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# Making the headlines: Africa in the news

Mary van Lieshout

## Introduction

Familiar images of emaciated, dying children from Sudan and Somalia once again found the front pages of our national dailies and the headlines on the RTE *Six-One News*. Perhaps the authors of such footage and photographers of these pictures justify capturing children in this way because they feel that showing the awful truth about those lives will do more good than harm, convinced that invading the privacy of a dying individual and his or her family is in some way 'worth it'. If that logic is correct why do these photographs bear such close resemblance to those of the mid-1980s coming out of Ethiopia?

In fact, professionals working in a famine situation tell us regularly that the starving emaciated child, while an awful reality, is but the tip of the iceberg. Why is it then that the image consistently portrayed of Africa is of this helpless passive victim, often juxtaposed against a heroic white saviour?

I believe the persistence of these images emanates from deeply rooted notions of white superiority. The 'concern' expressed hardly disguises the prejudice at work: the standard roles are filled, white saving black, year after year, in country after country. This prejudice is fed on an endless diet of misinformation and stereotypes of Africa which are embraced and which reappear regularly.

## Making the news

For the majority of us, a kind of journalistic zero-sum game governs our access to the Third World. This paper will look briefly at what events become news, and also at the perspective and messages inherent in news coverage of the 'Third World'.

Galtung and Ruge (1973) long ago identified cultural factors that influence the transition of something from an incident to a news event. These include: a) reference to elite nations, b) reference to elite people, c) reference to persons, and d) reference to something negative. Benthall (1993) suggests two variables at work in securing coverage of 'disasters' commonly associated with the developing world: first, numbers of victims, and second, personal relevance or proximity (geographical but also ethnic and economic disaster in a developed country always elicits more coverage per head of victims than one in a less developed country).

Extensive research recently carried out in Britain on the quantity of Third World coverage available on British television revealed that between 1989-1990 and 1991-1992, overall documentary international coverage on the four UK terrestrial channels fell by thirty six per cent. (Cleasby n.d.) BBC's television documentary coverage of developing countries fell by thirty five per cent in the same time frame. Further, BBC1's peak time documentary coverage of Third World issues fell by more than half. In addition those stories which do get through the editor's office remain more or less the same. Reports on conflicts and disasters account for over sixty six per cent of the coverage of the Third World issues of BBC TV main evening news and its ITN rival. Moreover, both tend to feature a relatively narrow band of Third World countries.

In the case of Irish coverage of famine in Africa, the prerequisites of Galtung and Ruge are met: the negative event criteria are clear, and famines quite obviously meet

Benthall's criteria of numbers of victims (any number of stories will refer to 'millions facing famine' and 'thousands dying per day'). But the coverage of famines also includes other criteria: elite nations often appear as the EU, the US (wasting money, bureaucratic or inefficient) or more recently the UN (heroes or unsuccessful troops); elite persons appear as presidents, actresses clothed as UN ambassadors or any number of politicians seeking status; persons appear in a variety of well known forms: black starving children, mothers with withered breasts, and making a regular appearance are Irish volunteers working to save both the mother and child mentioned above. The Irish volunteer also satisfies Benthall's criteria of personal relevance. Coverage of conflict and civil war, in so far as they give rise to food scarcity and distress, also quite easily meet the necessary criteria to explain the regularity and success of such news items.

That the media regularly overlook the huge endeavours of local communities to address and correct their own problems is not surprising when viewed from Galtung and Ruge's or Benthall's criteria of 'newsworthiness'. As Rakiya Omaar of African Rights (1992) has pointed out:

Do pictures of Somalia show herdsmen tending large flocks of well-fed camels, or farmers cultivating ripening crops? Are we allowed to see clan elders negotiating a local cease fire, or the women who have turned their homes over to orphanages?

The almost single-minded media focus on conflicts and disasters in Africa has a tremendous influence on people's perceptions of that continent. A European-wide analysis of the news coverage of the famine gripping Africa in the mid-1980s revealed that negative images of Africa were reinforcing stereotypes of a doomed and helpless continent which dated back to the colonial era (Van der Gaag and Nash 1987). This scenario has led African historian, Roland Oliver (1991), to comment:

Now it seems that, except for riots in South Africa (always portrayed with the same bobbing crowd scenes), we are presented only with civil war, famine... with the same or similar pictures used over and over again. It is not that scenes depicted are untrue. It is that they represent such a small part of the truth.

It is true that Africa is the poorest continent on earth; it alone began the 1990s poorer than it entered the 1980s. Maternal and child malnutrition are on the rise as are illiteracy, poverty, and several once contained infectious diseases. Costs of education and health care are also escalating. But these facts rarely make the headlines. Nor do the stories of local heroes who address the problems in their own communities in these countries. Famine and starvation are of course the outcome of years of economic decline and are never a surprise to local communities. Horrifying imagery may have its rightful place when it is absolutely necessary to inform and is genuinely representative of a community's predicament. In fact, Western perceptions of Third World poverty are often exaggerated (Benthall, 1993). Perceptions of constant famine, visible hunger and civil war, drawn largely from the news media and the fundraising agencies mean that when a true catastrophe occurs – such as the HIV epidemic which grips Africa today – it is not perceived against a background of normality.

What makes the news is one thing; how these events are reported, the message inherent in the coverage, simply compounds the problem at hand. It could be argued that racism and prejudice are not at work when news stories are selected. It is in the communication of such events that racism becomes obvious.

The news coverage of famines, with the standard roles in situ, is so familiar now that one famine could be mistaken for another in another place and time were it not that relief agency personnel often wear insignia t-shirts and shorts and replace religious sisters. There is, as John Benthall describes, a folk narrative played out in the coverage of disasters. There is always a hero, the expatriate worker, ambassador or foreign correspondent, who have come to sort out the villain. People are better villains than

poverty; thus, as Benthall points out, Pol Pot and the Cambodian crisis captured the imagination of the public for almost all of 1979. But where there is not a person to conquer, poverty and misfortune work. In folk narratives, there is always a donor as well; donors in folklore provide the hero with a magical agent to conquer the villain. In disasters, donors have a clear role: provide the hero with the means (i.e. money) to sort out the villain. There are also false heroes, less harmful than the real villain but a useful focus for excess anger in times of disaster. These can include, of course, EU bureaucracy, UN inefficiency or ineffective politicians.

In the pursuit of our ideal tale, the notion that the hero is always white and if possible used to live down the street, leads journalists to walk past the real heroes and the real stories in disasters: those mothers, fathers and children who pull together and make it or fight a courageous battle against insurmountable odds. To maintain notions of white superiority, our heroes must remain white; the villains somewhere else. Siad Barre, Mengistu, tribes, factions, warlords, drought; the villainy of colonialism, of high street banks, the international financial institutions which we support which bring Third World economies to their knees, do not feature in this folk tale. Getting the story to fit our notions of white and black, of death and dying, and heroic adventures often takes some doing. Rakiya Omaar (1992) denounced the conduct of film crews in Somalia hospitals:

They rush through crowded corridors, leaping over stretchers, dashing to film the agony before it passes. They hold bedside vigils to record the moment of death. When the Italian actress Sophia Loren visited Somalia, the paparazzi trampled on children as they scrambled to film her feeding a little girl – three times.

Photographs are cropped, but names of victims and their permission to use their photographs are not sought, interviews with local people are rejected in favour of our hero, often now the Irish expatriate employed by a relief agency. Reduced to nameless extras in the shadows behind Western aid workers and disaster tourists, the grieving, hurting and humiliated human beings are not asked if they want to be portrayed in their degrading way (Wilson, 1993).

At a seminar on refugee aid in Dublin in 1993, Dr. Ken Wilson of the Refugees Studies programme in Oxford commented that 'Africans have increasingly come to be seen by Westerners as uniquely incompetent and violent, and generally unable to survive without "white saviours" '. Indeed, in the survey of *Images of Africa* during the mid 1980s, when children in a school were shown a photograph of a smiling woman and her child in Burkina Faso, the majority of responses were that 'if they looked contented, we must have helped them' (Van der Gaag and Nash, 1987).

That much research on this issue has been done in Britain as it struggles with its colonial past and has to reconcile its media to an increasingly multi-ethnic, multi-cultural public is not surprising. What does surprise is that the relationship between the Irish media and the people of the Third World is so similar to that of a colonial nation: President Robinson holding the hand of a small black baby or, more symbolic yet, feeding a starving baby, an image long ago denounced by many relief agencies; the Irish volunteer who continues to illicit massive amounts of aid playing on the stereotype of the white missionary. That these images remain prevalent in Ireland suggests we have developed and now perfected a relationship with peoples of developing countries which is reminiscent of the colonizer with colonized and not one reflecting our history as a colonized nation.

### **NGOs and guidelines**

Many development agencies have struggled with this issue and some, including Oxfam, have developed guidelines on images. The NonGovernmental Organizations Liaison Committee based in Brussels issued image guidelines for use in education,

promotional and fundraising work (NonGovernmental Organizations Liaison Committee, 1989). Many agencies do strive to meet these guidelines while many more ignore them. Further, some of the major European agencies (Oxfam included) are now discussing the possibility of imposing their own image guidelines on television crews who make use of their facilities such as feeding centres to film a news report (Benthall, 1993).

Guidelines for the media will be most effective when they emanate from within the media organizations. But guidelines will always be guidelines. Until the media, and the relief and development agencies rid their practice and perspective of racist notions, guidelines will always be sidestepped and the racist message will continue. All agencies interacting with people of developing countries should be required as a first step to undertake anti-racist training and to ensure that such training informs their promotion, fundraising and media work. Another crucial step for media and development agencies in promotion work would be to hand the microphone over to a local worker in any disaster situation and hand over the camera to a mother of a sick child. One wonders what the story would be then and who would play the role of villain and heroine.

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