

The script of the Western news media

 By [Janine Lazarus](#)

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Are African lives worth a whole lot less than the lives of people in other parts of the world? But more to the point, are African journalists doing a better job than their Western peers in covering the continent?

To my mind, the African media is equally culpable of committing many of the same sins as those reporters who parachute in to crisis spots for a few days, filing reports with neither context nor understanding. How can what can only be described as fair-weather reporting over a few column inches do any kind of justice to the slaughter of innocents?

Ignoring African issues

This was the burning issue I tackled with the CEO of Tangaza Africa Media, Nixon Karithi, and AFP Southern Africa correspondent, Kristen van Schie, on SAfm radio's Media Show hosted by veteran anchor Ashraf Garda. And I didn't have to be asked twice to take part.

It's an issue close to my heart, more so because I've worked as a Media Consultant across the continent for several years and perhaps have more insight into its issues now than I did in my heydays as a news hound.

I spent the first 10 days of this year unwinding in Mpumalanga and hopefully putting paid to what was a tough 2014 from so many respects. I had lost my beloved father, and my mother had spent most of the torrid year in hospital. The lazy rhythm of Wakkerstroom was just what the doctor ordered.

Then came a rude awakening: the shocking news of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris. And so on went the television news - something I had vowed to stay the hell away from while I was on holiday. What horrified me more than the story itself was the fact that this senseless tragedy received way more attention than the deaths of roughly the same number of Nigerians in Borno State.

Millions of people were joined by 40 leaders, all marching in solidarity after the attack on the French satirical publication. But there was barely a murmur in the media after a young girl detonated explosives strapped to her body in a crowded market in Maiduguri.

The question I kept asking myself at that point was why the attacks in France had so thoroughly buried the atrocities in Nigeria. I accepted the fact that the Paris attack touched a nerve with members of the media worldwide, but to my mind, that was no excuse to ignore other parts of the world's worst violence. It was then that I called to mind the utterly horrifying image on Youtube in March 2011 of unarmed women in Cote d'Ivoire being gunned down by the military. They had

gathered to demand that Laurent Gbagbo, the country's then president, step down.

Was the lack of international news coverage in Nigeria or Cote d'Ivoire because they don't fit the bill in terms of news context? Or is it because many of the world's deadliest conflicts - more so those in Africa - reveal something far more sinister?

Elements of a news story

Let's examine for a moment what elements make for a good news story. If we look at proximity - something happening nearby with which people identify - then perhaps wars in Africa are of little interest to the West because they are happening to people too far away.

I don't buy that.

So then what of the practical side of media coverage and the matter of pure logistics? Covering dangerous, remote parts of the world is no easy feat. To my mind, another weak excuse. In this age of connectivity, citizen journalism, mobile phones and rampant social media, less and less remains a secret.

Then how about how 'interesting' a nation is? Large, economically powerful nations are more likely to receive coverage from the international media. A small developing country has little chance of receiving international news coverage - unless something extraordinary happens. I can't help but think of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. As soon as the soldiers left, so did the news cameras.

The element of sensationalism, as much as I'm loathe to admit, also plays a role in news coverage. The crashing of planes into buildings which later collapse is sensational. The slow starvation of entire communities forced to flee from violence may just not be sensational enough.

While not a news value as such, effective governments certainly play a pivotal role in this debate. French president Francois Hollande responded to his country's terrorist attacks with decisiveness. Not so Nigeria's Goodluck Jonathan. Since assuming the presidency in 2010, he has done little to contain Boko Haram. At the time of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, Nigeria's president seemed keener to condemn the Paris attacks than those in his own country.

Whatever the reason for this biased reportage, it's high time that journalists on the continent stopped taking their cue on reporting it from the Western outlets. They need to stop being part of the problem. They must urgently tell Africa's story.

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

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