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They Wanted Journalists to Say ‘Wow’ How NGOs Affect U.S. Media Coverage of Africa

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Seeing Africa Whole: An introduction

And now for some good news out of Africa. Since 1995, the rate of poverty throughout the continent has been falling steadily, and much faster than previously thought, according to a study released in February 2010 by the National Bureau of Economic Research.¹ The death rate of African children under 5 is dropping, with “clear evidence of accelerating rates of decline” in all of sub-Saharan Africa in the past 10 years, according to a study published in June 2010 in *The Lancet* medical journal.² And, in positive news of another sort, Africa is now “among the world’s most rapidly growing economic regions,” according to a study also published in June 2010 by the *McKinsey Quarterly*, the online journal of the international consulting firm.³

To be sure, Africa still contains most of the world’s poorest countries. But these and other indicators suggest that the continent, while beset by many problems, is on a trajectory of progress. Yet images and stories emanating from sub-Saharan Africa continue to portray a region of unending horrors. In June, 2010, for example, *Time* magazine published graphic pictures of a naked Sierra Leonian woman dying in childbirth.⁴ In September, CNN did a story about two young Kenyan boys, 5 and 8, whose family is so poor they are forced to work delivering goats to a slaughterhouse at a pay rate of less than one cent per goat.⁵

Good economic news seems a particularly hard sell, at least outside of the more sophisticated business publications. A survey of Africa coverage in the top 10 U.S. newspapers and magazines⁶ between May and September of 2010 found 245 articles mentioning poverty but only five mentioning GDP growth.⁷ Similarly, a survey of major western television reports on Africa between mid-2008 and mid-2009 by Media Tenor, a media monitoring organization, found that crime and

violence took top billing, but the economy didn't even feature in the top 10 issues.⁸ This occurred despite the fact that 2008 was a strong year for sub-Saharan Africa, whose GDP grew 5 percent to \$1.6 trillion⁹—spurred by advances in many sectors, not just natural resources—even as U.S. GDP growth dropped to zero.¹⁰

There are many causes for the disconnect between the data and the images that are prevalent in U.S. reporting on Africa, but one that may play a bigger role than generally recognized is that of international organizations such as UN agencies and western-based NGOs. Such organizations are dedicated to eliminating the very real problems that exist on the continent, and owing to the nature of their work, understandably tend to focus not on what has been accomplished but on how much remains to be done. As a practical matter, aid providers also need to attract funding to address the issues and to pay the costs of their organizations.

This leads to a situation in which there are incentives to present as gloomy a picture of Africa as possible in order to keep the attention and the money flowing, and to enlist journalists in disseminating that picture. In combination, these factors can result in distorted news coverage.

Some NGO leaders are acutely aware of the dilemma, and say they do their best to avoid exploitative presentations of the continent. An organization's message "has to be aligned with your mission and core values," says former CARE president and CEO Peter Bell.¹¹

But critics say that the pressure to tell a dramatic story is often intense. "They wanted journalists to say 'Wow'—they want them to quote your report," says Kenyan Rasna Warah, speaking of her former job at a UN agency in Nairobi,

which she left to pursue a writing career. “That means more money for the next report. It’s really as cynical as that.”¹²

Western journalists, for reasons ranging from a desire to get a good story to a need for practical assistance, “scarcely question aid organizations,” according to Dutch journalist Linda Polman in her 2010 book *The Crisis Caravan*. Writing from first-hand experience covering several African conflicts, she describes her colleagues as routinely following the lead of press-savvy aid groups on topics such as war victims and refugees. “Aid organizations are businesses dressed up like Mother Teresa,” she writes, “but that’s not how reporters see them.”¹³

Africans readily concede that there continue to be terrible conflicts and instances of human suffering on the continent. “Africa presents an ugly face way too often,” says Sunny Bindra, a management consultant and columnist in Kenya. But what’s lacking, critics like Bindra say, is context and breadth of coverage, so that outsiders can see the continent whole. “There are famines; they’re not made up,” Bindra says. “There are arrogant leaders. But most of the journalism that’s done doesn’t challenge anyone’s thinking.”¹⁴

This has implications for both U.S. government and U.S. business decisions. Top U.S. officials responsible for Africa policy who begin their days with media summaries focusing disproportionately on Africa’s problems are unlikely to see the continent’s potential. “The imagining around aid is clearly not in terms of mutual interests,” says Nicolas van de Walle, a government professor at Cornell. He adds, “The welfare model is still dominant on the Hill and in [Secretary of State] Hillary Clinton’s world.”¹⁵

In a similar way (though this may be starting to change as a result of heightened interest in the continent by China, India and other competitors) many American

corporate officials continue to view Africa as a place not for business but for charity. There is “no question” that Africa is getting richer, says Catherine Duggan, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School, citing among other indicators a rapidly growing middle class. But, she told a recent Africa forum, the perception among U.S. executives is still that “Africa is where you put your money once you’ve made it somewhere else.”¹⁶

It would be wrong to say that Americans’ skewed view of Africa is all the fault of NGOs, or all the fault of journalists. But both bear some responsibility for the current state of affairs—as, some would argue, does the American public.

Michael Maren, a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya who went on to become an aid worker in Somalia and then to write a biting account of his experiences in *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, asks, “What do Africans do? They starve. But mostly they starve in our imaginations.” He adds, “The starving African...serves as a handy object of our charity. He is evidence that we have been blessed, and we have an obligation to spread that blessing.”¹⁷

To get beyond this kind of thinking requires us to see Africa as it really is, not as viewed through our own interests. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer, spoke to this in a recent essay in which he talked of the “moral danger” of indulging in sensationalism about Africa. What distinguishes a moral observer from one who is not, he wrote, “can best be put in one phrase: the presence or absence of respect for the human person.”¹⁸

How It All Began: The Africa that never was

The current U.S. media images of Kenya, and of Africa as a whole, have been a long time in the making—and certainly didn’t start with today’s NGOs or

journalists. Rather, they are products of a frame of reference and a frame of mind that date back to the European explorers who ventured down and eventually around the continent at the same time that Christopher Columbus was sailing to the New World.

Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, the continent's most famous novel, explores these early western attitudes to Africa—what he calls the “profound perception of alienness”—in his 2009 book of essays, *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. “This perception problem is not in its origin the result of ignorance, as we are sometimes inclined to think,” Achebe writes. “At least, it is not ignorance entirely, or even primarily. It was in general a deliberate invention devised to facilitate two gigantic historical events: the Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of Africa by Europe, the second event following closely on the heels of the first, and the two together stretching across almost half a millennium from about A.D. 1500.”¹⁹

In the essay, Achebe refers to a 1970 study by Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, two American academics, who found that early reports from British voyagers were “matter-of-fact” descriptions that portrayed Africans as “shrewd traders and skillful bargainers.” But with the rise of the slave trade, they write, the tone and content changed: “African behavior, institutions, and character were not merely disparaged but presented as the negation of all human decencies.” In such circumstances, “Enslavement of such a degraded people was thus not only justifiable but even desirable.”²⁰

Henry M. Stanley, the first American journalist to send back dispatches from Africa, credits the accounts of one such European voyager as having provided his introduction to the continent. Stanley, Welsh by birth but a resident of the

U.S. from a young age, was hired by the *New York Herald* in 1869 to “find” Dr. David Livingstone, a medical missionary and explorer in Eastern Africa.

In *How I Found Livingstone*, a book-length account of his successful trip, Stanley begins by recalling his expectations of Zanzibar, an island off the coast of East Africa that was the jumping off spot for his trip. His conception of the island, he says, “was that it was but a little better than a great sandbar...populated by ignorant blacks, with great thick lips, whose general appearance might be compared to Du Chaillu’s gorillas, who were ruled over by a despotic and surly Arab.”²¹

In fact, he says, “the keenest observation failed to detect any great difference” between Africans’ nature and his own.²² But in his writings about this trip and his later travels in the Congo, Stanley portrayed Africa as a place of brutality, mystery and terror.

Even today, such views of Africa, together with romantic recollections of Kenya as a kind of Paradise Lost (for white westerners), continue to shape the mindset of Europeans and Americans approaching Kenya for the first time. Browse through the Africa section of any bookstore in Nairobi frequented by western tourists or expatriates and you will find ample copies of *Out of Africa*, a memoir of Kenya by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) of Denmark, and *The White Masai*, by Corinne Hoffman, a Swiss woman who married a Samburu tribesman from northern Kenya, along with old chestnuts like *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, but very few if any of the numerous memoirs, novels and historical accounts written by Africans.

The books that western aid workers and journalists read help to create the images they arrive with, along with ideas of what they will find. These, in turn,

influence what they look for and what they think they are seeing once they are there. “It starts when they get on the plane to go to Africa,” says Rasna Warah, the former UN employee, who is now a columnist for Kenya’s leading daily. “It doesn’t matter where they’re going—Ethiopia, Senegal, wherever; it’s just Africa.”²³

“Children Starving, Mothers Dying”: Why NGOs in Africa need the media

U.S. aid to sub-Saharan Africa more than quadrupled in inflation-adjusted terms over the 10 years starting in 1999, reaching more than \$10 billion in 2008.²⁴ Africa now represents one-third of total U.S. aid, as compared to under 10 percent in the 1970s, according to Nicolas van de Walle, the Cornell government professor.²⁵

NGOs have grown even faster than the aid budget. Van de Walle says that in the early 1980s it was typical for a country in Africa to have three or four international NGOs like the Red Cross or Oxfam, but now that same country will likely have 250. Kenya, for example, has a total of 6,500 registered western and local NGOs,²⁶ which contribute over \$1 billion a year to the Kenyan economy.²⁷

Just why NGOs grew so much and so fast is a matter of some debate. In a 2008 *Foreign Policy* article, authors Michael A. Cohen, Maria Figueroa Kupcu, and Prag Khanma cited “the growing reluctance of rich countries to route aid through corrupt foreign officials” as one reason why the amount of aid dispersed using NGOs as agents more than tripled during the 1990s.²⁸

A more complex narrative is offered by Professor Macharia Munene, a Kenyan historian. As Munene sees it, what he terms “aid addition” was always viewed

by western governments as a means of continuing their control of colonized peoples and their resources. Originally, this aid was channeled through a country's often-corrupt leaders, but when these leaders proved too unpopular, according to Munene, newly-formed NGOs took over. "First came the territorial colonialists, then the neo-colonialists, and now, since 1980s, the West continues colonialism in other ways through the World Bank, the IMF and the NGOs," Munene says.²⁹

Those engaged with NGOs dispute such characterizations. Peter Bell, the former president of CARE and now a senior research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Hauser Center, says that CARE's main concern is to help poor people gain power over their lives. During his 10 years at CARE, he says, "I came to think of the advance of human rights, including social and economic rights, as being at the heart of development." He also notes that the percentage of CARE's funding that comes from the U.S. government has been dropping, and now stands at about 40 percent.³⁰

The writers of the *Foreign Policy* article, while they have serious criticisms of NGOs (most notably that their presence deepens countries' dependency on outsiders), credit the NGOs with tackling "challenges that donors and developing-country governments either ignore or have failed to address properly."³¹ Those sentiments are shared by many Kenyans. A 2008 poll conducted by Afrobarometer, a research organization, found that 58 percent of urban dwellers believed that international donors and NGOs "help somewhat" or "help a lot," while only 25 percent felt they help "a little bit" or "do nothing."³²

David Makali, head of the East African Editors' Guild, says that in the 80s and early 90s, NGOs that focused on public issues "helped the media to grow, and helped investigative journalism by supplying documents and research." He also applauds them for developing concern about human rights. "The NGOs first created a need and then built the capacity," he says.³³

But whatever their motives and value, NGOs now face changing global conditions that could bring new pressures on their African operations. Martin Dawes, a former BBC reporter who is UNICEF regional communication advisor for West and Central Africa, says that his organization is starting to phase out its traditional programs in some areas of the world, notably Asia, as the need for their services declines. That leaves Africa as the chief focus of the aid community. Dawes predicts that "within about 10 years, 70 percent of all aid money will be spent in Africa."³⁴

This is likely to increase the number of African critics who question not just the role of NGOs and international agencies but the whole aid model of development. One such critic is Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian-born economist who worked for Goldman Sachs as well as the World Bank. In *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*, published in 2009, Moyo argues that "the notion that aid can alleviate systemic poverty, and has done so, is a myth."³⁵

Moyo is joined by Professor Michael Chege, a Kenyan economist and government adviser. "Africa has received more in external aid than the Marshall Plan," he notes. "But you have to ask what good it has done." In Chege's opinion, the solution for Kenya and other African countries is to move away from aid and instead encourage foreign direct investment.³⁶

In the U.S., NYU economist William Easterly has been perhaps the most visible critic of aid, largely thanks to his 2006 book, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. "The thing that really bothers me about aid is that it still does have a paternalistic mindset," says Easterly (whose critics accuse him, in turn, of being too pro-markets). "I've read a lot of colonial era documents about development and I see a lot of continuity. Racism is not as bad as 50 years ago. But there is still an awful lot of patronizing language." He adds, "They use words like 'empower' but who is actually going to make the decisions? The aid givers."³⁷

The increased focus on Africa predicted by Dawes is also likely to increase pressure on NGOs, for competitive reasons, to paint Africa in the worst possible light. It is not a game that every NGO is prepared to play. Peter Bell, the former CEO of CARE, recalls that after concluding that "no one was going to be moved" by a proposed series of fund-raising infomercials "without the 'starving baby' at the end," he decided against the campaign. "It's true that starving babies are part of the reality but we want to be respectful of human dignity," Bell says.³⁸

But other NGO officials say that even if they don't like to portray Africa as a basket case, they often feel they have little alternative, whether their funding comes from the public or from government donors. "When you're fundraising you have to prove there is a need," says the head of the Kenya office of a large U.S.-based NGO that receives substantial USAID money. "Children starving, mothers dying. If you're not negative enough, you won't get funding."³⁹

Dr. Nawal Nour, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, told a recent conference that when, on a trip to Eastern Africa, she urged the local head of an NGO campaigning against female circumcision to avoid the word "mutilation"

because it is offensive to local people, the woman told her, "If we don't use 'mutilation' we won't get the money" from donors.⁴⁰

So fierce is the competition for funds, according to an official of a Nairobi-based organization that provides data on Somalia's food situation, that many NGOs don't want to hear good news. After the organization reported that a 2010 bumper harvest in Somalia had reduced the number of severely hungry people, "I was told by several NGOs and UN agencies that the report was too positive," the official recalls. "Some of the donors were happy; they felt their money was producing results. But the NGOs would say, 'No, we need funding.'" In one case, recalls the official, who along with the NGO official doesn't want to be identified because of the sensitivity of their positions, the head of an organization based in Somalia sent out a press release with inflated numbers about the situation in one area of the country. "I saw him later at a meeting and I said to him, 'Why did you do it?'" the official recalls. "He said, 'Because we want funds for that region.'"⁴¹

From Cassava to the "Starving African": How U.S. media came to rely on NGOs in Africa

Susan Linnee's career as a journalist began not long after the wave of African independence in the 1960s. And during much of that period she has worked in Africa, including serving between 1996 and 2004 as AP bureau chief in Nairobi, where she continues to live today.

Linnee's first encounter with the continent was two years spent in Rwanda in the late 1960s, during part of which she worked for the European governments' development office. "It was a wonderful time, very exciting," she says. "People were making a huge move from a traditional society" into the modern world. As Linnee recalls it, the notion of development at that time was not one of

overcoming poverty but rather of stages of economic growth. “It was just the beginning of aid,” she recalls. “UNDP was just starting. Everything was experimental. The thought was that people needed skills.”⁴²

Through most of the 1960s, reflecting the mood described by Linnee, U.S. coverage of Africa’s newly independent countries was relatively upbeat (with the notable exception of events surrounding the overthrow of Congo Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba). Prof. Munene recalls, “The image of Kenya was very positive at the time of independence and through the 1960s, maybe partly because of the Cold War” (in which Kenya was a dependable U.S. ally).⁴³

But even then there was plenty to criticize, according to William Attwood, an editor before and after his stint as U.S. Ambassador to Kenya between 1964-1966. In his memoir, *The Reds and the Blacks*, he describes western journalists as uninformed about the country and notes how often they were “taken in by unreconstructed whites” who offered dire predictions about the country’s future.⁴⁴

(The prospect of imminent chaos remains a common journalistic gambit. In early 2010, *The Economist* began an article about Kenya, which had experienced post-election violence two years before, as follows:

“We are sharpening our pangas [machetes]’ says a man in a jam-packed matatu, the ubiquitous minibus taxi that is Kenya’s main means of public transport. ‘It is not if but when’ is the commonest answer to the question, ‘Will political violence resume?’”⁴⁵

The piece, which did not identify those making such chilling predictions, proved remarkably unprescient, at least in the short term; Kenyans went to the polls

again later in the year and, in a peaceful referendum, approved a new Constitution.)

According to Linnee, the key event that altered coverage of Africa from a traditional emphasis on politics to today's more familiar focus on social ills was the Biafran War. That war, which began in 1967, involved an ultimately unsuccessful effort by the eastern section of Nigeria to become independent. As part of the Biafran effort to win support in Europe and the U.S., western sympathizers, including in particular Irish priests working in the region, fed the media heart-breaking accounts of atrocities and starvation (some of them challenged then or later) that helped make Biafra into a cause célèbre.

"Biafra was one anvil on which journalists' ideas were formed," says Linnee. "Biafra was the first time there was talk of human rights, and there was a lot of concern for political prisoners." Among the organizations that grew out of westerners' experiences during the Biafran War was Medecins sans Frontiers, whose chief founder, Bernard Kouchner, was until recently the French foreign minister.

As late as the early 1980s, when she was working in West Africa, Linnee says, aid organizations were not interested in selling their story to the public, and in fact most foreign aid programs were hostile to journalists. "Everything was done through governments at that time," she says. "Just getting information was hard."

To most American editors, she says, that wasn't a big problem because they weren't very interested in Africa news anyway, as evidenced by the fact that at one point, AP had no correspondent in West Africa for four years. "AP had no idea what they wanted," she says. "So I wrote what I was interested in" — which,

she recalls, included a piece that told readers everything there was to know about cassava.

(Lack of interest is still the norm, according to Ethan Zuckerman, a senior researcher at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. He told an interviewer for the website Memeburn.com that he developed Media Cloud, a map of the news flow generated by 10,000 media sources, in 2003 after observing the paucity of coverage of Africa.⁴⁶)

By the early 1980s, the shift in journalists' framework that Linnee and others date to the Biafran War—from development to what are often referred to as humanitarian issues—was already underway. The response to the Ethiopian famine that started in roughly 1984 was both a result of this shift and a major catalyst for further changes.

Ethiopia, like all countries whose economies are largely based on subsistence farming, has had periodic draughts that in some cases have caused widespread famine. The difference in 1984 was that a BBC reporter, aided by a Kenyan cameraman, offered a vivid account to the British public that called the famine "biblical" in scope. The program prompted a huge western relief effort, including pop star Bob Geldof's Live Aid concerts.⁴⁷

The famine was not just a product of natural causes. As has emerged in the years since, the Ethiopian famine, like many such events, resulted from a complicated interplay of natural and political causes, in Ethiopia's case having to do with the government's desire to block assistance to rebel areas.

But the template was set. Since Ethiopia, the "starving African" story has become a mainstay of western journalism. Recalling the coming of television cameras,

followed by the introduction of satellite technology, Linnee comments, “By 1996 you had a 24-hour news cycle. And television needed something that moves.” Moreover, she says, “When you can have people talking to you from the center of a disaster, the disaster becomes more interesting...Technology and television led to the growth of NGOs. People wanted to know: What can we do to help?” Linnee also notes that with the decline of the Soviet Union and the attendant focus on victims of Communism, both journalists and activists “could turn their attention to Africa.”

The “starving African” story shows no signs of losing its appeal. According to a study of humanitarian relief coverage done by Steven S. Ross, an associate professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, in the five years between 1998 and 2003 the number of stories about famine in Africa in the NEXIS all-news library more than tripled, from 584 to 1,779 (faster than child mortality but slower than stories about AIDS, which made up the bulk of the growing aid coverage).⁴⁸ More recently, a May-September 2010 survey of the top 10 U.S. newspapers and magazines found 128 stories that mentioned famine, malnutrition or hunger. (By way of comparison, there were nine stories reporting the positive news on child mortality contained in the *Lancet* study.)⁴⁹

The Columbia study, sponsored by the U.S.-based Fritz Institute and the Reuters Foundation, included a survey of 290 journalists. It found that North American respondents were more likely than their counterparts elsewhere to mention, as reasons to run a story, having readers of the same background as those suffering and the involvement of aid workers from the readership or viewership area, while compelling visuals were mentioned by a third of all respondents.

One reporter who has had experience covering humanitarian events for both print and broadcast is Donatella Lorch, who was Nairobi bureau chief of *The New York Times* from 1992-96 and subsequently a correspondent for NBC. She recalls that after a stint as an aid worker in Afghanistan, she was hired by *The New York Times* as a stringer and later put on staff in New York. After repeated requests for a foreign assignment, she was finally sent to Africa. “The editors thought of it as a quiet backwater, a place for a greenhorn,” she says. “And I didn’t mind roughing it.”⁵⁰

(Susan Chira, the current foreign editor of the *Times*, says that in Lorch’s time this was indeed the case, “the reasoning being that it was a great place to learn the ropes, learn about how central logistics are to covering a story” and to build writing skills. Today, however, she says that this is no longer true, noting a string of Africa correspondents with previous foreign experience.)⁵¹

While stationed in Nairobi, Lorch says, the bulk of her time was spent covering war and famine in Somalia and the Rwanda genocide, often with the aid of NGOs. “Basically the only time I got space was for Somalia and Rwanda,” she says. With regard to NGOs, she says, she noticed a big change from Afghanistan. There, she had found a general wariness of reporters; “Now, they actually courted us.” The major reason, she believes, is that “they needed to show their donors their presence.”

Lorch, who is now back living in Nairobi, says that no more than 10 percent of her stories came about as a result of NGO press releases. But she says that with journalists stretched thin—she covered 15 countries for the *Times*—“reporters who go in and out have to depend on people who live there” to fill them in. She asks, “How will anyone know what is going on if not for the NGOs?”

Gwen Thompkins, who has just finished four years as NPR bureau chief in Nairobi, a regional hub for journalists, diplomats and aid organizations, has a somewhat different point of view on NGOs. In her way of thinking, NGOs are like all other protagonists in news stories: They want to shape the audience's perception of what's happening on the ground. And in Nairobi, where expatriate lives co-mingle so readily, it can be all too easy to blur the lines between journalist and NGO. "It's very incestuous," she says, with people going to the same parties and often being married to spouses who work for international organizations. Inevitably, she says, that leads to too much closeness to sources and too many requests for coverage.

Her own inclinations, in any case, she says, were to avoid set pieces on politics or aid and instead to focus on giving listeners a feel for ordinary life in Kenya. "I wanted people at home just to know what it looks like, sounds like, what it smells like," she says, recalling as among her favorite stories one she did on the tea auction in Mombasa and another on two constantly warring tribes in northern Kenya whom she likened to the Hatfields and the McCoys. When her editors wanted a report about a drought in Kenya, instead of opting for the obvious "starving African" story she interviewed the owners of water trucks who were enjoying a brisk business selling water to urban residents whose taps had run dry. "I don't know why people stick to these tropes" (like the starving African), she says. "I think a lot of it is that they lack confidence."⁵²

"A Natural Evolution": Why NGO influence is growing, and some examples of the results

"The press' admiration for aid workers has been genuine and warranted," author and policy analyst David Rieff wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1997. "But there is no

use denying that for the press corps, with the exception of the richest newspapers and television networks who can hire their own vehicles and translators, the international aid organizations have shaped coverage of their own stories.”⁵³

Rieff’s conclusion is even more true now than it was a dozen years ago. In an essay written last year for a series published online by the Nieman Journalism Lab and the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Global Communication, Kimberly Abbott of the International Crisis Group, an NGO with a 2009 budget of \$15.5 million,⁵⁴ discussed two programs that her NGO helped to produce and fund in partnership with *Nightline*. The first, in 2005, was on a conflict in Uganda, and was hosted by actor Don Cheadle, the star of *Hotel Rwanda*.

“This is not how we normally cover the news,” Koppel said in his introduction, as retold by Abbott. “But consider it a case of coordinating interests...Cheadle wanted his wife and daughters to get a sense of the kind of suffering that is so widespread in Africa. The International Crisis Group wanted publicity for what is happening in Uganda. And we, to put it bluntly, get to bring you a riveting story at a greatly reduced expense.”

According to Abbott, Americans are likely to see more such arrangements. “The truth is,” she writes, “versions of such partnerships are happening now in print and broadcast newsrooms across the country, though many are reluctant to discuss them too openly.” This, she says, is a natural evolution of an already strong relationship “in which NGOs are taking on more and more functions of news media in their capacity to gather and manage foreign news.”⁵⁵

Daniel Dickinson, a former BBC reporter who now works as a communications officer for the European Union in Nairobi, has seen how this works first-hand.

“The big difference in the past five to 10 years is the expansion of the Internet,” he says. “Journalists have got to feed these animals. Add to that the financial crash, and more and more internationals are taking the content we offer them.”

Dickinson says that the pieces he writes and films about EU-sponsored projects routinely get picked up and carried virtually as offered by some of the top western media. He doesn’t regard them as p.r., however. “There’s a message in there [about the project] but written in a way that’s journalistic,” he says.⁵⁶

Ben Parker, a founder and head of IRIN, a news agency that is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, is more forthright about Dickinson’s success than Dickinson himself. “He does stories and they’re picked up whole,” Parker says.

IRIN itself can point to many similar successes. Its stories on humanitarian projects, almost invariably well-reported and well-written, appear routinely in local papers in Kenya and, according to Parker, often result in knock-offs by western reporters. “The western media won’t reprint us verbatim,” he says. “But some plagiarize.”

Parker says that at a minimum, many journalists use IRIN stories as a jump-off for their own reporting. “The journalists say, ‘I have an IRIN folder’ or maybe it’s called an idea folder,” he says. “One told me he always goes through it before he goes to a country, in order to get ideas.”⁵⁷

Dickinson’s comments about growing economic pressures are echoed by Lauren Gelfand, an American who is a correspondent in Nairobi for UK-based *Jane’s Defence Weekly*. She says that most journalists she knows string for four or five different news organizations to make ends meet. One result is that they can’t

afford to do complicated or time-consuming stories, thus providing NGOs with more openings to successfully pitch ideas. Gelfand recalls that during a year she took off from journalism to work for Oxfam, she saw that “if reporters were going to cover a development story it had to be easy.” The simplest sell, she says, was a celebrity visit to an aid project, while the hardest was a time-consuming topic like trade or agricultural policy.⁵⁸

Gelfand’s remarks are borne out by academics Simon Cottle and David Nolan in another essay in the Nieman/UPenn series. “Packaging information and images in conformity to the media’s known predilections has now become institutionalized inside aid agencies,” they write.⁵⁹

Gelfand says that her experience at Oxfam helped her to understand just how much attention the NGOs put on getting their story told—and told as they would like it. “All the talking points are carefully worked out,” she says. “It’s a huge bureaucracy and there are as many levels of control as in any government.” Many NGOs refuse to cooperate with media unless they know they’ll be shown in a positive light, she says.

To be fair to the NGOs, Gelfand says, “It’s easier to sell a famine than to effect real, common-sense policy change.” And she says, she continues to believe that most aid workers do what they do because they want to make a difference. Nonetheless, she says, “A lot of what Oxfam does is to sustain Oxfam.”⁶⁰

Lara Pawson, a former BBC Africa correspondent and editor, says that the fact that many UN and NGO press people were once journalists themselves helps to foster receptivity to the aid organizations’ pitches. “The moment one of the big agencies—CARE, Save the Children, Oxfam, and any UN department—produced a report or issued a press release about yet another ‘worst

humanitarian situation' (they are, believe me, always the worst), the team would always want to run the story," she wrote in a blog posting in early 2009. "Various reasons were and still are behind this: it's easy to get an aid worker on the phone (even an ISDN line), they usually speak English, they will be concise, and free, and more often than not they are always willing to speak."⁶¹

Academics Cottle and Nolan also speak to the heavy reliance on western aid officials as sources in their Nieman/UPenn essay. They write: "When we are invited to see the world of disasters and human need through a mediated national prism that splinters the category of global humanity into 'us' and 'them,' 'nationals' and foreigners,' 'active saviors' and 'passive victims,' the active agency of indigenous aid workers (and survivors) is minimized, and a western-led and western-centric view of humanitarianism is reinforced."⁶²

Martin Dawes, the former BBC reporter who now works for UNICEF, puts the case more simply, and throws much of the responsibility back onto the journalists. He says that when there is a disaster, journalists "come to us as aid workers but often don't talk to the government, which is often what we're working through. It means that the chances for Africans to show an engaged response is limited. They are written out of their own story."⁶³

The growing pressures on both NGOs and journalists have combined to produce many cases in which inflated or dubious numbers have been cited by aid organizations and routinely picked up by journalists. One recent such case involves a poor neighborhood in Nairobi called Kibera. Between 2004 and 2008, mentions of Kibera as the "biggest" or "largest" slum in Africa in the Nexis "major world publications" library rose from 34 to 126, then dropped back to 70 in 2009 but rose again to 83 for the first 10 months of 2010.⁶⁴ Many of the stories

cited one or another of the several hundred NGOs or international organizations working there. Typical was an article that appeared on the Huffington Post in 2009 headlined “Urban Farming in Kibera,” which described Kibera as home to anywhere “from 700,000 to a million people” and discussed a vegetable-growing project supported by western donors.⁶⁵

Recently, however, the results of Kenya’s 2009 census were released; according to the official tally, Kibera has 194,269 residents.⁶⁶ A September 2010 story in the *Daily Nation*, Kenya’s largest daily, noted that the census data were more in line with a recent study done by an Italian academic than with those routinely cited by various government and NGO officials and in the international press.⁶⁷

Rasna Warah, the Kenyan columnist, wrote in the *Daily Nation* that she was “among those people who have published inflated population estimates for Kibera without having any solid evidence to back up the figures.” This, she said, occurred while she was working for an international NGO that got its data from UN-Habitat, where she had also worked. She said that sometime after 2004, population estimates for Kibera started to rise, and “Before we knew it, the figure spread like a virus...However, even within UN Habitat, there was no consensus on what the actual figure might be.” She added, “The inflated figures were not challenged, perhaps because they were useful to various actors...They were particularly useful to NGOs, which used them to ‘shock’ charities and other do-gooders into donating more money to their projects in Kibera.”⁶⁸

Questionable figures of another sort are to be found in UN and NGO reports on the Millennium Development Goals, a series of UN targets on poverty reduction and other measures of well-being. UN officials have repeatedly described sub-Saharan Africa as failing miserably; for example, the Associated Press in 2007

quoted UN General Assembly President Srgjan Kerim as saying that “in sub-Saharan Africa we may not achieve a single goal by 2015. This is indeed an emergency situation.”⁶⁹ A search of “all major publications” in Lexis/Nexis shows that between January 1 and November 11, 2010, there were 729 articles containing the words “MDGs,” “Africa” and some variation on “failure.”⁷⁰

William Easterly, the NYU economist, argued in a 2008 paper done under the auspices of the Brookings Institution that the MDGs are so ambitious that it is virtually certain that African countries cannot achieve them. To meet the poverty reduction goal of halving the poverty level between 1990 and 2015, he wrote, all of Africa would have to experience an annual rate of growth of seven percent in the final 10 years of the challenge—a sustained level almost without precedent.⁷¹ Easterly also took up this theme in an op-ed in *The Los Angeles Times* in 2007 in which he wrote that school enrollments are growing faster in Africa than at a comparable period in western development; nonetheless, he noted, the continent won’t meet the MDG goal of universal primary school enrollment by 2015.”⁷²

In his Brookings paper, Easterly raised the possibility that the goals had been intentionally set in the way they were out of a “desire to draw more attention to Africa, raise more foreign aid resources, and spur other actions to solve Africa’s problems.” But, he said, the result “generates a more negative picture than is justified” and is both demoralizing to Africans and a likely disincentive to foreign investment.

Easterly’s comments were echoed by Jan Vandemoortele, one of the architects of the MDGs, in a 2009 paper in the journal *Development Policy Review*.

Vandemoortele wrote that the MDGs were intended as global targets, but had been improperly applied to individual countries and regions. “It is a real tragedy

when respectable progress in Africa is reported as a failure by international organizations and external observers,” Vendemoortele wrote. He added, “It is unacceptable that targets are set and metrics are selected so as to present Africa as a failure, solely to gain support for a particular agenda, strategy or argument.”⁷³

Nonetheless, when the UN met in September 2010 to assess progress on the MDGs, the reporting continued to reflect only the framework of failure. The *Washington Post* quoted UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as saying, “Many countries are falling short, especially in Africa,”⁷⁴ while an article in *The Los Angeles Times* quoted an Oxfam report as saying, “Unless an urgent rescue package is developed to accelerate fulfillment of all the MDGs, we are likely to witness the greatest collective failure in history.”⁷⁵

Biting back: How Africa is telling its own story

While the Internet and new media may be putting pressure on journalists to produce yet more and faster stories, thus increasing the influence of international agencies and NGOs, Ben Parker of IRIN says that in the long run, he thinks new technology will help Africa to take charge of its own destiny. This is already evident in the case of aid programs, he says. “Through the web, beneficiaries can speak and evaluate programs.”⁷⁶

This optimism is echoed by Glenda Cooper, a British journalist who is also an associate member of Nuffield College, Oxford. In a research paper written in 2007 and updated in an essay for the Neiman/UPenn series, Cooper described some of the ways that people in developing countries are using the web and new media to present their own versions of the news. As one example, she cites Ushahidi, a Kenyan-generated technology used to map incidents of violence in

the post-2007 election violence, with people reporting in via text-messaging, phone or email. She quotes Ory Okolloh, one of Ushahidi's founders, as saying, "We were able to raise awareness (and for that matter learn of) a lot of the local peace initiatives that the mainstream media really wasn't reporting."

Cooper also cites the use of cell phones as another form of citizen journalism. "I am convinced the next big citizen journalism story could come out of Africa because of the mobile phone," she writes.⁷⁷ In Kenya, a country of just under 40 million people, there are about 20 million mobile phones, and at least one media company is already experimenting with having mobile users send in photos and texts from news events.

Kenyans are also using more traditional technologies, but in new ways, to get their own version of the news out. Salim Amin is the founder of A24, an agency that packages and sells video news stories from around the continent. "Al Jazeera has been a success because it presented a different picture of the Middle East" from that available through western media, he says. "We realized from that that we have to do it ourselves." According to Amin, his company broke even in terms of covering expenses after only 16 months of operation, although it has yet to pay back all its capital investment.

In the first half of 2010, according to Amin, 70 percent of A24's sales were to African broadcasters. But he's targeting all domestic stations around the world as well, which he defines as those that are not CNN or its equivalent. In the U.S., he says, there are between 1,000 and 1,500 such stations. "A24 will still tell the negative stories, but it will tell them from an African perspective and with African context," he says.

Amin says that his company sometimes uses raw footage from NGOs, but that NGOs don't have a say in how the footage will be used. "If, for example, we want to do a general piece about water issues, maybe we will use material from an NGO that's working on a water project," he says. "But we will shape the story."⁷⁸

In the end, the biggest single thing that will change the way Africa is covered in the West is probably not initiatives like A24 or any alterations in how NGOs and journalists operate, but rather changes—particularly business growth—in Africa itself. Sunny Bindra, the Kenyan management consultant and columnist, recalls the sudden escalation of interest in Japan in the 1980s as the country grew into an economic powerhouse. "Japan got attention because it was whacking the U.S.," he says. "It's the same with India and China now. Now you're beginning to see stories asking whether there is something about India's ancient traditions that make them such good managers."⁷⁹

There are also things that American journalists can do, even with shrinking resources, to ensure that they present a fuller and more accurate picture of Africa. One is to be more skeptical of all sources, as Dutch author Linda Polman urges. Another is to educate themselves on how to find and understand data on issues such as health and income that are available through African think tanks, academics and similar sources rather than to depend so heavily on aid organizations.

Probably the most important thing is to follow the example of reporters like NPR's Gwen Thompkins and look for stories that don't conform to existing stereotypes—stories like *The Washington Post's* 2005 profile of a girls' high school in Kenya that brought out both the funny and the serious sides of tribalism, or

like the *Post's* 2008 story on Africa's growing middle class that featured a Ugandan entrepreneur with a BlackBerry and a taste for organic greens.

Getting the space for such stories, however, requires support from editors who often have preconceived ideas of their own. Journalists frequently complain that their bosses are interested mainly in conflict and "fad" topics like child soldiers, with little enthusiasm for stories that deviate from established story lines. (They are not alone: quips a State Department press officer with lengthy experience in Africa, "I imagine a screenplay where editors and 'unnamed, senior State Department officials' learn from each other about how to interpret the world while discussing policy minutiae over drinks at a hotel bar."⁸⁰)

And finally, Chinua Achebe's words on the importance of "respect for the human person" offer guidance for both journalists and NGOs. A sick African woman in labor should not be treated as poverty porn. Residents of African countries should not have to starve in order to make it onto the evening news. And an aid organization need not be involved in order to create a newsworthy event. Africa has one billion people with one billion stories, but most of them are yet to be told.

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Note: all interviews were conducted between April and November, 2010.

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