WHAT IF THE VICTIMS WERE WHITE?

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We need to think carefully about the way in which we write about our brothers and sisters around the world
Category: Observations

Kenya has once again been the location of another attack by the Al Shabab terrorist organisation. As I write, theÂ death toll is still climbing and family and friends are having to come to terms with the loss of their loved ones. You can find information on the attack itself and the aftermath in the mainstream media (though, for reasons that will become obvious, I would suggest reading Kenyan, not Western accounts).

Alongside the attack itself, a storm blew up on social media after the New York Times published pictures of some of the victims while the attack was still underway. Many Kenyan writers (and others) responded that showing photographs of bodies in this way lacked taste and, more importantly, respect for the people involved. Here are some of the responses that I saw on Twitter:

https://twitter.com/texasinafrica/status/1085551431996837889

https://twitter.com/brodiegal/status/1085546583956037632

https://twitter.com/johnedwinmason/status/1085567957495889920

https://twitter.com/johnedwinmason/status/1085569780344594433

It isn't my intention to excoriate the New York Times or the Western media in general for the different way in which they treat people of different races (though there is certainly a place for that). I'd like to simply ask whether missionary publications (and Christian publications in general) fall into the same trap? Do we treat our brothers and sisters from Africa and across the world with the same standards and dignity that we would expect in this country? It is all too easy for an organisation which is trying to raise support for work in a particular country to present a picture which only stresses the needs and the problems, without any mitigation or balance. Poverty porn is a thing. I touched on this a few weeks ago.

If we do fall into this trap, it is a problem. Firstly because it does a disservice to our brothers and sisters across the world. If we don't write about them with the same objectivity and nuance that we do about our own countries, then we are discriminating against them in the way that James warns us against. Secondly, we need to realise that the people we are writing about know what we are writing and any negativity, lack of balance or discrimination will ultimately impact our relationships with them and our ability to work with them. My friend Chris tweeted an issue which might surprise many in the West:

https://twitter.com/ChrisHowles/status/1085796437374500864

In passing, I would suggest you follow up the thread that is mentioned in Chris' first tweet.