

The New York Times' ad debacle reinforces why Africans should tell their own stories

Western media's stereotypical coverage of Africa is not new of course. Recently however The New York Times broke the mould in its centuries long, negative, dismissive and patronising coverage of Africa. It is telling that this absurdity did not come in form of a news story, but rather a job advert (what could possibly go wrong?)

On July 3, the paper ran an [advert](#) for its Nairobi Bureau Chief position (which, ironically, is vacant because its previous occupant was hounded out of East Africa's business capital after she sensationally ran a story that included pictures of dead Kenyans following the January hotel complex terrorist attack) which would easily pass for an 1800s Church Missionary Society call for African explorers:

"Our Nairobi bureau chief has a tremendous opportunity to dive into news and enterprise across a wide range of countries, from the deserts of Sudan and the pirate seas of the Horn of Africa, down through the forests of Congo and the shores of Tanzania. It is an enormous patch of vibrant, intense and strategically important territory with many vital story lines, including terrorism, the scramble for resources, the global contest with China and the constant push-and-pull of democracy versus authoritarianism."

The Old Gray Lady does not stop there.

"The ideal candidate should enjoy jumping on news, be willing to cover conflict, and also be drawn to investigative stories. There is also the chance to delight our readers with

unexpected stories of hope and the changing rhythms of life in a rapidly evolving region.”

Now, it must be noted that The Times, in business since 1851, is, per American standards at least, considered a liberal newspaper. That means its editorial stance tethers left, and most of its journalists have a liberal world view. The New York Times was once considered the gold standard in American (and indeed global) journalism and the most trusted news organization in America. It earned ‘The Old Gray Lady’ moniker because it was thought to represent a certain stateliness, a sense of responsibility, the possession of the highest values in journalism.

So We are not talking about Fox news, the right wing rag that has one ‘Africa Correspondent’ who [lives in Johannesburg](#)

But The Times, like all western media, was always patronising when reporting about Africa.

What is even more telling is that it can’t bring itself to apologise when caught in the wrong especially in its Africa reportage. There’s something inherently racist in this stubborn refusal to acknowledge mistakes by a news paper. These people can’t just bring themselves to be seen to be bowing to black Africans.

The Times Nairobi reporter Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, for example, following her reporting on the Nairobi Terror attacks, dismissed the criticism that followed her nauseating story, telling readers to direct their anger to the newspaper’s photo department, claiming that she didn’t have a say in the choice of photos that go with her articles.

Her bosses in New York later released a [lengthy statement](#) attempting to explain why they ran gruesome photos of dead Kenyans, a statement that added insult to injury with its failure to justify the papers immoral editorial stance in this case. They had to go to way back to 1995 Oklahoma bombings

when challenged to show an example when they published pictures of dead Americans. Never mind that every day there is a mass shooting in Uncle Sam's. To this day that Story with pictures of dead Kenyans slumped in their restaurant seats is still on The Times Website.

In the latest episode, When Kenyans on Twitter shredded the racist job ad referenced at the beginning of this article, Michael Slackman, the international editor came in with a mea culpa. The ad was an 18 months old piece he had ran, he said on twitter, in a light-hearted post as if this was any laughing matter, and he refused to admit that anything was wrong with the ad. To this day the ad [still runs](#) on The paper's LinkedIn page.

When it comes to not apologising to Africans however, The Times has good company. Just imagine the behaviour of Boeing in light of its 2 latest plane crashes. They (aided by some American media) rushed to blame dead Ethiopian pilots at first, and only apologised weeks later. Had Flight ET 302 been a Delta flight 302 enroute from Atlanta to Nashville rather than an ET 302 flight from Addis to Nairobi, hell would've broke loose. White supremacy necessitates that white offenders would never apologise to black people they hold in contempt. That's the behaviour of the New York Times in the these episodes.

With this type of ad, does anyone doubt that The Times is certainly not looking for an African for that job? Don't we have fine African journalists who can fill the role? As long as I can remember, The Times has not had an African bureau chief in an African City. That should be weird. I know of stringers, reporters and freelancers that are African, but not anyone in a decision-making position has ever headed The Times News drill here in Africa.

Most of its foreign correspondents are fratboys and sorority girls from the Ivy League universities in New England who sign

up to live out their adventurous experiences, explore heathen Africa, toughen up and secure their rite of passage, the same way Church Missionary Society doctors came to practice their skills on Africans in the 1700s. They can then go to their next careers by touting [how they survived wars](#), wild animals and heathen Neanderthals. For many of these correspondents, an Africa assignment is no different from a gap year, a sabbatical to reinvent themselves while writing some [poverty porn](#).

You can almost smell this snobbism from their stories (Such as the Times' Declan Walsh triumphantly declaring himself 'The First Western Journalists' to reach the Sudan Protesters in Khartoum) and in the pages of their memoirs they write after they finish their missions; From Former Financial Times Africa Chief Michela Wrong, to recent Times Nairobi Chief Michael Gentleman's 'Love, Africa' memoir (which was [panned](#) by many reviewers by the way). These are no different from Kuki Gallman's colonialist 'I Dreamed of Africa,' or Henry Morton Stanley's "Through the Dark Continent," account that created that infamous term.

For them their subjects are only passing happenstances to their higher purpose of self-discovery, adventure, and career growth.

Ignorance of Africa is no defence

Many westerners are remarkably ignorant about Africa. If you asked five random Americans on a street, I doubt any will name 5 African countries. Their knowledge of the continent is one they pick from the racist tropes they see in popular culture and books they read at school. The media is the biggest enabler of this ignorance. And the New York Times is far from the only one. For example, the same day the New York Times published its racist ad, The British newspaper The Times, decided to focus a full-page story on a man whose yard a [Kenya Airways Stowaway](#) fell into in a recent heart-breaking story.

The story wasn't about the identity of the man or the circumstances that drove him to make such a deadly foolish decision, but some Oxford educated sunbather!



British Newspaper The Times ran this story in reaction to a man that fell out of a KQ flight that was approaching to land in London recently

Let's tell our own stories!

Which all brings me to this question: Why can't Africans tell their own stories? The continent's media landscape has exploded in recent years. Technology has meant that nearly every African adult owns a mobile phone, a radio, and many households have access to some sort of news outlet. Internet penetration is increasing daily, even in rural areas. Do we really still need The New York Times to tell our stories?

It kills me every time a local newspaper runs a wire story for a local event, rather than sending their journalists there, on a boda boda to cover it and spice it with their local knowledge of nuance and context.

The Associated Press, Reuters, AFP and other global giants are now becoming the UBER of the news. Like Uber drove local taxis to near extinction in some capitals, these global wire presses are making our local news gathering redundant.

Why can't a paper like Daily Nation or The East African be the

one authoritatively covering east Africa and having NYT pay to rerun its stories, not the other way round? I understand It's the economy, stupid. With less developed economies, you have less ad revenue to recoup in serious investigative stories, and pay reporters better. But a lot of this ceding of local agency to global news titans is self-inflicted. Our media houses have become lazy and sloppy by turning to yellow journalism and ignoring critical development reporting. The digital revolution is adding pressure on some of the media houses but this is an opportunity to be creative. Harness citizen journalism, invest in quality reporting, and your news will still get market.

Otherwise We will still have stories on Africa as a [hotbed of terror](#), and not the socioeconomic transformation that we know is the bigger story of an emerging Africa. The initiative is in our hands.

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