

Ebola stories divide people into 'others' and US

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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Rwanda's genocide memorials are designed to demonstrate the scale and brutality of the 1994 slaughter. The visitor is overwhelmed by rows of panga-scarred skulls, piles of bones or blood-spattered clothes, the body parts all neatly divided up - skulls on one side, legs on another - so that they can never be put together again; as if to drive home - even prolong - the dehumanisation.

There are few individual stories. Whose skull is this? Who was this child? Does she have a name? Does she have relatives? What is her story? Without names, faces, connections and stories - the stuff that puts life into bones - the shock of numbers wears off quickly.

This stands in sharp contrast to how South Africans dealt with their national trauma. Our Truth and Reconciliation Commission was about storytelling, about re-enacting and recording the individual tales of torture and murder. Every victim and every perpetrator had a name, a face, a family and myriad connections. There are still teams trying to find, identify and piece together bodies, record their stories and give them a proper burial. It was - and is - a process of trying to rehumanise and restore dignity, to victim and perpetrator alike.

US coverage of the outbreak

This difference came to mind as I observed the US media coverage of the outbreak of Ebola during a visit last week. One has to be careful of generalisation, because there was some thoughtful and well-crafted reporting of the outbreak in West Africa and its encroachment into the US, which was mindful of the risks of careless journalism. Not much, but some. One also has to acknowledge that any society is going to give fuller and better coverage of the threat to it rather than others who are far away.

But what was noticeable was that the coverage of the virus in Africa was all about numbers, scale and the speed at which the disease spread. Very little was about real people, very few of the picture captions gave identities to victims, there were few individual stories that humanised those caught up in the trauma. It was as if this was to emphasise that it was happening far away and the sufferers were - by and large - "others", not "us".

When the disease came to the US, initially in just one case, we knew who that person was, his family, the people he had contact with and all of those affected by it. These were real, human victims, people one could identify with and understand that anyone can be caught up in a tragedy like this. We heard their stories, we felt their pain.

With one victim in the US, the media exploded into wall-to-wall, panic-driven hyper-coverage. And it was sobering to see

how the media can contribute to irrational national panic. Schools across two states were closed down, television presenters were asking questions such as whether you could catch this disease from your pets or your swimming pool, and right-wing politicians began to say that the borders might have to be closed to keep out these disease-ridden Africans.

Reporting human stories

Those in the US who were affected by the disease - including medical personnel - were real people with real feelings. Others were just others, dealt with in large groups and with few names, faces, relatives or stories. Stories of the one US case outnumbered stories of thousands of African cases by a ratio of about 10 to one.

There is often debate about whether western coverage of our continent is relentlessly negative, built on stereotypes and quick to report on conflict and disease. This usually leads to suggestions that journalists must be more positive about the continent, which I find unhelpful. I am not so concerned if a report is positive or negative as much as wanting to know if it is insightful, informed and reflects the complexity of real people grappling with tough issues - the way the US or the UK cover themselves. What struck me with most of the Ebola coverage is that the critical difference between useful and harmful coverage is whether we look at numbers and quantities and piles of bones, or we have flesh and blood, families and histories and individuals with faces, stories and connections. Journalism is about providing the latter.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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