
Book Reviews

Hunter-Gault, Charlayne (2006) *New News out of Africa: Uncovering Africa's Renaissance* (W.E.B. Du Bois Institute), Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN-10: 0-19-517747-9 ISBN-13: 978-0-19-517747-3.

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The former TV newsreader Martyn Lewis frequently complained that there was not enough 'good news' in the daily bulletins he had to read. When he left full time news reading he even initiated a campaign for more good news stories – leading to considerable ridicule by many of his colleagues. This account of news out of Africa takes a rather more subtle and measured approach to the same problem. Typically news from Africa is even more loaded towards bad news stories than news in general – war, famine and disaster are the standard themes. Charlayne Hunter-Gault has spent a life time reporting from Africa for US outlets including CNN, National Public Radio and the *New York Times* and is passionate about the continent. Her latest book *New News out of Africa*, part-memoir part-polemic, is a plea for journalists to tell a different story from Africa.

She recalls an interesting anecdote from her journalism class. The professor used to ask the students what the news was. After they tried to enlighten him he would shake his head and say 'not a single new there'. He was no doubt referring to the fact that so much of a news bulletin is predictable and diary-led and not really 'new'. Hunter-Gault wrote this book because she felt that the 'good news' about Africa was really 'new news' which was not being told. There is a danger in urging people to focus on the good news which is that one falls into the Martyn Lewis trap, yet on the whole this book manages to avoid that. And there is another important sense in which African news has in the past so often not been new – because of the perennial recycling of the same old stereotypes. Michael Holman who was the FT Africa editor for many years complains about the endless clichés 'the children are always *emaciated* their limbs are *matchstick thin* their possessions will be *pathetic* etc etc...' He feels so strongly about this that 'If a *Financial Times* correspondent filed a heart-rending story about emaciated children among thousands 'at risk'...I would spike it. And then be tempted to fire the writer.'

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The difficulty is that Hunter-Gault's knowledge and understanding of the continent bring a dilemma. She is only too aware that there are enormous problems in Africa but she is determined not to tell a tale of Afro-pessimism. So in her detailed discussion of many of the different countries and regions she surveys, we read of terrible suffering of Aids victims or the appalling tales of Zimbabwe's descent into chaos and famine. Having lived and reported Africa for so many years she cannot ignore the facts and consequences of corruption and bad governance. Yet the overall theme of the book is that Africa is also full of good news stories which we do not hear about. The problem is that Western journalists fail to report it. They and more especially their news desks are unable to see beyond the usual African stereotypes to interesting and nuanced stories of African success. Hunter-Gault complains that the way Africa is reported most westerners do not even believe in the existence of an African middle class – but a continent peopled only by beggars and a handful of 'big men'. She claims to be 'sensitive to trying to strike a balance between stories of war, conflict, corruption, poverty, pestilence and disease on one hand and on the other stories that tell us of the people who live amid all that and yet survive, endure and sometimes prosper despite the odds.'

The principal story which the book focuses on is one of the most significant to come out of Africa in the last decades, that of the transformation of South Africa. Hunter-Gault knows this story best of all as she had lived in Johannesburg for many years and it is overwhelmingly a story of good news. But for her the story is not over – she observes some of the most thrusting and aspiring middle class Africans who have taken advantage of the new democratic dawn. So she does not just want to report on the familiar political success story where the ANC triumphed with relatively little blood shed. She is also concerned about the wider economic and social successes and the democratic and political examples that South Africa is trying (despite multiple setbacks) to spread across the continent. She focuses on the institutional achievements such as the African Union, NEPAD and the idea of peer review of African leaders. The key theme is that of African solutions to African problems, especially conflict resolution and better governance. Indeed these are initiatives that are not much reported upon – but the trouble is that the record is at best patchy. Even Thabo Mbeki who is hailed as an effective continent-wide example is open to criticism with his blindness regarding Robert Mugabe or his peculiar views on HIV. Moreover some of the countries that were seen as positive success stories in embracing better governance and democratic ideals also veer widely off course. Uganda and Ethiopia were two recent examples. So when Hunter-Gault enthuses about 'baby steps to democracy' they are very tiny ones indeed. She quotes a study of African leaders since 1960 which examines how they left office. Between 1960 and 1969 twenty eight of the thirty seven leaders who left did so as the result of force, one left voluntarily and none as the result of losing a democratic election. However between 2000 and 2004 only four of twenty four leaders who left were forced out by coup or war, one was assassinated. Eight

left voluntarily and three after losing an election. That may be progress but it is very gradual indeed. And it does not mention the unfortunate numbers of leaders who stay too long – sometimes as a result of rigging the system. Interestingly one international research organisation has suggested that any country that had had the same leader for over twelve years should be disqualified from receiving aid.

However faltering the arguments about good news, the polemic against the inadequacies of much western reporting on Africa is invaluable. In 1992 another American Beverly Hawk put together a collection entitled 'Africa's Media Image' which was a very useful survey of the inadequate and unsatisfactory way that the continent was portrayed. In many ways despite better communications things have certainly not improved. Paradoxically there was often better reporting of Africa in colonial times than in the period after the cold war. In the 1950s and 1960s in Britain even middle market newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily Express* had Africa correspondents. They were based in the field and able to offer well informed, nuanced reporting because they had a real expertise and background knowledge in Africa. Contemporary reporting no longer requires experts with long term and local knowledge but agile firemen who can arrive on the scene with a knowledge of what the 'desk' requires and turn something round in a matter of hours. This tends towards stories which are unforeseen and sudden emergencies are invariably the staple of African reporting.

During the colonial period one of the reasons Africa was better reported was because it mattered to western interests. The same continued into the cold war when Africa was a key battleground for Superpower proxy confrontations. However after that Africa seemed to drop off the map, as far as western news reporting was concerned. South Africa was the exception because correspondents were still based there and the story first of the unrest and then the 'miracle' was given proper and detailed explanation. However since the mid 1990s interest in South Africa too has declined. All the US networks closed their bureaux there, leaving only CNN. This is the background against which 'New news out of Africa' was written. Hunter-Gault is urging us to become interested in Africa again and not just as a scene of disaster.

The most interesting part of the book is on the emergence of African journalism, sometimes under dangerous conditions which are not conducive to independent reporting. This reporting renaissance is quite remarkable. There are, for example, over two thousand radio stations across the continent – compared with only three hundred in 1985, allowing more programming in local languages. Hunter-Gault speaks of 'brave men and women doing the work of journalism under circumstances that most of us could scarcely imagine...where danger is the common denominator' and as the 2005 Commission for Africa Report

Franks, *Book Review*

acknowledged, it plays a key part in the development of the good governance which they identified as the primary issue for the continent.

There is an interesting debate about African journalists considering themselves Africans first: As Thabo Mbeki told a group of them 'You were African before you became journalists...' with the implication that they should remember this when holding governments to account. The message of this book is rather different. It argues that African journalists should take issue with the priorities of western journalism – but not with the principles of fairness and independence, even when governments might feel unsettled: 'Being Africans first' means rather that they offer reporting through the prism of their own experiences. The question is whether the west is interested in listening to this. Each year CNN present an African journalist of the year award and in 2005 there were 630 entries from forty countries. Yet according to Salim Amin, the Kenyan cameraman/producer and son of the famous Mo Amin, CNN is not interested in transmitting the winning story itself. 'New News out of Africa' offers a lively account of an emerging African journalism. Yet Hunter-Gault also urges *us* to take an interest in these stories which are beyond the tired African stereotypes. Surely that is the least we can do.