WHY CHANGE THE WAY WE WRITE ABOUT AFRICA?

A storyteller's guide to reframing Africa

AFRICA *No Filter*

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About Africa No Filter

Narrative matters and the prevailing one about Africa as a continent defined by conflict, disease, poor leadership, poverty and corruption is outdated and harmful. It has also become the single story of the continent, crowding out perspectives of Africa that show an equally creative, innovative, and progressive place.

Africa No Filter is working to shift harmful and stereotypical narratives about and within Africa through research, grant-making, and advocacy. We empower narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms, and driving disruption campaigns.

Our goal over time is to leave an empowered narrative change ecosystem and an informed community of storytellers who work more deliberately to shift the narrative.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is produced as part of Africa No Filter's mission to shift harmful and stereotypical narratives about and within Africa, because words and stories matter. Narrative matters.

So, what is a narrative?

A narrative is a collection of related stories that is articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief. Narratives shape perceptions and determine what we believe about the subject.

Why should we care about narrative change?

Often, stories of poverty, poor leadership, corruption, conflict, and disease are the enduring ones that are told about and within Africa. These lead to narratives of a broken continent that is dependent on outsiders and whose people lack agency.

To present Africa in a more nuanced and contextualised way and reflect the continent as it is today –an emerging destination for investment, with high GDP growth rates and falling poverty, and an increase in peaceful elections, stability, and the spread of technology – we need to ensure these stories break through into mainstream coverage and conversations about the continent.

Why bother reading this guide?

In this guide you will find out more about the historic context that informs the current narratives about Africa, how they have been shaped and perpetuated over time, their influence in creating a single story of Africa, and the dangers of this. After reading it, we hope you will take away a checklist of practical suggestions for how you can start telling African stories with nuance.

📖 Read: Binyavanga Wainaina: How to write about Africa.

1. Narrative Matters

"

Narrative expert Lusike Mukhongo defines narrative as 'an overarching story (often framed and conveyed in news media, popular culture and in oral stories in communities) with certain recurring themes that influence or shape the overall dominant discourse and how audiences and users perceive certain groups, subjects or events[1].'

'When I say Africa, what comes to mind?' With this question – posed to a room full of American students – the documentary When I Say Africa opens a conversation that should be exciting. Africa is a diverse continent with 54 countries, and the question was asked in 2014 to a generation that has access to lived experiences that unfold in real-time thanks to digital platforms and social media.

Here is what came to the students' minds when Africa was mentioned: poverty, Ebola, safari, Lion King, rape, third world, violence and malnutrition. To them, Africa is an ongoing disaster, a place of chaos and terror – a stereotypical narrative that is both harmful and outdated.

It prevails because it wasn't shaped by one story, and, therefore, it will not be undone by one story.

Africa's narrative, which began during colonial times, has continued into the 21st century through stories told by global news agencies, international humanitarian and charitable organisations, tourists, social media influencers, Global North volunteers, film and TV script writers, musicians and in fashion magazines.

The following examples of prominent events about Africa show how, over time, the prevailing narrative about this continent has been shaped and cemented.

1878

Scholar and traveller Henry Morton Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* is published.

1884/85

The Berlin Conference that leads to the Scramble for Africa by European nations takes place. '*The Scramble for Africa, by partitioning ethnicities in different countries, shaped the trajectory of these societies by spurring civil conflict and unrest,*' economists and scholars Stelios Michalopoulos and Elias Papaioannou note in their 2011 study of the long-term effects of the Scramble[3].

1899

Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Heart of Darkness*, is published. It's about a man on a divine mission to save the 'native savages' of Africa.

1900

By now, most of Africa has been colonised by Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. 'The major impact of colonialism in Africa is that it brought about the under-development of African territories in many different ways,' scholars Stephen Ocheni and Basil C. Nwankwo (2012) note in *Analysis of Colonialism and Its Impact in Africa*.[4]

1919

The Treaty of Versailles is signed, bringing World War 1 to an end, and playing a role in shaping modern Africa as Germany renounces sovereignty over its former colonies. Article 22 converts these into League of Nations mandate territories, to be run by the former Allied powers.

1931

Tin Tin in the Congo is published (in French) as the second volume of *The Adventures of Tintin*, the comics series created by Belgian cartoonist, Hergé. Years later, he defends its stereotypical framing of Congo and the Congolese as a mere reflection of the times.

1952

The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya starts. The revolt against British colonialism would end in 1960 and be credited with ushering in Kenya's independence. Western media coverage of the Mau Mau movement 'focuses on discrediting the movement by representing them as terrorists, a criminal enterprise, and with links to communism, while never properly explaining the movement'.[5]

1984

Kenyan photographer Mohamed 'Mo' Amin takes pictures of the famine in Ethiopia[6]. These images inspire Bob Geldof to start the Live Aid movement and create an image of Africa that goes global.

1985

Michael Jackson forms a band called USA for Africa, featuring some of the biggest superstars of the day, to record a charity single, 'We Are the World' to raise funds for poverty alleviation in Ethiopia. In the UK, Bob Geldof starts Live Aid, also to fight poverty in Africa through fund-raising music festivals that feature superstars like Queen, U2 and David Bowie.

1991

Sierra Leone descends into a civil war that ends in 2002. The war inspires more than 30 books and films that include Blood Diamond, which stars Leonardo DiCaprio.

1993

New York Times publishes a photograph of a vulture eyeing a frail boy in famine-stricken South Sudan, taken by South African photographer Kevin Carter. It wins a Pulitzer Prize in 1994.

1994

A 100-day genocide unfolds in Rwanda. While the country has since reconciled and developed, becoming a global leader in parliamentary gender representation, the event continues to shape stories about the country.

2000

The Economist publishes an iconic cover calling Africa 'the hopeless continent'. The 13 May issue features floods in Mozambique, threats of famine in Ethiopia (again), mass murder in Uganda, civil wars in Sierra Leone, and a string of conflicts across the continent. 'The new millennium has brought more disaster than hope to Africa. Worse, the few candles of hope are flickering weakly,' the lead article declares.

2004

U2 front man Bono starts Live 8, a series of concerts held in 2005 in cities worldwide to fight poverty in Africa. *'For the first time in history we have the cash and the technological know-how'* to solve Africa's problems, he says in a speech to new graduates of the University of Pennsylvania[7].

2012

'Kony-2012', a documentary about the Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony and his movement's use of child soldiers is released and goes viral, with over 100 million views in under a week. A review notes that it reduces, depoliticises and dehistoricises globalised war into a simplistic political story[8].

2014

The Ebola outbreak spreading through Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea inspires Bob Geldof to form Band Aid 30 with superstars including Sam Smith, One Direction, Adele, Seal and Angelique Kidjo, to rework Band Aid song, 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'

2015

CNN calls Kenya 'a hotbed of terror' ahead of President Barack Obama's state visit to the country. Kenya demands an apology.

2020

On 15 March, Science magazine publishes an article titled '"A ticking time bomb": Scientists worry about coronavirus spread in Africa. Yet, Glenda Gray, a scientist quoted in the story, confesses, 'We really have no idea how COVID-19 will behave in Africa'. On 3 September, the BBC publishes an article with this headline: 'Coronavirus in Africa: Could poverty explain mystery of low death rate?'

- Eddie Murphy stars in Coming 2 America, a sequel to the 1988 film Coming to America. The movie portrays Africa stereotypically as backward and anti-women – women in the fictional country of Zamunda are not allowed to own businesses. However, according to the World Bank, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of entrepreneurship globally and most of these entrepreneurs are women.
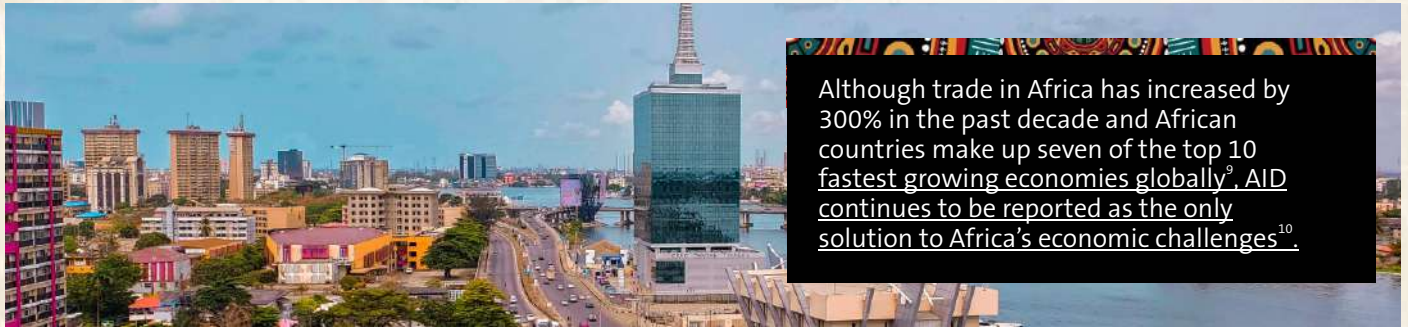
Although trade in Africa has increased by 300% in the past decade and African countries make up seven of the top 10 fastest growing economies globally[9], AID continues to be reported as the only solution to Africa's economic challenges[10].

There are many more examples of events and framing that have normalised the doom and gloom narrative of Africa. Western celebrities routinely set out to 'save Africa' from poverty by, for example, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro to raise awareness about girls' education, access to clean water, and the refugee crisis[11]. The acceptable stereotyping of Africa is also seen in TV shows and movies that may or may not be about Africa. Take the series, *Being Mary Jane*, where Gabrielle Union and her friends say they'd rather be black and poor in America than middle class in Africa.

▶ Watch: ABC 20/20 tenth anniversary special of the Ethiopian famine that inspired We Are The World.

"When we as Africans tell our own stories, we re-write the stories in the history books that our children are still taught in schools. We do what Edward Said wrote about decades ago in his seminal work, Orientalism, and move from being objects to becoming subjects of our stories.
–Maïmouna Jallow[2]

2. The Danger of a Single Story

A single story about Africa misses out on nuance, creativity and innovation. It downplays development, progress and leadership. It has turned a continent of 54 countries into a monolithic unit.

Consequently, how Africans view themselves and how others view Africans is informed by stereotypical and outdated views that don't reflect current realities. Many narratives within and about Africa negatively influence and inform Africans and others about the continent and its people. Within the continent, the persistence of these stories can feed ethnic conflicts, xenophobia, civil unrest, terrorism driven by a lack of trust, and feelings of inferiority, hopelessness and a lack of agency.

Below are some examples of how negative, 'single story' narratives have played out within the continent and beyond Africa's borders:

- In 1983, Nigeria expelled two million undocumented West African migrants. (See 'Ghana Must Go[12]'.)
- In 2008, xenophobic violence in South Africa culminated in a Mozambican man being burnt alive[13].
- At risk of death, many of Africa's youth migrate to rich countries, to pursue success[14].
- To remain relevant, Africa's music, film, art, fashion and languages are having to fight cultural colonisation.
- Europeans continue to treat African refugees with suspicion[15].
- In 2019, in Guanghzhou, China, African students and traders were given racist treatment, during the province's response to COVID-19[16].
- A narrative has consequences.

3. What a 'single story' Article Looks Like

The single story of Africa is so pervasive that poverty, conflict, corruption, disease and poor leadership are also used to frame stories of arts, culture, travel, and progress on the continent. The stereotypical framing on Africa even features in news reports exploring global issues.

**Clash of the cultures: The absolute monarchy and the music festival** is a travel and culture piece[17] about one of the biggest cultural events in Southern Africa, the Bushveld festival in eSwatini. But the festival is not the main narrative of the story; it's used as a hook to focus on socio-economic and political issues in the country. Instead of learning about the event and its top billing of African artists, we read about high poverty and unemployment rates and the illegality of being gay.

A report from the US news show _CBS This Morning_ investigates contract cheating, which happens when a student gets a third party to produce their academic work, in US colleges. Although the report calls contract cheating a global issue and speaks to an American ethics professor who has been 'sounding alarm bells' for many years about cheating in US colleges, the story blames poverty and unemployment in Kenya for being the biggest enablers. The report is set exclusively in Kenya, and most of the filming takes place in a typical (thriving) local market, to represent poverty in the country.
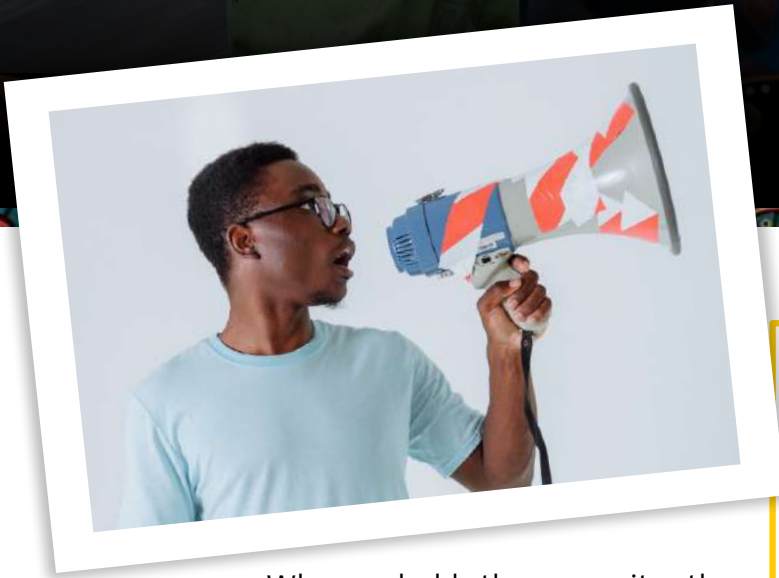
Ballet student Anthony Madu captured the hearts of millions globally after a video of him dancing in the rain went viral in September 2020. It's a 'good news' story of a boy so passionate about ballet that he dances every chance he gets, but the framing is all too familiar: being poor and downtrodden in Africa. Madu lives in Lagos, Nigeria. His family is not affluent. Thus, according to an NBC report, his passion for and mastery of ballet shows that he is 'unrestrained by his circumstances' – rather than a disciplined student undergoing rigorous training from Leap of Dance Academy. The circumstances are not named but are there for all to see; in one shot, Madu is barefoot in the rain and in another, he is dancing on a potholed street in front of shacks. In 2006, Madu decided to become a professional dancer. However, NBC implies (incorrectly) that this dream became a reality only after the video went viral. In fact, Madu had won a prestigious scholarship months before this.

▶ **Watch:** Finding African stories
▶ **Watch:** The Danger of a Single Story

4. Who is Telling African Narratives?

Whoever holds the pen writes the story. Currently, Africa's news —a critical factor in creating the dominant narrative— is often in the hands of Western media. Africa No Filter's 2020 report, *How African Media Covers Africa*, found that one-third of stories about Africa in news outlets on the continent are sourced from foreign news services.

The researchers surveyed 38 African editors and analysed content from 60 African news outlets in 15 countries. Additionally, there were focus groups with editors of media outlets across Africa and foreign correspondents for influential global media organisations.

Other key findings from the report showed that:

- 81% of the stories analysed were classified as hard news.
- 13% of the stories focused on political violence, civil unrest and armed conflict.
- 13% was made up of business and entrepreneurship — most of it reflecting the opinions of experts and activists.
- Only 8% were feature stories.
- 5% of the stories covered arts, culture, entertainment, personalities and history.
- Tourism was not covered at all.
- Ordinary people and their lived experiences were largely ignored, e.g. reports on End SARS in Nigeria favoured government officials, instead of protestors.

It is not surprising, then, that African narratives continue to present the same negative stereotypes, even when the stories themselves, are not, in fact negative, as some examples used in this guide show.

5. Take Back the Pen

It takes collective and deliberate effort to shift narratives. Taking back the pen requires more than hiring Africans to tell the continent's stories or including more Africans on global storytelling platforms and forums. In addition to these measures, Africa no Filter advocates a more nuanced narrative shift.

Taking back the pen and redefining the African narrative means incorporating these approaches into storytelling:

1 **Use African expert voices:** Don't use Western experts to comment on African issues and life around the continent. An alternative story centres the voices and experiences of ordinary people. Told alternatively, End SARS reports would have reflected the voices of activists and protesters – the people demanding change – instead of the voices of authority figures.

2 **Consciously avoid stereotypes:** Don't resort to lazy stereotyping in choice of words and images. Words and images carry meaning, which impacts perceptions.

3 **Incorporate authentic voices:** Use sources who are close to the story and people with lived experiences. At its core, an alternative story shows nuance and authenticity. It depicts all subjects as equals who can speak for themselves. It recognises that we are all humans who exist beyond a single event (e.g. a breaking news story) and we aren't defined by poverty, disease, conflict, poor leadership and corruption.

4 **Contextualise your story:** Nothing exists in a vacuum – provide an accurate and specific context. Avoid generalisations by including nuance.

5 **Mind your language:** Use empowering language that shows the subject's agency. Avoid telling stories in a way that disempowers the subject.

6 **Protect subjects' dignity:** Treat subjects in a dignified manner, e.g. does your story treat victims of violence in Africa differently to victims of violence elsewhere?

7 **Apply ethical storytelling principles:** Apply the following eight steps to ethical storytelling. They offer practical solutions aimed at rebalancing stereotypical narratives about Africa.
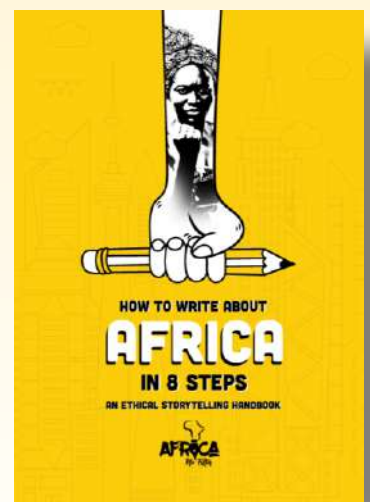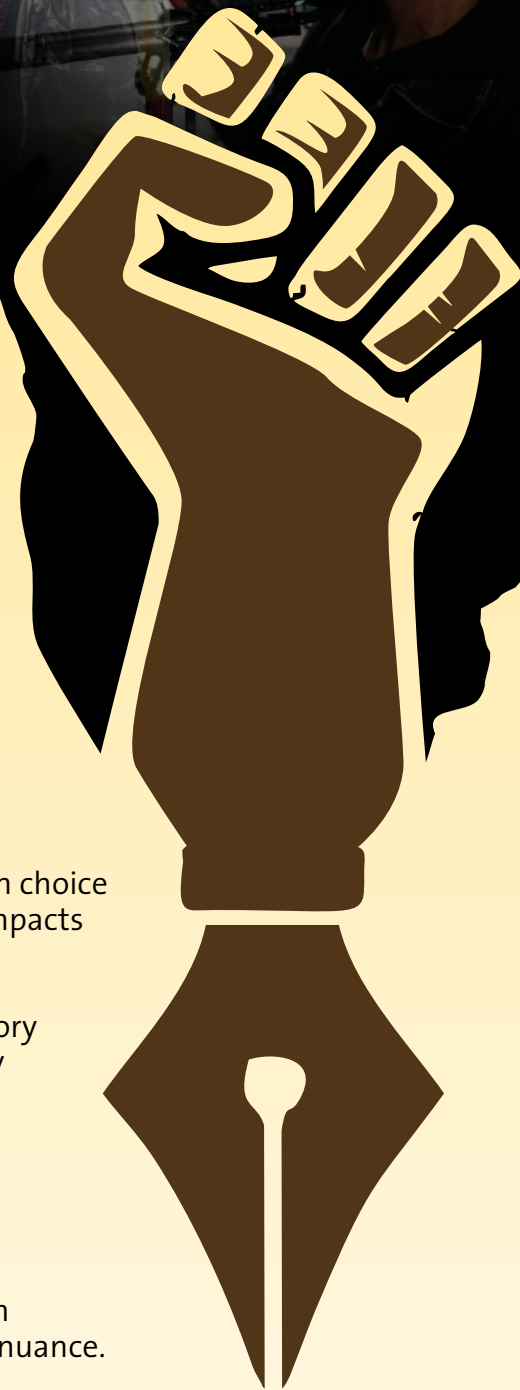
📖 **Read:** How to Write About Africa in 8 Steps: An Ethical Storytelling Handbook

6. Be Your Own Watchdog

Use the following questions to check your own stories:

- Does headline feed a stereotype?
- Does the story contain the usual biases about Africa (even when they are not the reason the story is being told)?
- Are African experts cited?
- Are ordinary people's voices heard?
- Did you allow people to tell their story, regardless of the story you were looking for?
- Were you present, on the ground?
- Does the story offer an alternative frame?
- Does the story empower or disempower the subjects?
- What words and images did you choose to empower typically marginalised groups? Do they provide a stereotype of Africa?

▶ **Watch:** Thank You for the Rain - Impact Story.

Conclusion

Narratives are created over time, and we recognise that changing stereotypical perceptions about Africa will also take time. However, we believe that identifying the problem, reflecting it back to audiences, outlining how it evolved, and suggesting steps we can take to shift narratives is a powerful and effective process.

Endnotes

[1] Quote taken from a presentation by Lusike Mukhongo to Africa No Filter in March 2021. ('What does it mean to shift the narrative?')

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[11] American football player Chris Long, Olympian Cheryl Bernard, TV personalities Cheryl Cole and Ronan Keating climbed Kilimanjaro to alleviate poverty/advocate for a cause in Africa; actor Matt Damon's embarked on a 'mission' to save Africa from poverty and Aids; Model Kendall Jenner celebrated her birthday by asking fans to donate $22, to help a charity built well in Ethiopia.

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