

How to Write About Africa by Binyavanga Wainaina – How Far Have We Come?

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Nearly two decades after Binyavanga Wainaina's satirical essay *How to Write About Africa* was published to African glee and Western discomfort, its subject-matter continues to reverberate with increased significance.

Wainaina's *How to Write About Africa* is the titular essay of a 2006 anthology that confronted Western preconceptions about Africa that seemed to be fundamental to how that part of the world chooses to perceive Africa and its people. The essay reads as an instruction to Western writers and others who interact with Africa to pursue clichéd references to dirt, indecency and poverty, exaggerate the political state of affairs and present without critiquing what Westerners are doing to help.

The irony of the essay is apparent enough to have one cringe but also bears the unpleasantness of naked truth. It is well-established that Western observers usually withhold from Africans and Africa the dignity, grace and good-faith critique they avail among themselves.

The mistreatment of African students escaping the dangers of war in Ukraine is an example of the indignity Wainaina satirizes. What goes even more to the heart of the writer's was that Western reporters and TV anchors did not shy away from sympathizing with Ukraine especially because it was not "some third-world country".

What Wainaina revealed was not novel but that was not the point; the point was that he sounded like a man fed up with the condescension and ignorance he had grown used to.

He did not care anymore. He knew all too well what any Western coverage of his home and people would look like and *How to Write About Africa* could as well have been called *Do Your Worst*.

Wainaina's ironical piece also masked a sense of hope that well-meaning writers would be inspired to do better.

In 2019, a job posting by the *New York Times* for an East Africa Bureau Chief said it hoped whoever got the job would "delight our readers with unexpected stories of hope" from that part of the continent. So much chagrin was provoked by this advertisement and it forced an admission of guilt from the *New York Times* international editor.

For a 2015 piece on environmental conditions and prospects of economic growth in Africa, *The Economist* decided to go with a catchy question for a social media caption. The publication settled on "Could this insect be largely responsible for Africa's underdevelopment?". The article itself was titled "How an insect held back a continent" but the paper continues to stand by both captions

It appeared as if that ad by the *New York Times* took Wainaina's instructions rather literally. The framing of "positive" news as "unexpected stories of hope" seemed to have been motivated by associating Africa with, in Wainaina's words, "Primordial" and "Darkness". Good news in Africa was akin to finding an oasis in the "Desert".

On the other hand, *The Economist* sacrificed a nuanced analysis of Africa's underdevelopment and all its external causes, on the altar of selling news content. The editors then simply tapped into the pre-existing narrative of misery of Africa.

The indiscretions by the *New York Times* and *The Economist* have not been the last by a powerhouse in the Western media industry. But there is clearly a cause for worry when a lot more similar mistakes (or intentional commitments) come to mind. The depths from which these offensive references come have been shown to be anti-black racism and colonial hierarchy of epistemologies where Africans are not only charged with falling short of white supremacy but their home is perceived through imperial lenses.

A result of this dynamic is what many on the continent would recognize from the 1990s into the early 2000 – the presence of reporters in Africa who were neither African nor lived there. As wars broke in a few East and West African spots during this period, the world witnessed the reports and saw who the reporters were and those who lived the strife could only guess what was going out to the world.

The inability of overwhelming number of African media houses to orchestrate cross-border news coverage in Africa is itself is chiefly due to financial constraints. It is difficult to pretend it is more than that because the other components of news making, i.e. talent, crew and logistics supervene on the availability funds.

So much is also said about journalism bringing what is unknown to the light but we rarely entertain inquiries into the biases of the storyteller as well as the conditions necessary for the truth to emerge.

As seen above in the example drawn from *The Economist*, the nature of the modern news industry is that it is supposed to be sold at a profit. A Pew Research survey from 2021 said that for more than 50 years, newspapers in the US have made more money from advertising than from circulation. Without a doubt, we know that news content just acts as a conveyor belt for corporations and their products

Money as a precondition for the truth to emerge and be known by all is a problem. If we conduct an inquiry into the motivations of Western editors commissioning stories in Africa, what are we to expect?

Are we to expect nuanced and sensible coverage of the continent? Or are we to expect what keeps Western audiences glued? These questions will require thorough analyses.

In the last decade, with technological innovation that makes storytelling easier, there are opportunities for Africans to centre their narratives to counter Western media reportage. Large-scale and micro blogging have raised a generation of independent reporters who can now broadcast to the world.

Incidentally within this period too, we have seen a marked increment of Africans writing and reporting for Western media.

Indeed, it is not only Western media houses that have expanded bases in Africa. There are now media owned and operated by China, Turkey and a few Gulf States who employ and commission a considerable number of African talents.

Admittedly, bigger platforms have now been provided for positive news about Africa by some of the biggest news providers. The BBC, for instance, expanded *Focus on Africa* with more Africa hosts and put it on the World Service while CNN continues to plug African innovation on *Marketplace Africa*. Deutsche Welle now has a popular youth-oriented magazine show called *The 77 Percent*, taking its name from the number of Africans who are under-35.

“Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated” - Despite these improvements, those who share Wainaina’s frustrations would know the worst is not over. Conversations and action plans will need to continuously revolve around editorial policies and dissemination.

Projecting Africa and Africans must also not proceed from tokenism. The campaigns to put Africa and Africans on the biggest TV networks, newspapers and internet platform must proceed from accepting the fact that Africa and Africans belong in these spots. As a matter of fact, representation and amplification of Africa and Africans is necessary to any sort of “global” conclusions we aim to achieve.

Experts on Africa provides a platform that seeks to help solve part of the problem – where are the experts? In many ways, this takes away a lot of room for excuses.

Experts on Africa Editorial Team