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# ‘This Place Used to be a White British Boys’ Club’: Reporting Dynamics and Cultural Clash at an International News Bureau in Nairobi

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**ABSTRACT** *Africa has long been portrayed by Western media as a dark and conflict-ridden continent. Such reports have traditionally been produced by white journalists in the field, writing for a distant audience ‘back home’. In recent years, significant structural changes in the foreign news industry have seen the near-demise of foreign correspondents and the increasing use of locally hired journalists. This research explores the increasingly important role of local correspondents in the production of international news reports, and asks whether their presence may start to change how Africa is depicted in the West. This investigation is framed by a cultural analysis of the Reuters newsroom in Nairobi during the post-election crisis of 2007–08. This newsroom provides a microcosm of the media industry, in which Western and local journalists disagreed and debated the role of the media in a crisis. This clash of values offers a springboard for exploring the potential ability of local national journalists to shape the news: Do they have the power to challenge Western reporting modes, or are they simply reproducing the values of this system? This article concludes that the current situation is somewhere between the two: Westerners continue to dominate international reporting, but there are indications that a slow and sometimes uncomfortable synthesis is beginning to emerge.*

**KEY WORDS:** media, Kenya, international newsgathering, conflict, post-election violence, tribalism, Reuters, colonialism, Al Jazeera

## Introduction

For hundreds of years, British explorers, military personnel, researchers and writers have travelled to Africa and sent home stories of the different and dangerous lands they found. In early reports, the continent was often represented as an unremittingly bleak and brutal place, whose inhabitants were uncivilised and ‘other’ to the people of Europe. Contemporary critics of the international news media argue that, centuries later, little has changed.

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British news reports, commentators suggest, continue to present Africa in a negative light—highlighting disaster, simplifying and stereotyping ethnic groups, and championing internationally-led rescue efforts (Franks, 2005). Rather than a relationship of equals—or the family analogy favoured in contemporary Commonwealth discourse—Britain’s news media continues to represent her former colonies in a paternalistic, negative and even ‘neo-colonial’ light, with disproportionate repercussions for trade, tourism and international relations (Mbembe, 2001).

The news coverage of the Kenyan election violence in 2007–08 appears to be an archetypal example of reporting in this mode, with much of the coverage generalising violence across the country, failing to contextualise events, and frequently presenting the complex political, economic and cultural crisis as a bloody and inevitable tribal clash (Somerville, 2009). However, in the midst of this conflict, locally hired journalists—who have become increasingly important to the production of international news as the importance of the overseas foreign correspondent has declined—began to challenge these negative and sensationalising norms. This research explores the ensuing fragmented debate inside the newsroom over the media’s role in a crisis, and asks whether the presence of local correspondents may start to change how Africa is depicted in the West.

Supported by a Round Table Commonwealth Award for Young Scholars, I spent August and September 2009 in Nairobi, interviewing journalists who work for British outlets and exploring these issues. The conclusions of this paper are particularly informed by eight weeks’ close study of the Nairobi bureau of the Reuters<sup>1</sup> newswire, including observation of news meetings and reporter interaction as well as in-depth interviews. This fieldwork produced original data that shed light on the experiences of foreign correspondents in the field and the individual, organisational and external factors that influence their work.

The article begins with a short background of the Kenyan post-election violence and the news media’s coverage of these events. It then briefly explores some of the literature on foreign correspondents in the field. The body of the article analyses the ethos of the Reuters Nairobi bureau in reference to the post-election coverage. It explores what was distinct about reporting, and what—or whose—values drove the production. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the importance of values clashes in the overseas newsroom: Are the days of foreign correspondence as a ‘colonial boys’ club’ numbered?

## **Background**

Despite the clichéd notion of a dashing foreign correspondent in the field—far away from home and battling adversity to uncover the truth (Peterson, 2001)—the reality of day-to-day international newsgathering in East Africa is considerably more mundane. The past 30 years have witnessed a systematic downsizing of the number of foreign correspondents posted around the world (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004). This trend has been particularly marked in Africa, where most outlets have no correspondents of any kind and rely heavily on the newswires to provide their stories (Franks, 2005). Today only five UK newspapers have traditional, permanently posted correspondents based in East Africa.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of news on East Africa is now produced by journalists working for a handful of

major newswires and networks that have bureaux in Nairobi, the largest of which are the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera, and the newswires Reuters, AP and AFP. A significant portion of the journalists hired by these newsrooms are not away from home at all, but rather locally hired Kenyans who report on their own country for international news consumers. The stories produced in these international bureaux are more important than ever, as they provide news coverage for the vast majority of international newspapers, TV channels and radio stations around the world, and are the primary source of information about Africa for most British citizens (DFID, 2000).

Despite the clear significance of these organisations, there has been little scholarly interest in their practices and the factors that influence foreign news production; perhaps, wrote Oliver Boyd-Barrett (2000), because newswires occupy a less romantic space in our imaginings, as compared with the rugged and dashing correspondents who appear in films and popular culture. Particularly neglected has been the role of local national journalists in the production of news.

This article contributes to filling this lacuna in the literature through an exploration of one particular newsroom, the Reuters bureau in Nairobi, and its distinctive composition, dynamics and news values. To focus the analysis, it explores a case study of reporting on the Kenya post-election crisis of 2007–08. This period was a dramatic anomaly in Kenyan news coverage and does not represent day-to-day reporting practices. However, it provides an informative example foregrounding many key issues of journalistic production, as the newsroom journalists negotiated (or failed to negotiate) how the crisis should be covered.

### *The Context*

On 30 December 2007, incumbent Mwai Kibaki was declared the winner of the Kenyan presidential election, amid widespread claims of vote-rigging from both local and international electoral monitors. Within the hour, supporters of Kibaki's opponent, Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement, began rioting across the country and attacking Kibaki supporters. The violence began as an expression of outrage at the fraudulent elections, but quickly became ethnically oriented, with Luo (Odinga's tribe) mobs venting their anger on Kikuyu (Kibaki's tribe) neighbours, and Kikuyu youths assembling to take revenge against any non-Kikuyu in their residential areas. Violence peaked with the killing of over 30 unarmed civilians in a church near Eldoret on New Year's Day. By the end of February 2008, post-election violence had left more than 1,200 dead and some 350,000 displaced.

The post-election violence displayed what the International Crisis Group (2008, p. 1) termed 'a serious ethnic character'—but ethnic differences were by no means the single root cause of the conflict. Tribal groupings have long been politicised and manipulated in Kenya by elites, from their construction during colonial contact through to contemporary politics of ethnic nepotism and exclusion. Today, there is a widespread perception that the ruling party's tribal peers receive preferential access to state resources. In December 2007, these grievances combined with weak political institutions, the normalisation of violence and conflict among elites to create the foundations of the crisis (Cheeseman, 2008, p. 170).

*News Coverage of the Post-election Violence*

The violence immediately captured the attention of the global news media. Unusually for an African news story, reports on the crisis reached the front pages of newspapers and were broadcast at the start of television and radio news bulletins around the world. Even more unusually, interest in the crisis was relatively long-lived, and it continued to receive a high level of attention throughout January and into February 2008.<sup>3</sup>

The content of international news coverage of the crisis has been fiercely criticised by both Kenyan and international commentators. Two critiques, in particular, have dominated the post-mortem analyses. First, it is claimed that coverage exaggerated the scale and severity of the violence. As one Kenyan reporter told the BBC World Service Trust (2008, p. 14) investigators, 'I watched the BBC and I thought this country was on fire. CNN was playing the same clip from Kibera as if it was a commercial. Part of what I saw was sensational [and created fear]'. The most explicit exaggerations were by articles that employed the term 'genocide', comparing Kenya's violence to the cataclysmic events of Rwanda in 1994; they reduced the crisis to an 'atavistic inevitability', and potentially stoked anger and fear (Somerville, 2009). The international news outlets showed little restraint in broadcasting the most explicit images, including 'burning houses, scared people on the move, and even people hacked to death' (Ogola, 2008). In some cases, these images were presented without any explanation of their content, conveying the sense that the whole country was in a state of senseless anarchy.

Second, the international coverage was accused of employing tribal language that was incorrect, condescending and potentially inflammatory. Keith Somerville (2009, p. 530) noted that in the UK media the election violence was presented almost exclusively as resulting from long-standing tribal hatred, with scant reference to even the political parties that were the source of much of the tension. The use of tribal language in reports concerned analysts, who felt this framing generated misleading descriptions, gave insufficient explanations of the violence, and had pejorative and primitive connotations (Anderson, 2008; Keane, 2008; Somerville, 2009). Finally, the tribal language concerned many Kenyan commentators, who worried that the language was inflammatory, particularly when international coverage became a crucial source of information for Kenyans themselves after the government banned local media houses from live broadcasting.

*Divergent Approaches and Conflicting News Values*

In Kenya, the local mainstream media (TV, press and radio owned by the two main media houses) adopted a very different, very reserved approach to reporting. Concerned not to exacerbate the violence, journalists refrained from naming the different tribes involved in fighting, and chose to describe clashes as occurring between different 'communities'. Speaking to the BBC World Service Trust (2008, p. 8), Farida Karoney, a Kenyan reporter, stated her outlet's position: 'Here at KTN, when we are reporting conflict we will not refer to people by their tribe because we think that such tribal references will entrench feelings of hate'. On 3 January 2008, Kenya's two biggest competing newspapers, *The Nation* and *The Standard*, ignored their commercial

agendas in a show of unity for peace, and published a jointly negotiated edition with a common editorial front page, reading ‘Save Our Beloved Country’.

This local coverage contrasts starkly with international reporters’ work, and strong differences of opinions are still articulated today. Kenyan journalists argue that the international reporters demonstrated little concern for the well-being of Kenya or Kenyans, and were simply trying to break another story for professional gain. Kenyan journalist-academic George Ogola (2008), for example, wrote:

It was not a desire by a section of the international media to tell the world the true story about the conflict that was slowly consuming Kenya. This was about a good story; it was about the exploitation of a people crying out for help.

International journalists, meanwhile, are defensive; they accuse local journalists of adopting a conservative approach that did little to air the issues underlying the conflict.

Underlying this clash is a fundamental disagreement on what the role of the news media should be during a crisis. Kenyan journalists describe an important ethical obligation to the peace process itself, and argue that the media should not produce reports that are potentially inflammatory, whether they are intended for a primarily local or international audience. This position is sometimes referred to in communications literature as ‘peace journalism’ or ‘conflict-sensitive journalism’ (Gultang, 2000; Hanitzsch, 2004), and is often presented as being in direct competition with traditional ‘hard news’ reporting (Fawcett, 2002). While ‘traditional’ reporting values suggest that journalists should draw attention *to* important developments in a conflict, ‘peace journalism’ suggests that journalists should draw attention *away* from any developments that could fuel fear or create further tension (Ross, 2008). Whether these two ends are inherently antithetical is an issue that became particularly relevant in the post-election coverage.

### **Research Questions and Literature Review**

Many interesting questions emerge from this overview. In what mode, and why, did the Nairobi Reuters bureau produce reporting? Second, how did the bureau—which hires both Kenyan and international journalists—negotiate the post-election crisis: were there value clashes in this newsroom, and if so, how were they resolved?

Oliver Boyd-Barrett is one of the few academics to explore contemporary newswires in the global news industry. Over his body of work, he constructs a macroanalysis of these newswire bureau networks, focusing on hiring patterns, global span and structural hierarchies. Boyd-Barrett’s (1980) survey of news agency journalists showed there were many more locally recruited journalists than expatriates in overseas bureaux, but that bureau chiefs were generally nationals of the agencies’ home countries (i.e. Britain, America or France) or nationals of other Western or Commonwealth countries. Bureau leadership by expatriates was justified in terms of expatriates’ presumably better sense of the news interests of media audiences back ‘home’ and their native command of the main language of distribution. Non-local journalists dominated top positions and had editorial control over their bureaux. Boyd-Barrett (2000) concluded that, in its original form,

the bureau conforms to a colonialist outpost model, whereby expatriate command and communications between expatriate communities and the mother country are privileged and the ‘whites’ are surrounded by compliant servants.

Boyd-Barrett did not, however, explore how these newsrooms are negotiated by the journalists who occupy them; and it is unclear what these structural relations mean in practice for news production on the ground. Furthermore, by focusing on these structural features, he leaves little room in his analysis for the possibility that local journalists may challenge these structures in the field. This research explores whether Boyd-Barrett’s prediction holds true in the Nairobi Reuters office: Was the hierarchy of the newsroom structured around firmly hierarchical, colonial lines? And, in practice, how did this influence news values and decisions in the bureau?

### *Exploring the Newsroom: Methodology*

In August and September 2009, I interviewed 10 journalists working on news production in the Reuters bureau in Nairobi, including the bureau chief, deputy chief, correspondents, and a number of stringers (casually contracted journalists paid per story). This sample captured nearly the full news team at this point in time,<sup>4</sup> and included a cross-section of nationalities: four Kenyans, three British, one Australian, one Ugandan and one Somali. In addition to these interviews, I spent eight weeks attending news meetings, observing interactions and talking informally with the journalists in the office.

To offer a counter-perspective and hear from journalists outside Reuters, I interviewed an additional 23 journalists from a range of competing outlets: representatives from the BBC, Al Jazeera, AFP, AP and Xinhau newswires; and a wide range of journalists at British, European and American magazines and newspapers.<sup>5</sup> Some journalists were happy speaking on the record, whereas others asked to remain anonymous. These interviews were semi-structured, and covered the newsgathering process, reporters’ news values, and their relationships with colleagues, editors and sources. If the journalist had been in Nairobi at the time, they discussed the 2007–08 post-election violence.

### **The Ethos of a Nairobi Bureau: Insiders and Outsiders**

This section gives an overview of the Nairobi Reuters office and examines the work its journalists did during the post-election violence. In general, journalists felt they had done a positive, professional job reporting the crisis. However, it was a very demanding time for the staff, and there was a variety of tensions among the journalists. Divides emerged along two main fracture lines: first, between ethnic/political groupings in the office; and second, between local and international journalists regarding the news and angles they wished to report. The cultural dimensions of these divides are explored.

### *‘A Leader in the Region’: The Daily Work of the Reuters Newswire*

Reuters is the largest newswire in Nairobi, at that time employing six text journalists, four television journalists, two full-time photographers, and a



fluctuating number of stringers. In Nairobi, AFP and AP—Reuters’ two biggest competitors for hard news production—hire only half this number of staff. The staff represented a range of nationalities, with Kenyans making up the largest group. However, as Boyd-Barrett’s work predicted, the managerial positions were filled by Western nationals—the bureau chief, deputy chief and a senior correspondent were British; the highest position held by a Kenyan national was senior economic correspondent. In addition, there were five Kenyan journalists, a South African television producer, a Ugandan humanitarian correspondent and an Australian stringer.

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The Nairobi office is the regional hub of Reuters reporting on East Africa; journalists in the office produce news on Kenya and 14 other countries in the region,<sup>6</sup> drawing on a large network of stringers and journalists in the field.<sup>7</sup> Bureau chief Andrew Cawthorne estimated that the office would compile, edit and produce an average of 12–15 stories a day, with five or six stories on a slow day and up to 30 on a busy day.

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Following the merger of Reuters and Thomson in 2008, the newswire has significantly refocused its editorial policy, aiming to deliver more financial news. This shift is an attempt to meet the needs of the majority of their clients, who work in the financial sector and subscribe to the newswire for its live data and news on markets and commodities (rather than traditional news media clients). David Clarke, the deputy bureau chief, described the new mix of content:

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We’re still providing video, pictures, text for media clients, i.e. newspapers, magazines, radio stations, TV stations around the world. But the stories we would focus on, prioritise more, are the ones which have more interest to the real-time clients [those with live update screens providing financial data].

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This shift in news priorities has significant implications for the types of story that Reuters produces (and thus, that all clients—including news media subscribers—receive and reproduce) and it merits substantial further exploration in another forum, where space permits. There is little doubt, however, that the new Thomson Reuters continues to pride itself on its ‘hard news’ coverage—and, in East Africa, this typically consists of breaking coverage on political developments, conflicts and humanitarian disasters. Bureau chief Andrew Cawthorne noted that the decision to cover the post-election violence extensively and deeply, with all available resources throughout December and January 2007–08, was a ‘no-brainer’. In addition to its clear political and humanitarian dimensions, the violence shook one of the strongest economies in the region and had significant implications for investment, tourism and trade.

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### **Case Study: Covering the Post-election Crisis at Reuters**

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As an agency, Reuters occupies an ambiguous space between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in Nairobi, reflecting the divergent positionalities of the journalists themselves. At certain times, journalists emphasised their insider status, especially in contrast to temporary ‘parachute’ journalists; this was proudly displayed as giving privileged

330 access to local knowledge and contacts. At other times, however, especially in the  
 middle of the crisis, to be too deeply embedded was clearly both personally difficult  
 and a journalistic liability. At such moments, the gap between non-Kenyan and local  
 335 journalists was at its widest, even as the locals desperately attempted to cling to their  
 sense of ‘balance’. The foreign dominance of the bureau and Reuters’ emphasis on  
 the needs of its international business clientele, however, meant that Kenyan voices  
 were continually sidelined under pressure.

In general, all the journalists in the Nairobi bureau believed that their status as  
 insiders—their permanent presence in Kenya, their local colleagues, and their deeper  
 340 local knowledge—significantly improved their reporting on the election crisis and  
 resulted in more nuanced and more consistent coverage. In this, they explicitly  
 defined their identity against visiting journalists, who had little local knowledge or  
 experience and whose treatment of the crisis was perceived to be more superficial.  
 Cawthorn felt that, in contrast to the Reuters journalists, these visitors were  
 overexcited, made false inferences and exaggerated the situation on the ground.  
 345 Describing a Sky News report, he said:

I mean, it was offensive stuff . . . It was like some guy had just got off a  
 plane, was sitting in Kibera with a load of hooded people with machetes—  
 you know, scraping the machetes along the ground, talking about the  
 350 number of the people they’d killed. And you know—because one goes to  
 Kibera often, you know that only one or two of them would’ve been killers  
 and the others were all peacocks. The real killers are not going to sit there  
 talking to the reporter.

355 Furthermore, after the violence had peaked, these parachute journalists left as  
 quickly as they had arrived, leading to discontinuous, ‘spotlight’ reporting of the  
 crisis. Patrick Muiruri, senior television producer at Reuters, noted that ‘they kept  
 playing old footage, the worst footage, after things had calmed down. Whereas we  
 do the footage that’s new everyday—so ours is more representative’.

360 In comparison with the dramatic, episodic and misleading reports of other  
 journalists, Reuters staff felt they were able to approach the issues from a number of  
 angles, discuss the manifestations of fighting around the country, and analyse the  
 core themes—for example, sidebars and interviews looking at issues such as ‘what is  
 inequality in Kenya?’ In this, both Kenyans and internationals at the bureau were  
 365 united as relative insiders.

#### *Kenyan Voices in the Newsroom*

370 As insiders, however, journalists were closer to the story, and their emotional  
 engagement threatened impartiality in the newsroom. For the Kenyans in the  
 Reuters bureau, the post-election violence was an extremely emotional and difficult  
 time to be a journalist. They were at greater risk when they left the office to report, as  
 they could be associated with one side of the conflict or another. Furthermore, many  
 found newsgathering and writing very difficult as the issues were so close to home  
 375 and were hurting the people and communities they cared about. Writing on someone  
 else’s conflict, including elsewhere in East Africa, is easy; writing on your own is

challenging. Helen Nyambura-Mwaura, head economics correspondent at Reuters, admitted:

When you write every day, like we do—‘15 people are killed in Somalia’—that’s one thing and it’s fine. But when it’s your own country and your own people it’s totally different. Totally and utterly different. It’s too hard. 380

Making it harder still, many of the Kenyans in the newsroom had very strong political and personal feelings on the crisis itself, and they found it difficult to remain impartial. Cracks emerged between those who supported ODM and those who supported Kibaki. Muiruri described the tension: 385

It was completely obvious that everyone was on different sides. I’m Kikuyu, and my mother rang me up in tears—my aunt’s house was burnt down. So I’m angry, and I want to write a big critical rant about ODM. But then, another guy here is talking to me and his friend’s house is burnt down on the other side . . . my job was to kind of try and find a balance between that but it was very hard. 390

Nyambura-Mwaura also identified strong divisions among staff: 395

There was a really big divide in the newsroom. There were those who thought ODM and those who thought PNU was right. Basically, it was Kikuyu versus everyone else . . . We would have discussions about coverage, they would say, ‘The election’s been stolen,’ and we would be saying, ‘that hasn’t been proven yet’ . . . So despite journalist objectivity, we were all very emotional and taking sides. 400

Despite the strain of these divisions, she claimed they did not have an adverse impact on the stories: ‘We ended up being balanced, because of that split—everyone was saying to each other all the time, “You have to put this side in”’. Faced with conflicting stances towards the fighting, the local journalists appealed to the notion of balance to adjudicate their stories. Journalistic impartiality is thus asserted as a resilient and internationally accepted goal; however, in actual practice several of the Kenyan reporters echoed Ogola’s (2008) complaint that the international coverage was sensationalist, self-serving and unsympathetic. Standoffish impartiality had to be tempered by a genuine concern with local needs. 405

#### *International and Local Divides*

Proximity to the crisis opened up a profound split within the newsroom between Kenyan citizens and outside internationals regarding how the violence should be covered; this reflected the difference of opinions that divided the local and international media in Nairobi more generally. The Kenyan reporters felt that international journalists should be more selective and cautious with what they covered, and more reserved in the language they used. These objections were either 420

not heard by the managerial staff, or were put to one side in the interest of more dramatic news reporting.

In general, Cawthorne thought that Reuters did a fairly good job of avoiding the worst of the tribal language in its reports and was fairly sensitive to the inflammatory potential of news content: 'Every meeting we had, every story we wrote, we were aware of that [trying to avoid tribal language]'. However, he was still aware that things could have been reported in a more nuanced way and, to some extent, that this reflected the fact that the Western journalists in the office dominated the editorial meetings and reporting decisions during the crisis: 'We could have done better. Afterwards when we had a big discussion, that became clear'.

Cawthorne believes that the Kenyans in the newsroom were unusually quiet owing to the traumatic turn of events. In addition, time pressures meant that there was little time to reflect or discuss the issues among the staff fully:

I couldn't fuck around—if you'll excuse me—when that was happening. I couldn't spend an hour to sit back and, let's think about this, and coax out people's ideas. I was like, 'Um, a church is burning with 33 people inside, we need to urgently write about that: is this echoes of Rwanda, isn't it echoes of Rwanda?' I mean, huge questions like that, and we were making split-second judgements on them. And unfortunately, those hardened correspondents here, we tended to dominate. I wanted to make the others speak up, and they weren't. Later on, they had a lot to say, an awful lot.

In normal day-to-day reporting at Reuters, Kenyan journalists have a high level of involvement in decision-making about the stories and angles of reporting. Kenyans run the morning news meetings, report fairly autonomously on their own beats, and contribute to newsroom discussions. Cawthorne and Clarke both stated that Kenyan journalists often suggested stories that they would not have thought of, or they explained local events in a way that made them appreciate their significance. This led to a 'happy symbiosis', he felt, between international news values and local knowledge and concerns.

In the coverage of the election crisis, however, this symbiosis faltered. Despite their significant numbers as journalists, Kenyans were completely absent from the management level of the newswire. In practice, this meant that Kenyans did not run shifts or oversee editorial decision-making. There was, furthermore, a state of emergency in the newsroom and decisions were made swiftly, often without discussion or consultation; the hierarchies of management became more visible, and the Kenyan voices were sidelined. Just as crucially, the Kenyan journalists' proximity to the violence became a liability in reporting 'hard' news to Reuters' clients, not an asset. According to the norms of the organisation, this contrasted unfavourably with the hardened distance of the traditional foreign correspondents.

#### *Alternative Approaches*

Was a more cohesive symbiosis possible in the Reuters bureau, one that combined local news values—the empathetic concerns of 'insiders'—and the international news agenda, with its demand for big breaking stories? Some outlets found it was possible to cover breaking 'hard' news in a way that was sensitive to local needs. Journalists

at the Al Jazeera English bureau, for example, articulated a crisis-sensitive approach to reporting. A British-born correspondent for Al Jazeera stated that it was very important to the producers not to be provocative, and that this principle trumped other notions of newsworthiness during the crisis reportage:

We tried very hard not to be inflammatory ... I was anchoring, and I would have to say to them [politicians]—during an interview—‘Look, you can’t talk like that’ ... I was interviewing William Ruto the night after the church burnt down. I said, ‘You must condemn this atrocity’ and he was just replying ‘oh, the police are always committing atrocities’—I told him, and made it clear, that he was out of line saying that on television.

Whereas other journalists might have turned the interview into a dramatic piece illustrating political animosity, Al Jazeera journalists described a pressing obligation to *desensationalise* the statements. They were aware they were being followed locally—Al Jazeera is available on free-to-air television in Kenya, and has a large following—and felt like they had become actors in the crisis. As a new outlet associated with the Middle East, its narrative for Africa is also nowhere nearly as entrenched in colonial experience.

The synthesis between local concerns and international news values appears to be a more established feature of the Al Jazeera network, partly due to the demography of its reporters. Kenyan journalists are well integrated in day-to-day reporting, and therefore seem to have had increased success in fighting basic stereotypes in their coverage. Unlike the humanitarian paradigm so favoured by many Western-oriented outlets (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1996), Al Jazeera English seems to have more leeway to pursue nuanced stories. Its producers, too, have the influence to push correspondents into relinquishing traditional hard news stories in favour of more innovative angles. A British-born correspondent, for example, recalls writing a report on soaring food prices. His instinct had been to go to the slums and see how the food crisis was affecting Kenya’s poorest; however, his (Kenyan) producer stopped him, saying, ‘Hang on—the crisis is affecting the middle class too—let’s go to Nakumatt [a large supermarket chain] and see how people are coping’. This intervention led to a report that showed a different side of Kenya to an international audience, many of whom—after years of negative reporting—may be literally unaware that Kenya has a middle class struggling with the same inflated supermarket bills as people in the West. The people in these news reports are like ‘us’—not foreign or ‘other’—and, as such, occupy a space that encourages a response of empathy rather than mere sympathy. Roger Silverstone (2007, p. 46) calls this the ‘proper distance’, and argues that it is essential if the news media is to help foster an ethics of care, ‘a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding’.

#### *Change at Reuters?*

There are signs that things are slowly changing at the Reuters Nairobi bureau to include more Kenyan voices in reporting. Helen Nyambura-Mwaura pointed out that things are already better than they were:

This place used to be a white British boys' club. They were running everything ... Kenyans weren't being paid as much, they weren't given responsibility or allowed to make decisions.

As a Kenyan journalist, she felt it was still harder to earn a permanent contract in the company (it took her seven years to go from being a stringer to a salaried position) but that things had improved, with Kenyan journalists more involved in the editorial process and more equal wages.

There are also indications the Reuters Nairobi newsroom will increase the number of Kenyan journalists it hires in the future, and even look to appoint its first Kenyan bureau chief or deputy chief. Cawthorne stated:

We're trying to shift the balance. There are far too many people like me and David [Clarke] here running things. There's no reason that Helen shouldn't be running the office. We're really trying to make that shift ... We want to promote local voices ... We would love to have a Number 1 and Number 2 of each—we want the change, and that symbiosis.

These moves suggest positive change for neo-colonial critics, who have long denounced the international news media's tendency to speak on behalf of Africans, rather than letting Africans speak for themselves. In particular, the integration of Kenyan journalists into management may help to fight stereotypes in day-to-day reporting, and encourage a wider range of local perspectives.

The potential for change should not be overstated, however, and the physical inclusion of Kenyans is not a panacea. Although fairly autonomous in many ways, the Nairobi Reuters bureau must report back with stories that the international and African editors are looking for. These editors, in turn, are looking for news stories that deliver their clients' news needs.

Reuters does not have many of the financial and outlet structures that make alternative modes of reporting possible at Al Jazeera English. Whereas the latter is publicly funded and, interestingly, is quite unclear on the demographics of its audience (described by one correspondent as an anarchic situation but 'one that's quite nice'), Reuters exists in a tight market where it must consistently compete with other newswires for clients. This competition is won and lost on the ability to break the news fastest and most accurately; and there are no institutional rewards for news that has the greatest respect for local needs or that incorporates the most conflict-sensitive language. Furthermore, Reuters has an extensive knowledge of all its (almost universally Western-based) clients and the editors know—or think they know—exactly what news their clients want: fast and accurate breaking stories on the events that move markets and affect political risk.

At the Reuters bureau, there is a range of incentives and pressures on journalists, which encourage them to produce institutionally favoured reporting that meets client needs. Journalists are given consistent feedback on which stories both the editors are commissioning and which stories they like (indeed, contract journalists are only paid if the story is taken by the organisation); Reuters receives direct feedback from clients, and there are clear data on which stories were picked up by the international press. Although more Kenyan journalists—especially in management—may have an

impact on the content of some reports (e.g. curbing the most worrying stereotypical portrayals), these constraints mean their influence will be restricted to a relatively small range of pre-established, client-approved modes of reporting. There is no reward for innovative or empathetic stories that deviate from these hard news norms.

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I asked Nyambura-Mwaura if things would change if she were in charge. She replied:

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No. Ultimately, we've still got to feed London and that's the bottom line: I could send them the story '20 people died in a car crash' and they would still come back with '20 people die every day in car crashes'. It's very depressing. African lives just don't matter. I've learnt that ... but it's still horribly depressing to know that nobody cares.

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## **Conclusion**

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The post-election violence was an extreme and anomalous period for the reporters in Nairobi, and interactions during that time do not reflect day-to-day reporting processes in the Reuters bureau. However, this case study raises a number of interesting and important issues regarding who exactly 'speaks for Kenya': it highlights the potential difficulty for Kenyans writing as 'insiders' on their own country, and the local criticisms that can arise of 'outsiders' perceived as exploitatively pursuing their own professional gain. This would suggest that any claims about the total dissolution of the 'inside'/'outside' cultural dichotomy in the era of global media are premature. Under pressure, it is evident that the dominance of Western views and 'traditional' news values in the newsroom continues without major challenge, not least because of the newswire's pro-business orientation. A more innovative, empathetic or advocacy-inclined position is inimical to the 'hard news' demands of this client base.

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None the less, there are signs that the newsroom is becoming more inclusive. Although a revolution in Reuters' position seems out of the question and local dominance seems very distant, the idea of 'whites' dictating descriptions of Africa seems increasingly unpalatable. If Kenyans are still subordinate, the space for debate is at least open. It may be that a slow and sometimes uncomfortable synthesis is emerging.

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## **Notes**

1. In April 2008, Reuters was acquired by the consortium Thomson and became Thomson Reuters. However, this paper follows near-universal custom and refers to the newswire as 'Reuters' throughout.
2. These are *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Financial Times*.

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3. In the *Guardian* website archive, for example, a search of 'Kenya' in October and November 2007, prior to the election violence, returns a result of approximately 50–60 articles per month. In January 2008, there was four times that number—with 202 articles. In February 2008, the coverage remained high, with 113. By March, it had dropped again to 61.
4. The size and composition of the news team fluctuates from day to day as stringers from the field come and go and journalists follow stories in and out of the field. In the text and television sides of the newsroom combined, there were on average eight full-time journalists and an additional eight stringers in the office at the time of this research.
5. These are not listed as some journalists chose to speak off the record and the identity of their outlet would make them easily recognisable.
6. Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Somaliland, Tanzania, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and Seychelles. The bureau also provides supplementary reporting on South Sudan and East Congo on an *ad hoc* basis, owing to their geographic proximity.
7. Each of the 14 countries covered has at least one stringer in the field; with more in the countries perceived to be of greater financial or hard news significance. In total, Cawthorne noted an estimated 24 stringers in the text network, and a comparable number working for the TV side. These stringers range from working nearly full time for the wire, through to those who file very occasionally.

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