Security: Empathy over Paris Attacks

Details
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Kenyans woke up Saturday morning to discover that while we slept, terrible coordinated terrorist attacks rocked the French capital Paris. We joined citizens of the world to sigh a collective groan in sympathy with the victims and thoughts of “not again”.

Tens of thousands of Kenyans also stood shoulder to shoulder with Parisians in January this year by retweeting and reposting the slogan “Je suis Charlie” following the Charlie Hebdo shooting. Commensurate with our own horrific Garissa University College massacre, French students responded with a collective “Je suis Kenyan” as it trended in France.

Nonetheless, commentators focused on how the world showed more sympathy to the first Paris terrorist attack this year as opposed to Garissa. In fact, many pundits at the time even accused Kenyans ourselves of not showing enough outpouring of grief following the terrorist attack at Garissa University College. Now that Paris suffers again, many of the same observers raise comparison arguments this week.

We interrupt our investment management series in Business Talk to discuss the following five mix of disturbing and understandable logical reasons to explain why the global media coverage in France as differs to that of Kenya and implications for business here. First, France sits right in the backyard of global media powerhouses. The BBC headquarters as well as Al Jazeera and CNN’s main Europe bureaus sit only 2 hours and 16 minutes away by Eurostar train. Although each network retains a Nairobi presence for regional news, the London bureaus hold far more staff. China’s main global station, CCTV, often broadcasts more about Europe because of its own geopolitical interests. Africa holds no worldwide news agency of its own, so our news gets distorted through foreign lenses.

Second, France broadcasts one of its own television channels, France 24, around the globe. So world audiences, including right here in Kenya, see the news from a French perspective. During European crises, many tune into France 24 for its perspective.

Third, tens of millions of tourists add Paris as their destination of choice each year. In fact, Paris often thrives in a competition with London as the most visited city in the world. Such direct familiarity enhances global interest in French news that enables people to relate where they visited.
Fourth, most importantly, both Western and Northern audiences feel more empathy with the Parisians than with Garissa County. Researcher Pan Yan-Gu delineates that empathy transpires when an observer perceives or imagines someone else’s affect that triggers a response causing the observer to partially feel what the target feels. Empathy involves two independent elements: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy. So do non-Africans lack appropriate neural networks to empathize with us? No, of course not. But some serious realities impact their ability to emotionally empathize with us.

First-hand experience with someone or a place, as mentioned above, increases one’s ability to empathise with that individual’s or place’s feelings. Tania Singer and Claus Lamm’s research on empathy highlight how we contextualize an area or person and our interpersonal relationship with the empathizer as key to our levels of empathy. So Western and Northern viewers relate more to Paris because on video and pictures, the streets and buildings look more similar to their own areas. During and after the Westgate attack, global media covered it far more than Garissa largely because of the drawn out process involved in taking control of the building, but also since the upscale mall looked just like nice buildings in the West or in East Asia. People could relate. Contrast the Westgate coverage with footage from the Garissa assault in that the area seemed dusty, void of grass, different looking trees, old structures, and rough building and wall finishing. The area looked so different from what global audiences were accustomed to that empathy suffered. Further, they felt no fear that such an atrocious savage cowardly attack could reach them in their own countries because the environment seemed so different.

Also, Svenja Koehne and team found that when you perceive that someone mimics you, you gain empathy with them. Since historically Kenya followed the lead of Britain, then one would expect British citizens to hold more empathy for us than other nations.

Fifth, the world holds a widely known unconscious bias against people of other skin colours and broadly against darker skin. Alessio Avenanti at the University of Bologna famously chose white Italians and black Africans to watch short video clips of Caucasians and Africans receiving pricks in the hand with a medical needle. The results matched what one might expect: "white observers reacted more to the pain of white than black models, and black observers reacted more to the pain of black than white models." However, the experiment took it further and included videos of needles piercing a purple hand. Participants reacted stronger to the fictitious purple hand prick than to penetrating the hands of people from other races. So indifference due to dissimilarity did not cause the difference in reactions, but actual real psychological prejudice.

Researchers have since replicated the experiment and expanded it. Disturbingly, if study participants rate on a one through five scale the level of pain expected to be felt by white or black people, white and even individuals of African descent assume that black individuals feels less pain than their white counterparts. So, sadly, Africans even hold unconscious bias against ourselves. The lack of empathy
negatively impacts demand for media coverage as well as how foreign businesses interact with us.

Amidst horrifying events, we find people’s true psychology. As more social media users debate bigotry and interact with others across racial divides and globalisation fosters more international travel, stereotyping and bias decrease with the greater exposure. However, what extent do failures to empathise also creep into our business environments? Do we fail to feel the pain of a grieving coworker from a different tribe? Might we neglect understanding the struggles of those of opposite races, genders, personalities, sexualities, heights, weights, or disabilities? Let us start at home right here in Kenya to eliminate bias and expect the rest of the world to follow our lead to increase empathy for others who differ from ourselves.

Discuss security and bias with other Business Daily readers through #SecurityBias on Twitter.

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