WHAT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT

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The Guardian recently published an open letter from a group of American academics and writers to the CBS network complaining that their coverage of African issues left Africans themselves 'voiceless and all but invisibleâ€™.

It's an excellent and thought provoking piece which is well worth reading; here are a couple of illustrative quotes.

> *Liberians not only died from Ebola, but many of them contributed bravely to the fight against the disease, including doctors, nurses and other caregivers, some of whom gave their lives in this effort. Despite this, the only people heard from on the air were white foreigners who had come to Liberia to contribute to the fight against the disease.*
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> *Africans themselves are typically limited to the role of passive victims, or occasionally brutal or corrupt villains and incompetents; they are not otherwise shown to have any agency or even the normal range of human thoughts and emotions. Such a skewed perspective not only dis-serves Africa, it also badly dis-serves the news viewing and news reading public.*

CBS isn't the only news outlet that is guilty of this sort of thing; we get plenty of examples of it in the UK too. What is worse, from my point of view, is that this sort of attitude is also found in a significant amount of missionary communications.

I've read more missionary biographies, magazines and prayer letters than any single individual should be required to in the space of a single lifetime. These can be fascinating, inspiring and uplifting communications. If it wasn't for some of the books I read as a teenager, I'd probably have a proper job now! However, it seems to me that all too often, missionary communications give undue prominence to the missionaries themselves and miss out some important factors.

Like CBS, missionaries often neglect to give a voice to the people they are working with, or present them as helpless victims who can't function without outside help.

More worryingly, perhaps, missionary writing can leave God out of the equation. Agencies and individuals promise results, they say that they are changing the world or extending God's Kingdom. I'm sorry, but only God can promise results, and certainly he is the only one who can change the world or extend his Kingdom.

I fully understand that missionaries and agencies need to promote their work; to promote what they are doing and to encourage people to pray for them and to support them financially. However, when we talk about ourselves to the exclusion of others and claim for ourselves things which only God can do, we are not communicating in an ethical fashion. Blowing our own trumpets might be good fundraising and advertising practice, but it shouldn't be part of the way in which Christian organisations talk about themselves.