

Continuous Learning: An Interview with Bahira Amin

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Bahira Amin recently served as a guest speaker to the [HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps](#). Based in Cairo, she is the Deputy Bureau Chief for Egypt and Sudan at AFP (Agence France-Presse).

What is a recent piece you have read that moved you and that you would recommend to young journalists?

If you'll allow me to play with forms a little bit, I'll recommend a piece to watch and listen to instead. [This panel](#), from this year's International Journalism Festival, is a remarkable conversation about how to practice less extractive journalism all young journalists need to hear. I would especially highlight the comments shared by Sudanese journalist Yousra Elbagir; from whose work I have learned a great deal.

Particularly as journalists in and from Africa, we must learn to resist the urge to cannibalize our communities for our careers or extract from others. There is a way for journalism to be mindful, responsible, kind, and transparent to our sources, the people we serve. As we grow in our careers and compete in what I believe is one of the world's toughest industries, we must learn valuable lessons of responsibility, and this panel speaks to a lot of them.

Do you find short-form content more effective than long-form content or vice versa? How did you experiment with different writing styles to get to where you are today?

They serve various functions. For years, my longform reporting gave me a chance to work slowly and deeply. I spent so much time with every source and every piece of material. I could go in-depth, build narrative, and give my writing space to breathe. That kind of freedom is a gift, but can be quite overwhelming, particularly for young journalists.

Now working in breaking news is a different world. You develop this razor-sharp focus on quick, clean copy. Your job is to effectively explain what's happening, in as few words as possible, in a way that anyone, anywhere can understand it. So, all the extra stuff must fall away – 'kill your darlings,' as the old writing adage goes. And that does wonders for your skills as a journalist.

As an industry, we need both short-form and long-form. They feed off each other, and at different points in your career, you will meet stories that are best told in one form or the other.

The 5th anniversary of the 2019 Khartoum Massacre passed on June 3rd. As you continue to cover Sudan's history and current war remotely from Cairo, what is an important takeaway you have received as a journalist and as someone from the African continent?

The single most important takeaway for everyone covering or observing Sudan is to listen to the people. Sudan's neighborhood-based grassroots volunteers – who have gone from organizing protests to delivering life-saving aid during the current war – are the single most important voices to listen to. They knew their revolution was being stolen, and by whom. They knew the war was coming. And they know what they need now.

There is a reason the UN has called the Emergency Response Rooms the 'frontline' of humanitarian response. They are not only staving off literal famine now, but their members – both inside and outside of Sudan – have the revolutionary imagination and clear-headed analysis necessary to chart the course forward.

How do you keep yourself inspired and going as a journalist when you cover difficult topics such as war, poverty, religious persecution, etc.?

One of my first journalism mentors once told me that even years into his career, he couldn't believe he got the chance to learn new things, speak to interesting people, and tell stories for a living. It is a remarkable gift when you think about it. As often as I can, I go after the kind of reporting that reminds me that it will always go back to my curiosity and love for stories.

We are lucky to be coming up as journalists now, when it is not taboo to talk about the massive toll that covering difficult topics can take on us as professionals. The culture is changing, and we can finally talk about things like vicarious trauma and mental health, when generations before us simply suffered in silence. My advice on this to young journalists is to use every tool at your disposal, even the ones that sound horribly cliché, because they will keep you healthy.

As you grew within the field, when did you notice yourself shifting from mentee to mentor?

I think at most points of our careers, we're both. I am incredibly grateful to have the mentors I have, and am constantly learning from so many incredible, generous journalists. Every bit of time, guidance, or correction has done wonders for me. It is also very humbling every time young(er) journalists reach out to me for advice or insight. Our field is built on the communities we make, the courage to cold email someone you respect and the generosity to pass on any wisdom that was passed on to you.