

A Snapshot of 21st Century West Africa: An Interview with Leslie Fauvel

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Leslie Fauvel was a guest speaker to the [HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps](#). She is currently the West Africa Deputy Bureau Chief at Agence France-Presse, where she covers Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, and Benin.

Much of your career has been dedicated to Africa. What are the distinctive or unique challenges you have faced as a journalist in West Africa?

In my day-to-day work as a journalist in West Africa, one of the biggest challenges concerns sources. In some countries, AFP is not well known by the general public or the authorities. It can take time to get answers from officials and companies alike. The administration is very hierarchical, and it takes time to get through to the authorized person to answer you.

Geographical travel is also a challenge: in Nigeria, insecurity on the roads is linked in particular to criminal groups who attack, kidnap, or rob travelers. In other countries, the great difficulty in getting around may be linked to infrastructure: roads can be bad, there are often no trains, air connections are complicated and expensive... It's important to bear in mind that reporting outside the big cities can take time and cost money.

You have covered various topics such as economics, the environment, and women's rights. Can you share one of your stories that has influenced public policy or perception?

We always hope that our articles will change things, but it's very difficult to assess their real impact. You have to take into account the global media coverage of a given subject:

if you write an article on the LGBTQ+ community or women's rights, for example, you can imagine that it's the mass effect of articles in different media that will, if not change public policy, at least help to arouse interest and raise awareness. We must remain humble: it's not every day that we change the world. But some stories are worth telling, whatever their real impact. I recently reported on a neighborhood in Lagos that was razed overnight, leaving several thousand people homeless. It had no effect on the country's authorities, who did nothing for them, but at least I'd like to think that these people's voices were heard.

Several years ago, I also wrote a series of articles on corruption in Madagascar, particularly within a government agency. I don't think corruption has stopped since then, but it did call certain contracts into question at the time. It was the same in Mozambique some years ago. There was a big corruption scandal involving the State, French businessmen, and the Mozambican elite: I could reveal the names of some of the people involved, and other media also did a great job about this story. At the end, it ended with a large cover and some of the people involved are still under prosecution. So it's not only the work I did, but my contribution added to many other journalists.

Are there any emerging trends or issues that you believe will be significant soon within the West African region?

Climate change and environmental issues are now of central interest to all media, and this enables us to cover extremely wide-ranging subjects: how farmers are adapting, what impact biodiversity is having, what green finance entails, how to cope with climate disasters, and so on.

West Africa is also undergoing an interesting geopolitical shift, with several countries breaking away from France, their former colonizer. This is leading to closer ties with Russia and China. Geopolitical alliances are changing, and in general, this is also leading to changes in terms of business.

Cultural subjects are also appreciated: being in Nigeria, it's fascinating to see how Afrobeats or the Nollywood film industry are becoming increasingly popular worldwide (as is Amapiano in South Africa). It all depends on the medium you're working for but as soon as you want to propose a story to a foreign or international medium, I think it's a good idea to choose themes that aren't confined to a very local issue; you have to think that you're writing for readers who don't live in Africa, and think about giving context.

Does the volatility in the region affect the safety and integrity of reporters and how does this influence a story?

Every reporter is different, and many factors come into play. I'm white, which can be a disadvantage in the sense that I quickly stand out in Africa and I'm quickly identified as a journalist, which can be a problem in some places where the press is not wanted. It can also be an advantage in the sense that I'm immediately identified as a foreigner, so some law enforcement agencies may go easy on me to avoid incurring the wrath of their hierarchy. Working as a text journalist is also different from working as a video reporter: with a pen and a piece of paper, you're much more discreet than with a camera. Keep this in mind too, and when you've got a camera in a sensitive area, make sure you've got local people you can rely on to smooth things over with disgruntled people.

In terms of coverage, security issues mean that you sometimes have to adapt your work: it's sometimes difficult to find first-hand sources, so you have to find others. This means being extra vigilant about who's telling you what, and for what purpose. Always ask yourself this. What's the point of people talking to you? Avoid being instrumentalized as much as possible and, whatever happens, always confront the two (or three or four) points of view in a story. Even if you don't get an answer, at least you can say you asked.

In the new digital and social media era, how is journalism adapting its strategies to remain relevant and financially viable?

This is a very large issue and I am sure there are better people to discuss it with you. Just bear in mind that social media is very powerful and brings along a lot of fake news. Always be very cautious and professional with your information, and cross-check everything all the time.

How do cultural sensitivities impact reporting within the West African region?

We all have our own cultural sensitivities, in West Africa or elsewhere. We meet people with whom we disagree. When you put on your reporter's hat, you're a reporter and you have to keep your opinion to yourself, and above all, listen to everyone's arguments, even those you may disagree with. Be open-minded, take every encounter as a way of learning, and be curious.