

## Headlines not an investment guide

Like do-gooder celebrities out to save the continent, this whole maneno of Africa's bad image in the media just won't go away. A recent debate made me sit up for a moment:

By [Andrea Bohnstedt](#) 11 Jun 2012

First, an article on '[How not to write about Africa](#)' (with a nod to Binyavanga Wainaina) by Laura Seay. She is an assistant professor of political sciences in the US and I occasionally read her blog posts and follow her on Twitter for analysis on the DRC. I absolutely hated her first sentence of her article, 'It's hard out here for us old Africa hands' - it sounded like a gin-sodden expose on the unruly natives on a coffee farm would follow. But the rest of the article was a lot more interesting, looking at superficial Africa reporting littered with stereotypes:

'Many Africa correspondents file stories that fall prey to pernicious stereotypes and tropes that dehumanize Africans. (...) Western reporting on Africa is often fraught with factual errors, incomplete analysis, and stereotyping that would not pass editorial muster in coverage of China, Pakistan, France, or Mexico. (...) To Africa-watchers, there is a clear double standard for journalistic quality, integrity, and ethics when it comes to reporting on the continent.' Western media houses, she says, assign too few resources to their Africa coverage, using a limited number of (Western) foreign correspondents who can only parachute into countries rather than properly understand them. Partly due to language barriers, correspondents rely on the same small group of fixers or NGOs, both of which limit and possibly distort their coverage.

All good points. Except when she was asking for nuanced reporting, this wasn't a wholly nuanced analysis either. And a journalist promptly got back to her. The GlobalPost's senior correspondent Tristan McConne said: 'Lumping all foreign correspondents together as dumb racists is a quick route to the moral high ground but it's also a cheap rhetorical trick. Of course, some reporters are sloppy with their facts and sloppy in their attitudes. Some do still turn up in Africa with their heads full of misconceived notions of the heart of darkness and atavistic savagery, but to apply this as a generalisation of all is lazy nonsense.' [See the article: [How do journalists write about Africa?](#) ]

I wish he had stopped there rather than attack Seay personally as someone 'who dips a toe in the continent and then pontificates from afar' - Seay is still clearly very competent, very knowledgeable on her area of research, and willing to get into the complexities of a story for which there really isn't that big a market. But other than that, these are valid points, too. Because it also really depends where you look: if you want to read substance about Africa, there's maybe not enough, but still a lot of good-quality material available.

My reporter friend Kat Houeild - a formidable woman, and a fantastic writer, too - recently had a bit of a grump attack that captured this: 'I'm bored by people who get angrier about images of people starving to death or reports of corruption than the fact it's actually happening. By people who treat all media as the same journalist - a bit like treating all countries as "Africa". Who ignore any reporting on technology, elections, or economics. Those stories are out there. Use google. Who use the same clichés - start with hacks in the sushi or the cocktail bar. Please mention air conditioning. Contrast with flies and description of starving kid. (The last one resonated because I am so tired of NGOs moaning about the middle class drinking cappuccinos in malls. I might actually have to start drinking cappuccinos just to spite them.)

There are many levels to this issue: First, how big is the market for Africa coverage really? International

media houses have demand to meet - which isn't an excuse for shoddy quality, but it probably explains limited resources. And the argument does not leave much scope for the domestic media industry: McConnell and Seay fought over international Africa coverage, but there are also regular complaints from Africa about distorted coverage. Don't like it? Make your own - and do something to improve domestic journalism. Publishing news is very much a digital space now, so whatever you put out is globally available an instant.

And from an investment perspective, do I think this whole image discussion matters? Not so much, I suspect: Yes, negative news stories can convey the impression that it's all crisis and no prospects around here. But even that is nonsense: You can make a lot of money in the most difficult terrains like Somalia and DRC if you know the risks and know how to mitigate them. It essentially depends on your risk appetite. Like Facebook says, it's complicated. A company that's turned off by bad news shouldn't be here anyway. They don't understand the market, and have made no effort to do so if they are deterred by a headline not just in Africa, but anywhere in the world. Investors with a fair chance to survive and thrive know that there's a lot they need to know, and that they won't necessarily pick it up from their local daily.

Source: [allAfrica](#).

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