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To cite this article: Caesar A. Atuire, Grace Addison, Samuel Asiedu Owusu & Patricia Kingori (2021) “Covid Cure (1)”: Anas’s Investigative Journalism and the Ethics of Uncovering Fakes in African Spaces, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33:3, 312-319, DOI: [10.1080/13696815.2021.1940887](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1940887)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2021.1940887>



Published online: 20 Sep 2021.



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“Covid Cure (1)”: Anas’s Investigative Journalism and the Ethics of Uncovering Fakes in African Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Investigative journalists sometimes resort to the use of fake identities in order to reveal fakes and malpractice, a phenomenon that can be described as revelatory fakery. Acclaimed investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw, in collaboration with *BBC Africa Eye*, employs revelatory fakery to expose and prosecute wrongdoers in Ghana. From an ethical viewpoint, Anas’s revelatory fakery, a second order fakery, becomes a seedbed for an exponential level of fakery. This article poses the question whether Anas’s work is journalism or instead yet another expression of fakery that allows a prosecutor to act as a journalist. This question is contextualised within the ethics of the broader narratives created by the *BBC Africa Eye* investigations, which feed and promote a spectacular but “fake” narrative about Africa as a place of negatives, difference, and darkness.

KEYWORDS

Africa; fakery; Anas; Covid-19 cures; *BBC Africa Eye*

Introduction

In March 2020, at the beginning of concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic gripping the African continent and the total lockdown of Ghana’s capital, Accra, Abdellah Jnr, a self-styled medical doctor and herbalist, took to one of the city’s numerous FM radio stations to announce that he had a cure in his possession. Abdellah Jnr was careful to point out that his “Covid Cure (1)” had not yet received official approval from Ghana’s Food and Drugs Authority and that under no circumstances was it available for sale to the public. Yet he intimated at the end of the radio transmission that he was available to discuss his cure as he gave out his phone number to listeners.

We became aware of “Covid Cure (1)” because of the work of Anas Aremeyaw Anas, more commonly known as Anas, a pluri-awarded Ghanaian investigative journalist who – equipped with secret video and audio recorders – contacted Abdellah Jnr under the guise of a concerned relative in need of “Covid Cure (1)” for someone infected with the virus. A meeting was arranged in Abdellah’s laboratories on the outskirts of Accra. Abdellah Jnr received the undercover Anas donned in a university customised shirt under a white lab coat. The premises were decorated with lab equipment, technicians’ coats, carefully exhibited labelled drugs on shelves, hand sanitisers, and a Muslim *tasheeh*. During the secret recordings made by Anas, Abdellah Jnr and his brother Abdellah Snr reconfirmed the 100% efficacy of their cures which extend to other diseases such as HIV and AIDS. They boasted of top-class clientele, including ministers of government and escapees from Covid-19 quarantine centres.

After some bargaining, and despite claiming that under no circumstances was it available for sale to the public, Anas acquired samples of “Covid Cure (1)” which were then presented to the Ghana Standards Authority for toxicology tests. The results declared that “Covid Cure (1)” was unfit for human consumption. Anas reported the case to the Food and Drugs Authority. The documentary “Corona Quacks” aired by Anas on the *BBC Africa Eye* channel ends dramatically with the Abdellah brothers handcuffed and being led away by a police officer wearing a Criminal Investigation Department (CID) vest. Anas Aremeyaw, one of Africa’s most famous investigative journalists, had once again fulfilled his motto to: “name, shame and jail”.

In this article, we explore the role of Anas’s investigative journalism in exposing fakes and fakery in African spaces. In particular, we are interested in the depiction that one person, irrespective of how laudable her or his aims, should be the arbiter of right and wrong, real and fake, legal and illegal on the African continent. Secondly, we seek to question the nature of the types of stories produced by journalists like Anas and aired by organisations such as BBC Africa as being reflective of an authentic Africa. In so doing, we highlight the wider implications of Anas’s work for the global perception and narratives about Africa – in this case, the a priori assumption of Africa as both the producer and consumer of fakes, reigniting long-held narratives of the vulnerability of Africa without external medicines and interventions. Our goal in this piece is to explore some of the ethical issues surrounding Anas’s methods, particularly the employment of fakery as a principal tool to expose other presumed fakes and wrongdoing in African spaces. Our contribution differs from others, for example, Darko (2020) whose ethical and legal analysis focuses more on how to balance individual privacy with the need to report on issues of public interest. Our aim is to offer reflections from a fakery viewpoint that may contribute to a more critical conversation around the way Anas builds and presents cases for apparent wrongdoers to be prosecuted.

We begin by describing the work of Anas and the popularity of his accounts. This is followed by a questioning of Anas’s employment of revelatory or second order fakery. Finally, we query the seeming objectivity of Anas’s type of journalism, promoted by the BBC, against the backdrop of a colonising narrative about the African continent.

Who is Anas?

Anas Aremeyaw Anas is a Ghanaian investigative journalist whose works are so popular that he has been described unofficially as the “the most feared journalist in Africa” (Ferreira 2019). He is head of an investigative organisation, Tiger Eye P.I., based in Accra. Anas’s recent documentaries are transmitted through the BBC’s *Africa Eye* platform. The release of an Anas documentary in Ghana is a big event preceded by carefully released teasers, previews, announcements, and interviews. In a period of two decades, Anas has exposed human rights abuses and corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa. Supported by secret video cameras, audio recordings, and fake identities to gather evidence, Anas has brought many malaises of contemporary African societies to the public eye. His work has exposed corruption in several public spaces in Ghana: he has exposed wrongdoing among judges, ministers of state, football referees and leaders of the football association, immigration officials, the management of the Electricity Company of Ghana and the Customs Excise and Preventive Service, and more recently frontline healthcare

workers bootlegging anti-Covid-19 PPEs destined to protect their colleagues from infection. Anas's investigative journalism has exposed and led to disciplinary and legal actions against persons who have been caught *in flagrante delicto*. His work has been so successful that the claim "Anas is watching. Do the right thing", has become a popular saying and a subject of works of art in Ghana (Figure 1).

While Anas seeks to expose others, very few people have ever seen his face. In public, Anas always wears a face-covering made of stringed African beads. In his own words, he keeps his identity secret "because of security concerns, because the bad guys are always out there, they will always want to come for people like us" who expose their secret actions to the public (BBC 2018a). Anas argues that the targets of his work are persons engaged in corruption and illicit behaviours across Africa although most of his work has focused on West Africa (Figure 2).

Anas has stated that he has been and continues to be the target of attacks, but it was only in 2019 that it became clear that Anas does not operate on his own but that members of his team are also subject to threats. In fact, on 16 January 2019, Ahmed Suale, a young investigator working with Anas, was shot dead near his family home in Accra. To date, the killers have not been found, arrested, and prosecuted (Yeboah 2021). The death of Ahmed Suale revealed that Anas's work was the collective efforts of multiple unaccredited journalists.

Anas's method of investigative journalism has come under criticism for being a form of entrapment and for lack of transparency regarding criteria for selection of targets, and forms of extortion (see, for example, *Who Watches the Watchman*, Part 1, 2018). Another ethical question that remains unanswered regarding his work is the source of financing. In some documentaries, the investigative *Tiger Eye* journalists under fake



Figure 1. Street art: Anas is watching, do the right thing.



Figure 2. Masked face of Anas.

identities are seen giving relatively large amounts of money to their suspects. Transparency on the part of Anas regarding his sources of funding would allay possible allegations of conflicts of interests and bias. Anas's productions exercise a huge influence over the lives of the persons and the institutions exposed.

Ofori-Parku and Botwe (2020) in a careful study of Ghanaian metajournalistic discourse highlighted four ethical concerns surrounding Anas's method of investigative journalism: personalisation and celebritification of Anas undermine public deliberation; spectacularisation and promotion of corruption as a cultural commodity to be sold and consumed; engagement of the BBC as a source of legitimisation entangles Anas in power structures that can reinforce partial narratives about Africa; and finally the lack of structures of accountability if abuse by Anas could become a threat to democracy. They conclude by pointing out that "(un)covering corruption as a 'public spectacle', while useful in sparking public interest in cases of corruption, is polarising and even undermines the utilitarian justifications that underpin the case for journalistic deception in newsgathering" (404).

The overall picture of Anas that emerges is that of a brave journalist who exposes wrongdoing at a high personal cost. Yet there are also concerns about the methods he employs, the effects of his work, and the power he wields without being fully accountable to anyone.

The Revelatory Fake

Since the outbreak of the ongoing pandemic, on every continent there have been new "cures" for Covid-19, most of which have, to date, turned out to be fraudulent.¹ Tooth-pastes, certain religious practices and USB flash drives purportedly offering protection

from the non-existent threat of infection transmitted via 5G mobile telephone radio waves are some of the many “cures” that have emerged over the months from across the globe (Cox 2020). The multiplication of such claims creates a fertile territory for investigative journalism.

The goal of investigative journalism, according to De Burgh (2008), is to unearth information of public interest but which has not been sufficiently highlighted. Quite often, this entails revealing facts through whatever media may be available to discover the truth and to identify lapses, information that some people might want kept away from the public eye. Investigative pieces are often triggered by a journalistic hunch, an informant or whistleblower, or a critical observation of missing pieces in the information available to the public. Nevertheless, investigative journalism requires attentive scrutiny and supervision to ensure that important ethical values are not breached in the process of obtaining and presenting a story to the public.

Anas’s investigative pieces follow the trend of tackling issues that are of public interest, but which public? Anas’s documentaries are presented in English and not in any of the widely spoken Ghanaian languages, for example Twi, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language. Media houses employ Twi to target large sections of both the educated and uneducated in Ghana. Moreover, the fact that Anas’s documentaries are often presented on the *BBC Africa Eye* platform points to an international audience and locally, to the middle and upper classes of Ghanaian society.

Anas’s “investigative journalism” can be classified broadly as second order fakery or revelatory fakery, defined as “a method seeking to identify, target, and expose presumed fakes through fakery itself” (Kingori and Jones 2020). If we accept the accusations made in *Corona Quacks* as being plausible, and the documentary is compelling, then the first fake is “Covid Cure (1)” – the Covid-19 therapeutic cure produced by the Abdellah brothers. The second order fake is the method used by Anas to expose this first fake through his own use of fakery. Anas hid his identity from the Abdellah brothers and lied about the reason for which he wanted to purchase the drug. In this way two different orders of fakes are exposed in this one example. However, it is possible that Anas and his second order fakery open the doors to a proliferation of other forms of fakes and fakery.

Revelation or Confirmation?

A concern highlighted by Kingori and Jones (2020) is whether revelatory fakes or second order fakes do reveal *real* facts or simply confirm suspicions which may be influenced by pre-judgments, epistemological assumptions, and power imbalances. According to Kingori and Jones (2020),

revelatory fakes transfer considerable power to those faking, positioning the method as an impartial, morally neutral object capable of accessing and extracting reality, while having no role in its construction. Yet there are many reasons, including those drawn from historical examples, why this should be questioned. (223)

Indeed, the visibility of Anas’s investigative journalism is such that Barack Obama, in his 2009 African policy address in Ghana, singled out Anas and commended him as “a courageous journalist who risked his life to report the truth” (Obama 2009).

Turning to *Corona Quacks*, the documentary which claims to expose the fakery of “Covid Cure (1)” through the samples procured by Anas which were presented to the Ghana Standards Authority for testing, the toxicological test revealed that the potion was unfit for human consumption because it contained bacteria and mould. The documentary does not tell us whether any tests were carried out to show whether the potion did actually include any active ingredients that are beneficial to human health. It was premised on the assumption that the Abdellah brothers, the creators of the “Covid-Cure (1)”, were fake herbalists trying to prey on public fears of the pandemic. The immediate result of the investigation is seen at the end of the documentary as the Abdellah brothers are handcuffed and led away by police officer wearing CID vests thus achieving the goals of Anas’s motto: name, shame, and jail.

Ethics of the Broader Narrative

The *Corona Quacks* documentary is a *BBC Africa Eye* production. At the launch of this TV news strand in December 2018, the BBC Commissioning Editor, Nisha Kapur, said that,

Africa Eye will promote the culture of investigative journalism across Africa and strengthen the skills of African investigative journalists. All of the programmes will be based on in-depth reporting that holds power to account. They will tackle topics that are of intense interest and concern to audiences in Africa. These reports will be produced in a fresh and contemporary style that resonates with young audiences. (BBC Media Centre 2018)

Two years later, *BBC Africa Eye* has become a website of African horror stories including programmes with titles like “Sex for Grades: undercover inside Nigerian and Ghanaian universities”, “Sudan’s Secret Hit Squad” and “Kenyan Gangster Killings” and more recently “South Africa’s Covid Storm”. The latter premiered on 29 November 2020 and was met with widespread condemnation on social media platforms where comments included:

Kethani Rammela (December 2020). “The stigma BBC news show about African countries ? which are doing pretty well on covid19 than EU countries”.

Thando Mbatha (December 2020). “BBC: South Africa is sick, corrupt and ‘struggling’ SA: Really BBC, you guys are the corrupt ones! My thing is why choose to show this now?! It’s December ?”

Thought Process (December 2020). “I’m so confused, I’m in South Africa right now and I wasn’t aware that we are in the middle of a Covid 19 storm. @BBC stop spreading false information and fear. We are perfectly fine. South Africa’s response has been one of the best in the world. This is despicable of you to do.”²

It is against this background that *Corona Quacks* and the work of Anas is promoted as providing an authentic insight into contemporary Africa. We are not suggesting that the stories told by *BBC Africa Eye* are fabrications, although many of those commenting on social media argued that they were, but rather why the dominance of these negative narratives?

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, positives have emerged from Africa. In Ghana, for example, 370,000 PCR tests were carried out in the early phase of the pandemic between March and mid-July 2020, making the nation one of the countries in the WHO Africa Region with the most tests per 100,000 population (WHO, Regional Office for Africa 2020). This was achieved through an innovative method of pooled sampling. At

the onset of the outbreak, only the Noguchi Memorial Institute at the University of Ghana had the capacity to test for COVID-19. Whilst the government was trying to establish other testing laboratories, scientists at the Noguchi Memorial Institute came up with the solution of pooled sampling which enabled them to test up to 1000 samples at a time. More recently, researchers from the school of Public Health at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and technology, after obtaining promising laboratory results from studies on a herbal medicine, locally called *nibima*, technically *cryptolepis sanguinolenta*, have successfully applied for authorisation from the Food and Drugs Authority to carry out phase II clinical trials of the drug as a COVID-19 therapy (FDA Ghana 2021).

Such stories are absent from *BBC Africa Eye*. For a news platform claiming to share programmes that are “based on in-depth reporting that holds power to account” and to “tackle topics that are of intense interest and concern to audiences in Africa” (BBC Media Centre 2018), one might ask which powers the *BBC Africa Eye* has in mind? Corrupt African officials and governments? What about other forms of political, economic, and epistemic power that structurally disempower Africa and Africans? Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) has pointed out there has been a long tradition of a “single story” that portrays “Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are ‘half devil, half child’.” The danger of a single story is that it can lead to grave misconceptions about people and places. Could Anas’s work, promoted by the BBC, be adding to the “fake” narratives about Africa that have been told for centuries?

Notes

1. US FDA, 1 April 2020.
2. These comments and others can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0WDtG7E1tg&lc=UgybZv6-p6uKCv88uXZ4AaABAg>.

Acknowledgements

Patricia Kingori is funded by a Wellcome Trust Senior Investigator Award (Pseudo Global Health: Fakes, Fabrications and Falsehoods in Global Health grant number 209830/Z/17/Z).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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