

# Imposing one story on Africa is doing it a disservice

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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The African Media Leaders Forum in Addis Ababa last week ended on a weak note: Politicians want the media to generate a new, positive African narrative, different from the one that had been imposed for so long from the West. It is a tired line.



Africa... a vast continent - and it needs its stories to be told, the good and the bad. (Image: NASA)

After two days of media owners, managers and journalists grappling with the challenges of technology, finance, and censorship, and determined to grow the continent's media, it was disappointing to hear the line-up of Kenyan Vice-President William Ruto, his Ethiopian counterpart, Demeke Mekonnen, and our own Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, now chairwoman of the African Union Commission.

Replace the old image of Africa with one that we generate ourselves, they said, one after the other. The case most often cited is *The Economist*, which ran the "Hopeless Continent" front cover and then, a decade later, ran another with the headline, "Africa Rising". Many celebrated the change without seeing that replacing one simple, crude generalisation about Africa with another misses the point.

## Stereotypes... incomplete, untrue

Ring in my ears were the wise words of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "Beware the single narrative." Just the idea of wanting to impose one simple story on a huge, diverse continent is unhelpful, even if it is a more positive one. To choose one story about her Nigerian identity is to "flatten my experience", and "to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

We don't expect one story of Europe, even though they are trying to form one community. We recognise it for the diverse and complicated place it is. We certainly don't expect it of the US, where we know instinctively that the Texas of George Bush is not the same as the Chicago of Barack Obama or the New York of Michael Bloomberg. We know too much to rely on a stereotype.

The problem with the way much of the world has viewed Africa is not that they have the wrong narrative, but that many are ignorant of the many competing elements of this place. We want simply to replace one overly pessimistic story line with another crudely optimistic one, rather than embrace a complex reality with many competing, different things going on. This is a plea for complexity rather than simplicity, for a plural vision rather than a myopic one, for depth of knowledge over prejudice.

## Two stories... same stage

Up on that stage last week was the Kenyan leadership, which boasts a high-quality and interesting and flourishing media, announcing that they would withdraw legislation that had been introduced to control journalists. And an Ethiopian leadership justifying the fact that seven writers are in prison, some serving sentences of as many as 18 years. At least 73 publications have been closed down in recent years, and the result is an Ethiopian media that is second-rate and a cadre of journalists that works in fear - hardly the conditions to generate a new narrative. On that stage, there were a number of different stories from those pleading for us to find a new story.

How often is one asked: are you optimistic or pessimistic about South Africa? It is an unanswerable question: it is unconscionably crude to fall into one or other side of a false dichotomy and not to admit to competing uncertainties about our future.

We should challenge the stereotypes of Africa, but replace them with knowledge, depth, and complexity and not fall for the temptation of another generalised view, especially one imposed from above.

**UPDATE:** Last week I bemoaned the [easy treatment given to the advertising agency, MetropolitanRepublic](#), caught cheating in the Loeries competition. The Association for Communication and Advertising (ACA) has issued a "written reprimand" and suspended them for 12 months and the Creative Circle, saying they brought the entire industry into disrepute, banished the agency from competitions for the rest of 2013 (two months) and chucked them off their board and judging panels for 24 months. Notably silent is the client of the fake entry, MTN, which raises questions about their complicity.

## ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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