

Everything the Western Mainstream Media Outlets Get Wrong When Covering Poor Countries

By [Tamara Pearson](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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If you want to find out what's happening in a poor country, be sure to add -tourists to your Google News search.

"Canadian and Italian tourists feared kidnapped in Burkina Faso," was the recent [headline](#) in the BBC, a day after clashes there claimed [46](#) lives. The BBC didn't cover the clashes online, nor did they cover a terrorist attack there a few days prior, or the country's trade deals with China. If the tragic events had happened in Europe though, the media would have been all over it.

We see similar scenarios with the recent media coverage of [tourists robbed](#) in Brazil (just as a president who is arguably more racist, sexist, and homophobic than Trump has taken power – yes, it's possible), of a tourist [murdered](#) in Morocco, and the [killings](#) in a Mexican tourist resort.

From de-prioritizing the lives of locals in poor countries, to downplaying global inequality, racism, and condescension, the way Western news agencies do international news is deeply harmful. They judge other countries based on the assumption that US and European political and economic standards are the best and only way to do things, and that practice is leading to some seriously discriminatory and damaging outcomes.

As the news becomes increasingly corporatist, with agencies blurring the lines between native advertising and news stories and focusing on clicks over quality, there is little desire to examine this sort of malpractice, let alone rectify it.

A list of deliberate distortions the mainstream media makes about poor countries

1. News discourse is based on the assumption that the only way to do democracy, elections, and economics is the highly dysfunction two-party neoliberalism of the US and Europe. If countries stray from the West's way of doing politics, or from "free" trade and privatization, they are labelled as tyrannies, dictatorships, regimes, and more. Though the news claims to be unbiased, there is a stark inconsistency in the terminology used for the West and for poor countries.

2. Media coverage of charity and aid from the US and Europe rests on the assumption that such "help" is desired, and that the US and Europe have something to offer poor countries, despite their responsibility for colonizing, looting, enforcing abusive debt repayment, and largely causing the poverty in the first place. The historic and economic context behind the poverty is rarely discussed, creating the impression that poverty has no cause.

3. Media agencies boycott news stories about what people in poor countries are doing,

achieving, calling for, hoping for, or building. By omitting this sort of coverage, one gets the false impression that people in poor countries aren't doing anything about their economic or political situations. That contributes to the myth perpetuated by charities that poor people are incapable and passive and need outside help.

4. Media analysis assumes that institutions in other countries work in the same way as those in the media's home country. For example, that police and national guards should play the same role in Venezuela as they do in the US, and if they don't, there is something wrong with them.

5. The media consistently boycotts experts from the actual poor country in question when it comes to quotes and interviews and analyzing what is going on there. Instead, experts are typically US or European white male academics who aren't in, or have never set foot in the country they judge and opine on. This sort of boycott contributes to the stereotype about who an expert is and what they look like. Hypocritically, the media never invites qualified intellectuals in poor countries to pass judgment on the US or Europe.

6. Related to this, is the belief that poor countries are so simple and similar that a Western journalist can be parachuted in to one to cover a presidential election, for example. These journalists often don't speak the local language, and don't know how the local elections work (as I witnessed while covering numerous elections in Venezuela). The media also thinks it is acceptable to use locals to do all the networking work and on-the-ground grunt work as "fixers", or worse, as unpaid "contacts", while a Westerner gets the byline credit and much higher pay, for writing up that work.

7. US and European culture is portrayed as the default or norm, while everyone else's culture is "exotic" or "colorful". Further, the media usually thinks its enough to do the occasional photo gallery of such culture (ie a festival in India) for people to then have an understanding or insight into the ways of being and living of people in countries like India, with its 1.2 billion people.

8. The media's errors regarding poverty extend to its default definition of it. It sees poverty as how much stuff people can buy, rather than, for example, access to culture, education, and healthcare. When covering other countries' situations, it doesn't include their perspective on what good living consists of.

9. Western mainstream media values the lives of people in rich countries more. People have to die in the thousands in a non-political tragedy in poor countries to get a similar amount of coverage as the death of a white Australian mountain climber in Indonesia.

10. The media brands itself as "neutral", though it always takes the perspective of its home country or region. But when [1 billion](#) people are hungry, we need the media to have a more global perspective.

11. And despite lauding itself as being objective and factual, accuracy is less important to the media when it comes to poor countries. Getting a president's name wrong, the actual title of the head of state, or labeling community organizations as "terrorists" isn't a big deal.

12. When something really huge happens in a poor country - like a tsunami and earthquake that kills [230,000](#) people, then the media is happy to exploit it for all the clicks they can get. Once the main drama has passed though, don't expect too many follow-ups that analyze

why earthquakes cause more damage in some countries than others, or the rebuilding and recovery needed.

13. Further, when the media does bestow to cover poorer countries, it usually needs to be in terms of a richer country. Stories about Mexico, for example, are more likely to get covered if Trump is in the headline. African countries are more likely to see the light of day when a famous Western actor deigns to visit.

14. Sometimes the media takes the position that poor countries are “too depressing” for readers. But if the reading is tough, imagine what its like to live it. We should be screaming about the worst injustices from our rooftops, not sidelining such injustice with pathetic excuses.

Causes and consequences of anti-poor country bias

Global racism, classism, and prioritizing profits are the key factors behind all these distortions. Stories about poor countries don’t appeal to advertisers, except for those promoting charities who typically victimize poor countries and simplify poverty because they want their donors to think that \$1 a day makes the exploitation, wars, and debt go away.

Further, mainstream media has stopped seeing itself as an active force in the world that has a responsibility to inform people and to help them understand what is going on – if it ever did see itself that way. Instead of being a public service, the news is a commodity. As such, media companies understand that stories about first world events, white people, celebrities and the rich and powerful tend to get more clicks than those about the poor.

In addition, over the past decade with the smartphone becoming more accessible to more people, the media has shifted over to bite-size stories and easily and quickly digestible content that can be scan-read, then shared, in a few seconds or minutes. However, the key issues in poor countries aren’t bite size nor simple. They require context, and the media shies away from that – especially where worker rights, inequality, or historical injustice are concerned.

Finally, US media in particular loves individual stories of rags-to-riches and to perpetuate the myth that financial success is all about individuals working hard. Poor countries simply don’t fit into that narrative, so they get left out altogether.

The consequences of this selective and distorted media coverage are serious. What it ultimately does, is perpetuate the status quo; the racism, the dehumanizing of people who live in poor countries, the global inequality, and US and European cultural, economic, and violent dominance. That is, mainstream media coverage of poor countries is an active, and deliberate participation in the oppression of those countries.

The coverage ends up distorting how we understand global forces, culture, and history. It obstructs our ability to learn from other culture’s amazing lifestyles, literature traditions, philosophies, art and film techniques, and it fosters closed-minded adults. Such rich-country centric coverage also promotes unjustified arrogance in those countries, which in turn fosters blind spots to how damaging US and European foreign policy (ie wars) can be.

With high rates of homelessness, police impunity, racist attacks, consumerism, and more, countries like the US are in no position to be judging other countries. A healthy media landscape would instead see the news media as informational and educational rather than

entertainment, and would prioritize local journalists and local experts.

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Tamara Pearson is a journalist who has been living in, and covering Latin America for the past 11 years. She is also the author of [The Butterfly Prison](#), and can be found @pajaritaroja.

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