elite sources, as compared with CNN and BBC (Figenschou, 2010; Painter, 2008).

Malcolm Webb, English-national stringer for AJE in Uganda feels the outlet tries to specifically ‘go out of their way to cover obscure places on purpose’. Webb gave the example of the Burundi elections: ‘Financially, other outlets can’t do this – you know, investors and readers and things, they’re simply not interested in Burundi. But at Al Jaz, the attitude is: it’s an election, and it’s on our patch, so we do it.’ Webb also felt that he

had more latitude in how he shaped and framed his reporting: ‘At AFP, I might have tried to present it as something quirky or headline grabbing. But at Al Jaz, it’s really just, “something serious about people”. And especially if they’ve been screwed over in some way’ (Interview, Kampala, 27/08/2010).

During Kenya’s post-election violence, Al Jazeera English seems to have adopted a conciliatory form of journalism. Producer Andrew Simmons states that it was very important to the producers not to be provocative during the election crisis, and that this principle trumped other notions of newsworthiness:

We tried very hard not to be inflammatory... I was anchoring, and I would have to say to them [politicians] – during an interview – ‘Look, you can’t talk like that’... I was interviewing William Ruto the night after the church burnt down. I said, ‘You must condemn this atrocity’ and he was just replying ‘oh, the police are always committing atrocities’ – I told him, and made it clear, that he was out of line saying that on television. (Interview, Nairobi, 14/08/2009)

Whereas other journalists might have turned the interview into a dramatic piece illustrating political animosity, the Al Jazeera English journalist described a pressing obligation to *desensationalise* the statements. They were aware their news was being followed locally – AJE is available on free-to-air television in Kenya, where they have a large audience – and the journalists felt they had become important actors in the crisis, with the power to exacerbate or provide calm. In covering the election violence, AJE provided a form of peace journalism, or what El-Nawawy and Powers have described as ‘Conciliatory Media’: they let a variety of voices speak, did not frame issues within a traditional conflict narrative, and they represented the interest of the public in general (2010: 70).

AJE has the freedom to report in this manner for a number of reasons.

The major international news wires and news outlets discussed above tend to report for an audience based in the Western world. Thus journalists working at these outlets have an implicit understanding that news needs to be framed so these Western consumers can readily understand it. Moreover, in a competitive environment, journalists are unlikely to ‘back off’ or report more sensitively on a high-profile news story, which may bring them recognition and prestige. In direct contrast, AJE journalists do not have any ‘home country’. They appear to pursue a more comprehensive internationalism that includes a sense of ethical obligation to the local environment where they are based and reporting from. And they seem to valorise – and associate cultural capital and status with – those journalists who are able to show and share empathy with the local subjects of their reports.

Social media too has started to alter who exactly ‘speaks for Africa’, and how the continent is presented to international news consumers. The power of Twitter in particular to challenge Western coverage and shape international news coverage of east Africa started to be noted in earnest in March 2012 when CNN ran a story about an isolated attempted terrorist attack on a bus in Nairobi. This was reported on the channel’s news under a banner reading ‘Violence in Kenya’ and many observers felt that the report was sensationalized, with the event taken out of context. The Kenyan twitter-sphere responded, and the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN was born. Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka, amongst many others, tweeted: ‘It is extremely irresponsible for CNN to paint Kenya as a nation in chaos while we are victims of terror. #SomeoneTellCNN.’ These tweets expressed the strong desire of Kenyan citizens to describe events to the international community on their own terms. As @NiNanjira tweeted, ‘#SomeoneTellCNN that Africans watch CNN too & that we will not be silent as they

misrepresent us. We Will Be Heard!’ The hash tags #SomeoneTellCNN, became the second most trending term on twitter that week. Eventually the east African foreign correspondent for CNN, David McKenzie, issued an apology: ‘Our reporting last night was accurate, the banner used in bulletin was not. I contacted CNN for future bulletins [to be corrected]. Apologies to all.’ As more pressure mounted on twitter, the news video was actually taken off the CNN website, with another apology from McKenzie: ‘We are having offending video pulled. Again, apologies for the mistake. It was changed on air, but not online. Now it is.’ In this instance the power of twitter was made clear: it entered into, and influenced, mainstream news representations of Kenya.

During the 2013 election in Kenya, #SomeoneTellCNN was resurrected and used to name and shame Western journalists that Kenyans felt were reporting sensational or inaccurate material in the lead up to the vote. The most targeted was again a CNN report, this one titled ‘Kenyans armed and ready to vote’ which showed a handful of men described as a ‘militia’, preparing for armed conflict in Kenya’s Rift Valley. The piece was immediately criticised on twitter by Kenyans who described it as staged and irresponsible (Dewey, 2013; Shiundu, 2013). Tweets redistributed rebuttals and parodies of the report from citizens and local Kenyan reporters; a *Daily Nation* piece that was widely circulated, opened with the line, ‘Kenya was braced at the crossroads on Saturday amidst growing concern that the demand for clichés is outstripping supply’ (Namlo, 2013).

The rise of social media represents a distinct break in historical reporting practices and, notably, the news coverage of election violence six years earlier. As media commentator Nyabola wrote in an Al Jazeera English analysis piece: ‘Six years ago, in December 2007, we Kenyans were helpless and paralysed, as alarmist reports often inaccurately depicted our country as another in the litany of failed states in Africa... Now, in 2013, Kenyan

presence on the internet has expanded dramatically and it is harder to get away with such overstatement' (2013).

Kenyan tweets were not restricted to the 'twittersphere' – they entered into, and became stories in mainstream international news coverage. Outlets such as the BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera and *Washington Post* all carried stories based exclusively on tweets, and foregrounding the Kenyan reaction to the international coverage, and their call for unity and peace during the election. Mohammed Ademo, writing for *Columbia Journalism Review* noted:

What's new is social media's role in empowering Africans to own the narrative and protest against what they saw as stereotypical coverage of their stories... as more Africans start to use social media, it is playing an increasingly important role in allowing them to partake in conversations about their future, and to protest unfair representations. (2013)

Or as Nyabola wrote, her previous 'experience of "voicelessness" over the construction and dissemination of my national narrative' had been, to a large extent, ameliorated by the new technology: 'What Twitter does successfully is allowing those who may not be able to claim power in the context of traditional media (with higher economic barriers to entry and with more entrenched power dynamics) to claim it in 160 characters or less... a lot of Kenyans are determined to take control of their national narrative'(2013).

There is no doubt that Africans are appropriating the Internet to represent their countries from local perspectives. Low penetration of the internet in many African countries makes this difficult (Ogunyemi, 2011: 468), but there is clearly now a critical mass in Kenya, at least. This critical mass is capable of making CNN amend its reporting,

and has enough participants and followers to trend Kenyan issues on twitter's global stage.

Conclusion

From the romping pages of Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* to the critical satire of Binyavanga Wainaina (2005, 2012), foreign correspondents in Africa have been parodied for their indulgent, ex-patriot lifestyles; disconnected from local realities, these foreigners are seen to enjoy a parasitic relationship with the local environment, profiting from the suffering they observe. Wainaina (2012) describes foreign correspondents living in Kenya:

Nairobi is a good place to be an international correspondent. There are regular flights to the nearest genocide, and there are green lawns, tennis courts, good fawning service. You can get pork belly, and you can hire an OK pastry chef called Elijah (surname forgotten) to work in your kitchen for \$300 a month.

Wainaina's comments are consistent with a substantive postcolonial literature that draws attention to the way the image of Africa has, for centuries, been crafted and controlled by actors from outside the continent. But his comments are no longer consistent with how the majority of daily foreign news content is produced.

International news images of Africa are no longer constructed entirely – or even predominantly – by Western-born foreign correspondents; local journalists around east Africa constitute the majority of correspondents working for traditional, international news organisations. These journalists, with deep local networks and background knowledge are writing news that, in limited ways, provides an alternative and localised perspective on news events. However, these journalists are deeply embedded in

international news outlets that operate on tight profit margins, and produce news for clients predominantly based in the Western world. Moreover, their work is shaped by the prevailing values of the journalistic field – with its emphasis on objectivity, and the firm notion of journalistic non-involvement. The more significant development, this chapter has suggested, is the emergence of alternative outlets and new mediums, in the guise of Al Jazeera English and twitter. Through these media, for perhaps the first time in history, local voices are starting to construct and debate the contemporaneous image of Africa that is disseminated around the world.

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