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Book Review: The media and aid in Sub-Saharan Africa: Whose news?

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Lena von Naso, *The media and aid in Sub-Saharan Africa: Whose news?*
London; New York: Routledge, 2018. 266 pp. ISBN 9781138575462

The Media and Aid in Sub-Saharan Africa argues that foreign correspondents in Africa have developed an 'unholy alliance' with aid organisations, and this relationship has led to reporting about Africa that is overwhelmingly negative and crisis-focused.

This is not a new argument. Media researchers have long pointed out that NGOs and journalists enjoy a 'symbiotic relationship' with one another. Aid agencies need publicity and donations to survive, and so they encourage journalists to raise awareness of their causes and campaigns. Meanwhile, foreign correspondents depend on aid agencies for information and quotes, as well as financial and logistical support to travel into the field and report on crises.

These interactions are said to result in reports that reproduce the worldview of the Western aid agencies. Such stories focus on disaster and development issues, celebrate 'western saviours', omit the voices of those affected by crisis and fail to critically assess the work of aid agencies.

While these are not new claims, they are rarely made with the extensive and systematic data that von Naso presents in *The Media and Aid in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Writing on the topic has historically been very anecdotal and generalised. There was previously quite limited work looking at the relationship between journalists and aid agencies in detail, and only a few researchers have asked how this relationship might vary between different individuals, organisations and regions.

In 2018, a series of books looking at aid, journalism and humanitarianism were published, starting to address this gap. In addition to von Naso's *The Media and Aid in Sub-Saharan Africa*, there were important monographs by Cooper (2018), Powers (2018)

and Wright (2018), among others. Together these provide a much-needed empirical, nuanced and critical understanding of the aid–journalism relationship.

Like von Naso, Kate Wright (2018) examines the aid–journalism relationship in the context of international reporting about Africa. Her insightful book uses rich and detailed case studies to illuminate the news production process, and the moral and political economies in which it is embedded.

The Media and Aid in Sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, focuses on breadth; it canvasses the wider media-aid field in East Africa and draws on 71 interviews as well as quantitative data from questionnaires. Of these interviews, 37 were with foreign correspondents and 34 with employees of humanitarian organisations. Most were conducted in person in Nairobi, Kenya.

This data show there is a ‘deep co-dependency’ between journalists and aid workers in East Africa. While the foreign correspondents all stated that their close relationship with aid agencies did not influence their reporting, von Naso ultimately rejects this claim, pointing to the pivotal role of aid agencies in news production. Humanitarian organisations often hold the monopoly of infrastructure and access, as well as information. As a result, they ‘often have the upper hand in the relationship, denying correspondents access, information, or contacts, resulting in the journalists’ performing self-censorship in order to comply with the organisations’ needs and requirements’ (p. 213).

One of the book’s key contributions is the analysis of how dependence on humanitarian organisations varies depending on the journalist’s experience, news values, personal contacts, the country where their news outlet is based, and the nature of their employment contract. Notably, von Naso establishes that freelancers are more dependent on humanitarian organisations than staff correspondents: an important finding given the ever-dwindling resources for international reporting, and the increasing role of freelancers in the global media system.

The Media and Aid in Sub-Saharan Africa is structured like a ‘traditional’ research project or PhD thesis. The introduction is followed by chapters containing literature and theory reviews; a methodology chapter; a single, very long chapter that presents the research findings; and then a conclusion. This format will make the book less accessible to undergraduate students and general readers. It will be most useful for researchers

working on the global news system, news about Africa and/or humanitarian communications – particularly researchers looking for empirical data about working conditions. In addition, the thorough literature review is notable for summarising a number of important German texts on the global media and news production (which are not widely available in English) and bringing these into conversation with English-language research on the subject.

It would have been interesting to see more reflection on theoretical questions in the book's findings and conclusion. The early literature review is very thorough, explaining the relevance of a range of theory – from gatekeeping and network analysis through to framing theory. Revisiting these in light to the findings could have helped to take the data forward and contribute to wider theoretical debate.

Moreover, there have been important developments in the media system in recent years which are not explored in the book. A number of NGOs have committed to using more positive and empowering media content about Africa, and journalists appear more prepared to criticise the work of aid agencies, particularly in light of the #Aidtoo scandal.

Nonetheless, this book makes an important contribution to the literature on aid–journalism relations, providing much-needed empirical data. As news budgets continue to shrink, the role of NGOs in news production will only increase.

References

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