



Dear Members of the Media

## Responsible Reporting of the Ebola Virus

Perspective is crucial in times of crisis. The Ebola epidemic in West Africa certainly qualifies as such a time. Much of the devastation is attributable to the severe nature of the virus and is exacerbated by poor medical infrastructure in certain affected countries. Still, some of the harm is a result of misinformation. There is no clearer example of this than the collateral damage felt by other African countries, some of which lie thousands of miles from the outbreak.

To date, only six of Africa's fifty-three countries have reported cases of Ebola. The World Health Organisation has confirmed that Ebola is stabilised and contained in Nigeria and Senegal while experts agree that the Democratic Republic of Congo is tackling a strain of the virus that is unrelated to those experienced in other countries. Thus the epidemic is currently only prevalent in three nations: Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Presenting the outbreak as gripping West Africa is ill-advised as it categorises unaffected countries into the disaster. Worse still is grouping the whole of Africa into the emergency; pooling North, South and East Africa into a crisis that has not – and may never – arrive. This association results in unjust economic implications. If this stereotype is perpetuated it will have severe economic repercussions. Lack of detail and careless reporting pulls an entire continent into a calamity that is, in reality, concentrated in a very specific part of Africa.

In order to provide clarity on the scope of the virus, it is necessary to grasp the vastness of Africa. London, Madrid and Paris are closer to the epicentre of the Ebola outbreak than Nairobi, Arusha, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Africa is a continent large enough to contain India, Mexico, Peru, France, Spain, Papua New Guinea, Sweden, Japan, Germany, Norway, Italy, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Nepal, Bangladesh and Greece. Couple a widespread misconception of Africa's size with the careless reporting of Ebola as a 'West African' or 'African' issue and the consequences are dire.

Irresponsible reporting can have an enormous economic impact on countries already suffering economically. Generalised and inaccurate reporting places huge strain on the travel industry as irrational fears and hysteria translate into cancelled bookings, nervous travellers and lost revenue for many businesses. When the reality is that most travel to Africa carries no more threat of contracting Ebola than domestic travel in the USA or travel within Europe. As the founder and CEO of one of Africa's largest online tour operators, I would never allow our clients' safety or security to be placed at risk.

It is unfortunate to detract - even for a moment - from the true victims of the outbreak which, of course, are the individuals that have lost their lives or loved ones to the epidemic and the countries and medical personnel that are tasked with protecting their citizens. It is, however, necessary to address unfounded fear because history tells us that the harm connected to life threatening viruses normally far exceeds the actual threat. Put differently, panic and confusion aid the virus, magnifying its destruction.

The responsibility of managing this collateral damage falls squarely on journalists and reporters who should discourage hysteria in favour of educating viewers and readers about the whereabouts and extent of the virus. Why not report on the countries in Africa which are unaffected and assuage concerns about travel to Eastern and Southern Africa?

Herein lies the choice: be part of the solution or add fuel to a fire that needn't detriment an entire continent.

Yours Faithfully

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