

Who Is Telling Africa's Stories?

By Whitney Richardson Jan. 10, 2017

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Akintunde Akinleye was at home one December morning in 2006 when a friend called him with urgent news. Hours earlier, a petroleum pipeline had exploded in a town outside Lagos, Nigeria, his home city, leaving more than 200 people dead. Hopping on his motorbike with his camera, Mr. Akinleye, a Reuters staff photographer based in Nigeria, swerved through miles of thick traffic and arrived on site in less than 30 minutes.

Pacing through flaming rubble, he spotted an older adult man carrying a bright blue bucket of water. Mr. Akinleye lifted his camera and took several shots of him rinsing his face as dark smoke stained the sky. His final frame was circulated to news media globally, and even made the front page of The New York Times. It also earned him a World Press Photo award for spot news single in 2007, making him the first Nigerian to receive the prestigious award.

Mr. Akinleye's sudden thrust into news media prominence is rare for even the most experienced photojournalists, but it's an even rarer occurrence for an African one. Of the most covered news events in sub-Saharan Africa over the past several years — including antigovernment protests in South Africa and Ethiopia, the Boko Haram kidnapping in northern Nigeria and West Africa's Ebola crisis — only a handful of stories were assigned to African photographers by major international publications.

The absence of local coverage in international markets has also been reflected in the top awards. According to World Press Photo's State of Photography 2015 report, only 2 percent of their contest submissions annually come from African photographers.

Since World Press Photo released its initial report in 2015, Lars Boering, the organization's managing director, said accessing data about their contest applicants as well as surveying the photojournalism industry were critical first steps in closing this gap. The organization recently held its first Joop Swart Master Class in Kenya, working with photographers across East Africa, and plans to host another one, in Accra, Ghana, this March. Other organizations, including the Magnum Foundation and the Prince Claus fund, have also invested in supporting photojournalists on the continent.

“We needed to flip it open. It will make us vulnerable, but it was important to start talking about it,” said Mr. Boering, who is based in Amsterdam. “There are a billion people living in Africa. We should make sure the visuals we get reflect our worldview.”

Mr. Akinleye, who has spent the past decade covering West Africa for Reuters, said as digital cameras have become more accessible, he has seen a surge in the number of local photographers in the field. But better equipment hasn’t necessarily equated to more opportunities for aspiring photojournalists, he said. With the absence of formal photojournalism programs at universities, young photographers are not learning the fundamentals of storytelling and editing, Mr. Akinleye said. Independent newspapers in his country have also struggled to navigate hostile relations with government leaders known for threatening the local news media, he said.

“Young people are asking, how do we get work,” said Mr. Akinleye, who noted that the majority of working photographers he knew in Africa were stringers for wire services.

“I have told them to look for opportunities abroad to gain exposure and to learn the ethical standards of the industry,” he said. “If I wasn’t working with Reuters, I probably would just be part of the crowd.”

International news agencies, including The Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France-Presse, have long been entry points for local photojournalists, especially during times of extreme conflict. During the United States-led war in Iraq, news organizations heavily depended on local news photographers, out of concern for safety and financial pressures, to document the scene. Within months of training alongside other wire photographers, Iraqi photojournalists began dominating international coverage of the war — producing award-winning images of the political transformation in their home country.

“We had taxi drivers and former studio photographers and we gave them cameras,” said two-time Pulitzer prize winning photojournalist, Muhammed Muheisen, who is currently the chief photographer for the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan for the AP. “The region was getting a lot of attention, so it became a place where Iraqi photographers could develop and show their talent.”

Khalid Mohammed, AP’s chief photographer in Iraq, was one of those emerging talents. Mr. Mohammed, who worked for an Iraqi newspaper before the war, gained the reputation of beating foreign photojournalists to deadly scenes and was one of six Iraqis on the AP team that won the Pulitzer Prize for photography in 2005. Many of his most striking images, including one showing the charred bodies of U.S. contractors hanging from a bridge in Fallujah in 2004, appeared in publications around the world.

“I choose to cover the war to expose the crimes and violations against my people,” Mr. Mohammed, who is currently in Mosul, wrote in an email interview. “You had to be ready to accept the sacrifice and know that this picture may be the last image,” he said.

Mr. Muheisen, a Jordanian national born in Israel, said that until news organizations begin investing in more extensive coverage of African news, African photographers might have to “find and broadcast their own stories” on various social media platforms.

“All you need to do is pay some attention to that region and give the photographers a chance to appear,” said Mr. Muheisen. “There is no better way to tell a story than when you are in it.”

The West African photographer Andrew Esiebo, who was featured on Lens and has freelanced for The New York Times, has amassed more than 91,000 followers on Instagram, and is one of several emerging African photojournalists cultivating an international audience using the platform.

“I tell younger photographers that the internet can make you equal with anyone in the world,” said Mr. Esiebo, who is also a contributing photographer to the @everydayafrica Instagram account. “It has been a great tool to push my work out there.”

Everyday Africa recently teamed with World Press Photo and Blink to create an online database of working photojournalists on the continent, with the intent of connecting African photographers to international photo editors. Mr. Boering said that with the expansion of the database, he hoped editors and photographers would have the opportunity to create dialogue around potential story ideas and developing opportunities.

While Mr. Akinleye recommends photographers seek outside financing to support their work, others, including Aida Mulneh, the founder and director of Addis Foto Fest in Ethiopia, and Azu Nwagbogu, the founder and director of the African Artists Foundation and LagosPhoto Festival in Nigeria, have invited the international photo market to their home cities. Both festivals have exhibited photographers from around the world, while highlighting talent from their countries with shows, talks and portfolio reviews.

“I’m a big believer in looking at images globally,” said Ms. Mulneh, who was born in Ethiopia and raised in Yemen and England. “We have to look beyond our borders to see what other photographers are producing in order for us to compete in the industry as well.”

During the year, Ms. Mulneh, who worked as a freelance photographer at The Washington Post before returning to Ethiopia in 2007, puts on a series of monthly photography workshops for developing photographers with her company Desta for Africa Creative Consulting. Using social

media and e-mail blasts to promote coming events, Ms. Muluneh also organizes photo walks, where she can reach younger photographers who may use only cellphone cameras.

She said she organized her biennial photo festival in 2010 for an international market with hopes that editors at top news organizations would travel to Ethiopia and meet new talent.

“You don’t need to send somebody here to photograph,” Ms. Muluneh said. “There are folks here that are doing the work that just haven’t been given the opportunity,” she said.

Unlike photojournalism, conceptual and portrait photographers in sub-Saharan Africa have received international recognition, including Malian studio photographers Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita. In a Lens article last year, Mr. Nwagbogu of the LagosPhoto Festival said that Africa had become a place where photographers could be more experimental.

“It’s not that we aren’t interested in photojournalism, but Africa has become a playground for photographers coming to tell the ‘truth’ about the continent and they get stuck on the ‘hopeless’ narrative,” he said in the Lens post. “We can sculpt so much more than this.”

As budget cuts hit newsrooms across the country, Alice Gabriner, Time magazine’s international photo editor, said there was less money to assign long-term photo stories. To offset costs, Ms. Gabriner said she had to look for photographers with completed bodies of work — something she hasn’t consistently found with African photographers.

“I am not seeing African photographers who are coming to me with their work saying this is work I can pick up,” said Ms. Gabriner, who previously worked as a national photo editor for Time, as well as a senior photo editor at National Geographic.

To find new work, Ms. Gabriner travels to photo festivals and meets with photographers in her New York office, though she has not yet attended a photo festival in Africa. Like many editors, she said, she also prefers to work with photographers whom she knows and whose judgments she understands.

Marco Longari, the chief African photographer for Agence France-Presse, has also been responsible for coordinating staffing and coverage of sub-Saharan Africa since 2015. His approach for recruiting photographers differs depending on the location, he said, as local talent in news media hubs like Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria are typically easier to recruit than in smaller regions.

“When I am on location in different countries, I try to meet with new photographers and look at their work,” said the Italian-born Mr. Longari, who is based in Johannesburg. “We set guidelines and manage expectations early on, so we don’t have any misunderstandings,” he added.

“In certain areas of the continent, the idea of photography is not yet developed,” he said, noting that many photojournalists he meets are also working wedding photographers. “The equipment is there. The focus should now be on visual literacy training.”

South Africa — with a long tradition of photojournalism training — has one of the most established scenes on the continent. The Market Workshop, founded by David Goldblatt in 1989, is one of the regions top photography programs, with a roster of graduates including the acclaimed portrait photographer Zanele Muholi and the award-winning documentary photographer Jodi Bieber. In the 1950s, Jürgen Schadeberg, who was born in Germany, helped develop a generation of South African photographers who documented the effects of apartheid for Drum magazine, including Ernest Cole, Bob Gosani and Peter Magubane.

Last year, the Goethe-Institut, a German cultural organization, also teamed with Photo: to release an interactive map of the current photography training initiatives in Africa. Several programs highlighted include the Zimbabwe Association of Female Photographers, Nuku Studio in Accra and the Sudanese Photography Group.

As these programs continue to sprout in the region, Mr. Esiebo says he hopes African photographers will depend less on being published in international publications, but instead raise the standards of publications in their home countries.

“How do we raise the standards of our papers to be like The New York Times?” Mr. Esiebo asked. “We should start from home and tell our stories better.”

Whitney Richardson is a photo editor on the business desk at The New York Times and a former producer of the Lens blog. Last year, Ms. Richardson was one of nine African-American journalists to teach a monthlong photography workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. She also curated the Lens blog’s photo exhibit “Looking Forward,” at the 2015 LagosPhoto Festival with Meaghan Looram, deputy of photography at The Times.