Discernment and Flexibility: An Interview with Gabriele Steinhauser

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Gabriele Steinhauser was a guest speaker to the HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps. Based in South Africa, she serves as Africa Bureau Chief for the Wall Street Journal.

What challenges do you face managing a team of correspondents across the continent, and how do you ensure comprehensive coverage?

The biggest challenge is that we are a small team – four journalists including myself – that is tasked with covering about 50 countries, each with a different history, government, and usually multiple local languages. The result is that we end up having to be quite selective about what we cover, picking the right moment to tell a particular story in a big way, rather than writing about each, incremental, development. We also work closely with local freelance journalists to help us understand and get access to various places.

Could you share an example of a story you've covered in Africa that had a significant impact or resonated with readers?

My colleagues' scoop last year about the United Arab Emirates supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in their war against the Sudanese military was probably the most impactful of our recent stories. Since we reported on these weapons shipments, the UAE (which has denied supporting the RSF) has come under pressure

from the U.S. and other international governments and its involvement has been one of the central topics when the war is discussed in global fora like the United Nations.

Stories that resonate with readers often fall into two categories:

Readers like exclusive, detailed stories on issues they already care about, such as Russia's expansion in Africa or the increase in governments taking human hostages to put pressure on other countries. This story about one of Wagner's key fixers in Africa or this one on Equatorial Guinea's vice president are pretty good examples of that.

In the other category are deeply reported, usually human-driven narratives or profiles that allow our mostly American readers to feel closer and better understand events that are far removed from their every-day lives. For examples, I would point to this story, actually written by two of our former African correspondents, on two sisters who were kidnapped by Boko Haram, or my recent article about a mother and her children who were attacked by the RSF in Darfur.

As a journalist, how do you balance objectivity with the need to tell compelling and impactful stories?

I actually don't see a contradiction between the two. Most readers (as well as our editors) will quickly pick up on biases in our reporting and failure to be fair, for instance by not giving everyone we write about the opportunity to comment, will actually undermine an article's impact by making it less credible.

What strategies do you employ to navigate sensitive topics or gain access to sources in regions with complex political dynamics?

This is a difficult one and it very much depends on the specificities of each situation. Number one, I would say, is to do your research, so you understand what situation you are entering and whether or how your work could affect the people you speak to. This involves first talking to experts on a certain topic or place and, if there are concerns about local authorities potentially going after people who speak to journalists, meeting them or communicating with them in a place or through a medium that can't easily be surveilled.

What advice would you give to aspiring journalists who want to specialize in international affairs and reporting from diverse regions?

Speaking different languages is a huge plus, especially if you want to work for an international publication. If you want to cover Africa, in addition to local languages like

Zulu, speaking Arabic, French or Portuguese will be a big plus, since you will likely have to cover countries that don't use English as an official language.

What motivates you to continue reporting on Africa, and what impact do you hope your work has on global perspectives?

African countries are often at the center of global issues such as climate change, migration, poverty or access to the natural resources necessary for the global energy transition. By 2050, one in four people on Earth will be African, so writing about what happens here is important. I hope that my and our teams' work succeeds in doing several things: holding the powerful--whether it's governments, companies or individuals--accountable and writing in a way that avoids stereotypes or generalizations and reminds our readers of how much we have in common, despite cultural, geographical or racial differences.

How did you transition from covering the eurozone debt crisis and climate policies in Europe to reporting on life, politics, and economics in Sub-Saharan Africa?

The simple answer is that we had an opening in the Johannesburg bureau and I applied for it. While on the face of it, these are two very different assignments, ultimately the necessary skills are more or less the same: curiosity, persistence, diligence and the ability to write about a potentially complex topic–whether its a proposed new climate law in the EU or elections in an African country most readers will never have visited–in a way that is interesting and easy to understand.