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Unfreezing the frames: media diversity in Europe

We need greater equity when it comes to reporting — minority-world news outlets cannot keep refusing to work with majority-world journalists

In a chat about local reporting in the global media, my Europe-based Nigerian colleague Mercy Abang (co-managing director of*Unbias the News)* shared with me an experience of making a pitch: 'the editors told me,' she said, 'unless it's a Boko Haram story from Nigeria, we are not interested.'

My experience of pitching to a reputed German publication, with European colleagues, was no better. Regardless of a swath of international commendations for my work, the editor admitted one reason he and his colleagues had rejected my approach was because they had never worked with me before.

Frozen frames

Credibility is everything in journalism — if a publication is cautious about who it commissions, that is understandable. But what happens when minority-world news outlets work only on subjects and with people they know, without making any effort to acquaint themselves with the unfamiliar?

Then they keep entire continents frozen in stereotypical frames (Nigeria = Boko Haram) for their audiences, including policymakers. This framing then affects all policies with global ramifications — from the administration of asylum to responsible sourcing to just transition.

In 2019, Daniel Trilling wrote this in the *Guardian* about coverage of the 'migrant crisis': 'the fragmented and contradictory media coverage of the crisis left room for questions to go unanswered and myths to circulate … One thing that constantly surprised me about the reporting on refugees in Europe, for instance, was how little we heard from journalists who had

connections to already settled diaspora communities. Immigration from Africa, Asia or the Middle East is hardly new to Europe, and this seems like a missed opportunity to strengthen bridges we have already built.'

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The representation Trilling describes is missing, or severely limited, in newsroom leadership as well — critical to which journalist gets asked to cover what and how. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism explored five markets to learn more about ethnicity and leadership in the news media.

Reuters found that in the United Kingdom, six per cent of those in top editorial positions were of ethnic minority backgrounds — one-third of the proportion of non-white individuals in the population of England and Wales. In Germany, no publication included in the sample had a person of colour as its top editor at all. The researchers wrote: 'the racial and ethnic composition of newsroom management can affect diversity in hiring, retention and promotion, as well as in news content itself, influencing editorial decision-making and attention to stories and experiences that reflect the communities news organisations serve.'

As a co-founder of *The Gender Beat*, an international collective supporting gender journalism, I worked on a report that surveyed people in the media 'milieu' from more than 40 countries, mostly based in the majority world. A strong recommendation from our respondents was: the pool of editors commissioning stories must become more diverse for reporters to have the opportunity to tell more complex stories, especially from the majority world. News organisations must increase the diversity of voices within their newsrooms and in their stories.

The 'cost-of-living' argument – adopted even by some progressive media outlets – takes for granted and perpetuates global inequalities.

The European Commission has called for greater diversity in the sector. Some years ago, the Council of Europe developed a self-monitoring tool for media organisations in this regard. When negotiating for an assignment with a European organisation, I was, however, told that the rate I was quoting was too high. Its principle was to pay according to the journalist's own cost of living.

True, if I stay in Delhi, I might be able to rent a bigger apartment for the same amount of money my European colleague pays for a studio apartment. But if, in this national capital, I wished to move to a greener

area – Delhi being one of the most polluted cities in the world – with pavements where I could walk without the fear of being run over by cars, my cost of living would then end up matching my colleague's. If I wanted to enjoy decent healthcare, I would be paying much more than someone in a country where the free public health system was robust and accessible.

There has been a huge historical drain of wealth from the majority to the minority world. As Jason Hickel, Christian Dorninger, Hanspeter Wieland and Intan Suwandi remark, 'historians have demonstrated that the rise of Western Europe depended in large part on natural resources and labour forcibly appropriated from the Global South during the colonial period, on a vast scale.'

The 'cost-of-living' argument – adopted even by some progressive media outlets – thus takes for granted and perpetuates global inequalities. The disparity is even more telling when expatriate journalists are paid what they would have received in their country of origin, while their local counterparts get 'local rates'.

Greater equality

For European journalists to work together with their majority-world colleagues would broaden perspectives, on both sides. This has to be an equal partnership — not one between the reporter, who ends up being the sole author, and the *soi-disant* local 'fixer', instrumental in making it possible. And where a pitch from Africa or Asia is accepted, the editor should resist the temptation to send a European staff member to 'supervise' the project.

In a piece for the *Al Jazeera Journalism Review*, Dina Aboughazala pointedly asked: 'why is it ok for international media outlets to use the expertise of locals to publish or broadcast a report under a Western correspondent's name instead of investing in locals to tell their own stories? It is unheard of for an Indian, Egyptian or Nigerian journalist to descend on London or Washington to cover a story, and to employ a local fixer to facilitate the reporting.'

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Any journalist open to learning knows that collaborations are a sure way to become more self-reflective, and so humbler. Working in international collaborations has exposed me to my own biases. In Europe, a number of organisations have started giving grants for collaborations. But most are for journalists

for those from the majority world, on the other.

within the continent — more are needed for intercontinental work.

For migrant journalists, including editors, working with media houses in Europe, support is required outside as well as inside the newsroom: they continue to face racist, cultural and bureaucratic challenges. In the online world, many have shared stories of missing reporting opportunities and conferences because of visa rejections, inaccessibility and delays.

We cannot have 'parachute' journalism by minority-world correspondents, on the one hand, and entry barriers for those from the majority world (despite a slew of reassuring documents attesting they have no intentions to 'settle'), on the other. Without greater equity when it comes to freedom of movement, not only will the 'migrant crisis' story be skewed. Across the news agenda, journalists in the minority world will be able neither to 'return the gaze' nor to exchange perspectives with their European peers.

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