

Local Voices in the Global News Coverage of Kenya and Sudan: De-colonization of Communication Flows, or More of the Same?

Mel Bunce¹

¹University of Oxford, Department of Politics and International Relations, Oxford, United Kingdom

melanie.bunce@politics.ox.ac.uk

In the past twenty years, budget cuts across the foreign news industry have seen the near-demise of Western foreign correspondents posted abroad. In their place, local-national journalists have become increasingly important producers of foreign news. Today, global newswires such as Reuters and AP depend heavily on local nationals to provide their news content - a Ugandan reports on Uganda; an Ethiopian reports on Ethiopia, and so on. Their news stories are then disseminated to audiences around the world.

The trend to hire local-nationals to provide foreign news has been hailed by some commentators as a necessary and positive step towards the de-colonization of international communication flows. But to what extent are these 'new entrants' able to challenge traditional representations of Africa? Is their presence changing how Africa is presented to news consumers around the world? Almost no research has been done on local-national correspondents, and how they differ from traditional, Western-born correspondents. This article contributes to the lacunae through two original, ethnographic explorations of foreign correspondents at work - one in Sudan, analysing journalists covering the Darfur crisis; and one in Kenya, examining journalists and the post-election violence of 2007-8. These case studies draw on interviews and ethnographic methods, including a month in Sudan interviewing and observing foreign correspondents at work (both locals and Westerners); and two months in a newsroom in Kenya, conducting interviews and observing the dynamic between local and Western foreign correspondents in news meetings.

The results show that, in Sudan and Kenya, local-national journalists frequently disagreed with their Western colleagues over them meaning, importance and interpretation of a news event. However, a number of external and industry pressures operated to "trump" their divergent, local perspectives, and encouraged them to reproduce the news-values of their Western based outlets. These barriers included: organisational and industry demands for "hard news", which preclude attention to thematic and background stories; political repression which silenced local voices; and cultural barriers between journalists and their editors.

The results show that global news content is by no means becoming 'decolonized'. However, the existence of debate and conflict - particularly in the Nairobi newsroom - suggest that the status quo is far from uncontested, and that a difficult synthesis may be starting to emerge.