Reporting Africa: Problems and Perspectives

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Abstract
The paper argues that over the past thirty years there has been a steady decline in the attention Western media have given to reporting Africa. And the end of the cold war has exacerbated this lack of interest. When sub-Saharan Africa is covered in the news it is uniformly as a tale of disaster and conflict. There is rarely much context or background in the reports. In part this is due to changing priorities in news coverage but also part of the wider trend of the disappearance of TV current affairs on mainstream channels in the UK. It argues that if in 2005 British politicians are seeking to reinvent our perceptions of Africa and the way that the West engages with it, then the role of the media and the stories it reports on Africa will have a pivotal role in that process.

This is the year of Africa. British politicians are falling over themselves to declare 2005 a unique opportunity for the west to sort out Africa's problems. Tony Blair's prestigious Africa Commission published its report, Our Common Interest, at the end of March; Gordon Brown has been on a well-publicised tour, highlighting debt in Africa. In July 2005 Britain hosted the G8 conference at which great pronouncements were expected on the fate of Africa and in September there was the UN Millennium summit. But how is Africa being reported and did the media use 2005 as an opportunity to take Africa seriously? Over the past thirty years there has been a steady decline in the attention we have given to reporting Africa. This presents a paradox; for just as communications and technology have improved so the coverage of difficult to reach and faraway places has in some cases deteriorated. It is now easier to fly to remote locations and to broadcast stories from them, but we are no longer so inclined to do it. There are three principal forces behind this. Firstly there is the overall way that Africa is perceived as a story, secondly the changing priorities in reporting news and thirdly the wider trend of the disappearance of TV current affairs.

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In the immediate post-colonial period Africa was still covered in a considered and serious fashion. Even middle market papers like *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* had Africa specialists. They had correspondents based in Africa who filed on a regular basis and offered informed comment on African affairs. The fact that newspapers and broadcasters had invested in correspondents meant that they were then inclined to take their material and the story was reported in a steady, incremental way - informed by locally based expertise. In retrospect it appears that Africa was interesting as long as it was perceived as an end of Empire narrative. The overwhelming trend of the coverage, for British media purposes, was the move away from white rule, whether that was in Kenya, Rhodesia/Zimbabwe or latterly South Africa. Naturally French or Belgian coverage focussed upon other African locations.

Once the process of de-colonisation had finished, Africa no longer commanded the same level of coverage in the west. But then the story mutated into a cold war theme. Africa was the location of much proxy great power conflict. In countries like Angola and Mozambique there were wars fuelled by Soviet and America support and that was still a story worth telling in the eyes of the west. As the cold war dissipated so did interest in such remote places. There was still fighting and wars but they were no longer explicable through either a colonial or a cold war paradigm and were often dismissed as 'tribal' or 'ethnic' conflicts – neither comprehensible or worthy of much interest. As a reflection of this, British media representation in Africa has largely been downgraded to stringers (at least for domestic services), so there is institutionally less 'investment' in taking their material. An interesting exception to this trend was the story of the white farmers in Zimbabwe starting in 2000, which was widely covered in all parts of the British press; although that was essentially a throwback to the same end of Empire themes as before.

The diminished appetite for news from Africa reflects an overall decline in involvement with the continent. It is remarkable that in the 1980s the amount of aid given to Africa was an average of $33 per head and now it is only $19. The reason behind that is certainly not that things have improved so much and less aid is needed but rather that the geopolitical reasons for distributing aid have gone away so that western powers are less motivated to do it. Moreover there has until fairly recently been little political will behind it. Africa has figured neither on politicians nor on the voter's agendas. In a BBC online survey in 2004 a staggering 73 percent of respondents had never heard about the Millennium Development goals. If no one is interested then the drift in media coverage is not surprising. As Gordon Brown pointed out in a speech to the BBC World Service Trust conference:

> If six thousand people in Europe died of malaria (as they do every day in Africa) the media would not just report the disaster: They would look for signs of negligence, for culpability, failures of science and technology and governmental corruption (24 November 2004).

The crisis in Rwanda in 1994 highlighted the lacunae in media perceptions of Africa. When the killing began, it was difficult for editors to grasp what was happening and they chose initially to ignore it. Organisations such as Oxfam sent repeated warnings about imminent genocide, but there was little response. Crucially the timing coincided with the first democratic elections in South Africa and the feeling was that one African story at a time was enough - moreover all suitable expertise was busy in Johannesburg. The ignorance was compounded weeks later when the Hutu killers arrived in the camps in eastern Zaire. By then the elections were over in South Africa so there was an unseemly rush by both journalists and aid agencies to places like Goma to tell terrible tales about poor fleeing refugees. For days there were misleading reports where several journalists who knew little about the background, missed the point that the camps were not ministering to fleeing Tutsis but full of the recent killers and their relatives. This level of misinterpretation would be unthinkable in most other parts of the world, but in Africa there is a sense that it is all too complicated and probably caused by some ancient tribal rivalries. In the intervening years these 'missing stories' have been compounded. The fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was part of the fall-out from Rwanda, eventually claimed some 3 and a half million lives in a continuing war of attrition – the highest death toll in any war since 1945, yet for western purposes it is invisible. Indeed it is sometimes called 'Africa's hidden first world war', because as far as the rest of the world is concerned it is hardly ever reported, despite the enormous death toll. The same is also true of the fighting and enormous population displacement in Northern Uganda.

John Seaman is a veteran Africa expert at Save the Children Fund. He is critical of the level of political analysis now given to Africa:

> It should be much higher than it is. I have the sense that when I watch the media in the Middle East with all its limitations I get some detailed analysis, the people talking to camera know something about the region…whereas Africa gets rather slight coverage, it is intermittent without permanent representation and internationally Africa is not taken seriously. It is like the old joke, if somebody towed Africa off into the Atlantic and sank it, nobody in Europe would notice for a week. It has no great trading connotations, it has no armies, it has no political effect (BBC History Seminar, 16 November 2004).

An important gap in the way that Africa is reported is not just the disappearance of regular correspondents, but also of longer more considered television documentaries. The Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project has been tracking television coverage of developing countries since 1989. In 2003 they recorded 197 hours were broadcast on terrestrial TV - and that includes *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here,* set in an exotic foreign location (Dover and Barnett 2004, 12). This is the lowest total of factual programmes on the developing world in the fourteen years since the project began, and a fall of 49 percent compared with 1989. And even 1989 was on a declining trajectory. Although there is no official data on this from 1970s and 1980s what evidence there is shows that there was even more coverage of the developing world and of Africa in that period. This kind of programming played a key role in informing audiences about Africa because it could give a properly nuanced view which set the story in context and looked behind the headlines. Crucially the producer and crew had been on location for more than the couple of days it takes to film a news story. For example *World in Action* once made an important programme on the rebel guerrilla movement in Guinea and the TV Eye and Central TV documentaries by Peter Gill and Charles Stewart were instrumental in understanding the Ethiopian famine in the period leading up to the news reporting by Michael Buerk.[1] There were regularly thirty or forty minute programmes on African topics shown at peak time on ITV which is now inconceivable. According to the 3WE report, in 2003 there were no programmes about foreign countries at all on ITV under the categories of politics, development, environment or human rights (Dover and Barnett 2004, 10). Indeed there were only twenty four such programmes shown anywhere on British terrestrial TV and they were generally in twilight slots.

As current affairs coverage has declined, the only television outlet left for factual programming about Africa is on the news. So the kind of explanations and background context that would once have been contained in a thirty or forty minute programme, if they happen at all, now have to be compressed into a two or three minute package. It also means that the nature of what is covered will be dictated by news priorities. TV news, which is how most people find out about the world, is an event driven operation. Contemporary news reporting in Africa is invariably of the 'fire fighting' tendency. In the absence of resident correspondents, a highly professional reporter - well attuned to the needs and expectations of the various outlets- is flown in when disaster occurs and expected to deliver something within days if not hours.

News from poor countries does not often make the headlines and when it does it is nearly always bad news. The only regular exception is celebrity or royal visits. A Dfid report (*Viewing the World*, 2000) examined both the attitudes of broadcasters

and audiences towards TV reporting of the developing world. And the conclusions showed that coverage was usually related to famine, war, terrorism and catastrophes. Not surprisingly this was also the impression that audiences had picked up – it was all gloom and disaster. Interestingly one of the reasons behind the success of Alexander McCall Smith's *No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series is that it presents daily life and society in Botswana as both normal and interesting, rather than the view of horror and disaster that is the regular media perception of Africa. Smith has been criticised for not referring enough to Africa's problems, such as AIDS, but he argues that there is sufficient mention of that elsewhere.

Salim Amin, son of the famous cameraman Mohammed Amin has inherited the Camerapix news agency operation in Nairobi. He describes himself as:

> …an African journalist who also tries to peddle my wares to the international media… but we cannot sell anything positive about Africa. We do plenty of positive stories, on subjects other than war and disaster, but they are mainly for an African audience now, because we cannot move them internationally (BBC History Seminar, 24 November 2004).

An example of that is in the training school for African journalists that Amin helped set up; 'recently a graduate from there won the CNN African journalist of the year award, yet even CNN would not buy the story that won their own award'. Amin's solution is to propose the establishment of an African satellite station – a home grown version of Al Jazeerah – 'to give us an outlet that we can feed ourselves'. Maybe there is at last an appetite for this kind of initiative. One positive development in the reporting that does now happen from Africa is certainly a greater willingness to let people speak for themselves. Twenty years ago coverage of Africa, as Michael Buerk recalls, was invariably full of white faces and exclusively English voices.

So is there any prospect this year of real a sea-change in the way that Africa is reported? Television is certainly promising 2005 African seasons and specials and there is an increase already in press coverage of the continent. Derek Warren, now at Dfid and formerly with Oxfam, worries that there is still a danger of misreporting.[2] He highlights for example Tony Blair's visit to Ethiopia in late 2004 for the meeting of the Africa Commission, which was covered by lobby correspondents rather than those with any interest or expertise on Africa. Warren describes one journalist who attended the press conference in Sudan on the 'Darfur Crisis' and then the briefings in Addis Ababa. Yet the only story that made her paper was one about the prime ministerial plane being despatched to Nairobi to fetch prawn sandwiches. Similarly some of the Africa coverage in recent times has been in the framework of the Blair/Brown feud – Africa is a backdrop with

each of them trumping the other to show how much they care and what they propose to do about it.
Paddy Coulter, formerly head of communications at Oxfam and now with the Reuters foundation, is only cautiously optimistic:

> I am concerned it might end up like the Earth Summit in 1992 when there was impressive coverage of environment issues for a year or so, but in the succeeding period there was a feeling that we had 'done' the environment and indeed several long running series on these issues were even axed' (Interview with author: January 2005).

He hopes that after 2005 Africa will stay on the media agenda and that there will be longer term sustained interest.

> We need to break out of the cycle where editors complain that there are never any good ideas about Africa and producers claim that editors are never interested anyway. The challenge is to come up with imaginative and challenging ideas so that Africa continues to command serious coverage in years to come (Ibid.)

An important part of that is approaching Africa as a normal place like anywhere else, not just a backdrop to humanitarian catastrophe and celebrity visits.

Much of the impetus for change and the establishment of the Africa Commission arose out of the twenty year old memories of *Live Aid*; a key modern media moment. Yet the replaying of those images is not necessarily a positive thing – when it reinforces the spectacle of an Africa full of passive, suffering victims. (Moreover the rebirth of *Live Aid* in 2005 as *Live 8* has continued many of the original themes of 'white celebrities saving the black world'). If 2005 is to bring about a lasting transformation in Africa, then the media will have to be embedded in that change. Politicians are seeking to reinvent our perceptions of Africa and the way that the West engages with it and the media will have a pivotal role in that process.

Notes

[1] Peter Gill produced 'Bitter Harvest' for Thames TV transmitted in October 1984 and Charles Stewart made 'Seeds of Despair' for Central TV transmitted in July 1984

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