

Interview - Andy Wolff

Written by E-International Relations

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Andy Wolff is a German film-maker, who together with Stefanie Brockhaus works at Brockhaus/Wolff films. Previously he co-directed *On The Other Side of Life*, about life in a South African township. In this interview we mainly discuss Andy's latest production, *The Captain and His Pirate* (streamable or downloadable through the website) a documentary about the captain of a cargo ship who was taken captive off the coast of Somalia and the pirate leader who took him hostage. The documentaries produced by Wolff and Brockhaus can be streamed on their site.

Could you shortly describe the plot of your documentary 'The Captain and His Pirate'?

A German captain and his crew are held hostage by Somali pirates for four months. The film is about the captain and the head of the Somali pirates. Both of them describe the hostage situation from their points of view. Both of them explain to us how and why they've come to build a trusting relationship in the end.

What became of the people in the film after it was produced?

The captain toured with the film for over one year and showed it on festivals all around the world – from Germany to Holland, Mexico, Morocco, and Australia. It became part of his therapy because the film touches a sensitive subject – the fact that, at a certain point, the captain was rejected by his own crew. Before the production of the film the captain avoided this subject. After the film he's gotten used to facing the crowd and explaining how this happened and why there were times when he could trust Ahado, the leader of the Somali pirates, more than anyone else of the parties involved.

The number of pirate attacks in the gulf of Aden have sharply declined since 2012, what has been the cause of this? And have the root causes of piracy been dealt with?

It's very hard to say what exactly the reasons for the decline were. One of the main reasons was the surveillance of the Indian Ocean by the international army – the protection of the merchant route, or the "war" against the pirates, depending on how you see it.

Because the ships became harder to hijack, the pirates demanded more ransom. Negotiations became more and more complex and durations of the hijackings grew longer and longer.

It wasn't impossible to hijack ships but the whole process became more and more risky and time consuming.

Also, shipping companies replaced Western crews (French, Italian, German, British or American) with Eastern European or Asian ones – that's why it became harder to ask for ransom for the hostages. The whole subject was wiped off the international media because nobody cared about these "second level" seafarers any more. It is horrible but that's what happened. There were cases when shipping companies ceased communicating with the pirates for several months as if they had abandoned the ship and the crew. Like: "Keep the ship and the crew – we don't care about it."

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Then there were certainly other factors within the country that contributed to the decrease. Maybe the provisional government in Puntland had conflicts with the pirates over a share in ransom. That's why it made the pirates job monitoring out of Puntland difficult at times. You can tell because the locations where the pirates held the ships were constantly changing – also moving to the South, to areas that were monitored by a different clan (Haowi). That's why sometimes the two different clans (Darod and Haowi) had to work together. That made the whole process more complex as well.

The civil war added to the difficulties. The risk wasn't over once the ransom money was paid – there were often conflicts after the money was distributed.

But I haven't spent enough time in Somalia to know for sure what the reasons were.

What do you make of the African Union mission AMISOM? And what is its influence on piracy?

On top of my head, I don't know enough about AMISOM to make a statement. I get the feeling that AMISOM's presence in Somalia is predominantly military, confronting parties like Al-Shabab or maybe also pirates. They seem to be in conflict with Al-Shabab. I'm not sure whether getting rid of Al-Shabab is the true solution for Somalia. From what I know AMISOM is Western backed, which is a problem in my point of view in a country like Somalia. That's why the president seems to be “put in place by foreigners” – either Ethiopian or Western, or both. This approach reminds me of Afghanistan. Personally, I am against any aggressive form of Western influence in countries which used to be colonies. Propagating Western ideals might not be a healthy long term solution for a tribal society. It seems short sighted, in my point of view. This presence gives local people the impression that there's an economical interest. Foreigners want to find quick solutions in order to make money in the region. Instead, the West should ask itself: Why is there piracy in Somalia, really? The same question needs to be answered concerning Al-Shabab's influence. Why is it's influence so big? It has a lot to do with the colonial history. The West has contributed a lot to the situation in the country – it is partly responsible for the chaos. It divided the country, clan structures were shattered, weapons were poured into the country during Siad Barre, and so on. One should think that the West is obliged to “help” this country peacefully and in the long run, without expecting any economic return. How should the West help? That is a very complicated question. Some people say NO INVOLVEMENT is the BEST HELP, meaning no manipulation whatsoever, no AMISOM if it's backed by the West with Western expectations.

Somalia is often considered as the epitome of chaos, does this view need to be modified? And where do you see the country evolving in the next ten years?

Out of all African countries I think Somalia has the biggest potential to see great development in the future. The Somali diaspora is one of the biggest in the world, they're highly educated and spread all over Europe and North America. They've always been a trading people. It is said that Somali merchant ships have sailed to India and China long before Europeans ever thought about crossing the Atlantic. They are used to travelling between continents and exchanging with different cultures. For more than 1500 years Somalis have had very close relations with the Arabian Peninsula, which is culturally completely different to the African continent. Somalis integrated the Arabian influence in their African culture. Despite this close relation with the Arabs they're deeply rooted African. As nomads they have regularly migrated as far as Kenia and Ethiopia. Somalia has known forms of civilization very early. Islam has come to Somalia only few decades after it was created on the Arabian Peninsula. The Somalis adapted the Arab religion with their African tribal customs, creating one of the most fascinating forms of religion at the time. One could say that Somalis are very good equipped to survive in a globalized world. Having crossed continents for centuries, globalization is part of their culture. Many aspects of this people make it one of the most progressive people on the African continent.

What projects are you currently working on?

Together with my partner Stefanie Brockhaus I'm working on a feature documentary film about the veiled Saudi poetess Hissa Hilal. She is known for controversial verses and was the first woman to enter the finals the American idol for Arab poets – “The Million's Poet” – the most highly endowed literary award. In her poems Hissa condemned

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the fatwas of hardline Saudi clerics – live, in front of 70 million spectators. This forever changed her life. We tell the dramatic story of Hissa Hilal, to give the audience an idea what it means to grow up in Saudi Arabia as a Bedouin woman. With this film we want to confront the Western audience with its attitudes towards women who wear the Niqab. Women who wear the Niqab are sometimes confronted with prejudices from Westerners. We often ignore the circumstances – for instances why this custom was created in the first place and what made it spread so rapidly all over the Arab countries in the last three decades. I assume that most Westerners would not necessarily expect a sharp and modern mind like Hissa behind a black cloak.

How do you think documentaries can help explain the complex issues generally studied in international relations?

Stories and human accounts can bring an audience closer to the subject than theory. I think it was Nietzsche who said that, when two people talk, the actual content of the words makes up only seven percent of the information that is exchanged. The other 93% of the information which is exchanged are: Facial expressions, body language, the melody and rhythm of the vocal language. If we see a human being on screen and see and hear his or her story, the *emotional* content makes us *experience* information, as opposed to *learning* it *rationally*. And I believe this experience can add to the facts of a subject, making it more complete. I can read thousands of pages of case studies and interpretations about abortion. But if I hear and see a woman talk about her story I get triggered in a more intense way, understanding the subject emotionally.

What do you think academics could learn from documentary makers?

Think human. Think emotional. Instead of only rational. What do people feel and what do they need – it can add to the facts. Story telling was always part of passing wisdom to the next generation. I think academics should integrate the story of their subject into their studies to make it more live. Make it personal. Make it wet instead of dry. This is my personal opinion – and I must say that I'm someone who always had a hard time in school sitting still.

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This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.