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Humanitarian Journalism

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Summary

Humanitarian journalism can be defined, very broadly, as the production of factual accounts about crises and issues that affect human welfare. This can be broken down into two broad approaches: "traditional" reporting about humanitarian crises and issues, and advocacy journalism that aims to improve humanitarian outcomes. In practice, there is overlap between the two approaches. Mainstream journalists have long helped to raise awareness and funds for humanitarian crises, as well as provide early emergency warnings and monitor the treatment of citizens. Meanwhile, aid agencies and humanitarian campaigners frequently subsidize or directly provide journalistic content.

There is a large research literature on humanitarian journalism. The most common focus of this research is the content of international reporting about humanitarian crises. These studies show that a small number of "high-profile" crises take up the vast majority of news coverage, leaving others marginalized and hidden. The quantity of coverage is not strongly correlated to the severity of a crisis or the number of people affected but, rather, its geopolitical significance and cultural proximity to the audience. Humanitarian journalism also tends to highlight international rescue efforts, fails to provide context about the causes of a crisis, and operates to erase the agency of local response teams and victims. Communication theorists have argued that this reporting prevents an empathetic and equal encounter between the audience and those affected by distant suffering. However, there are few empirical studies of the mechanisms through which news content influences audiences or policymakers. There are also very few production studies of the news organizations and

journalists who produce humanitarian journalism. The research that does exist focuses heavily on news organizations based in the Global North/West.

Keywords: aid agencies, crisis reporting, distant suffering, foreign correspondents, humanitarian, international media, journalism studies

Introduction

William Howard Russell, one of the most famous foreign correspondents of the 19th century, is widely considered the first war correspondent. But he could also be considered a "humanitarian journalist." His reports from the Crimean War detailed appalling human suffering, a lack of medical support, and the outbreak of cholera. These accounts shocked readers in the United Kingdom, prompting large charitable donations, and allegedly helped inspire Florence Nightingale's medical mission to the Crimea, which would transform the practice of nursing and crisis response.

This article considers the intertwined relationship of journalism and humanitarianism and the way that communication scholars have studied the subject. It introduces the complicated and contested concept of humanitarian journalism, providing a brief history of its practice and an overview of key themes in the research literature. It demonstrates that there is a large body of research on the content of humanitarian journalism and the crises that receive news coverage. Far fewer studies have explored the production of humanitarian journalism or its impact on audiences and policymakers.

What Is Humanitarian Journalism?

Although commonly used, the phrase "humanitarian journalism" is surprisingly hard to define. Both of its key concepts—"humanitarian" and "journalism"—can be controversial, with definitions that have evolved over time and that vary across cultures and organizations. Humanitarians fiercely disagree about whose suffering should be addressed, and how. Some argue that a crisis must be an urgent emergency to count as a "humanitarian issue," others believe it is their responsibility to address the root causes of human suffering, including poverty and inequality, which can increase vulnerability to crises. While some humanitarians wish to appear neutral and apolitical at all times, others argue that this is impossible and/or counterproductive. Finally, while some believe that humanitarianism must be restricted to non-state actors and civilians, in some countries the

government is considered the most important humanitarian actor and the military oversee major humanitarian work. Journalists are similarly conflicted. Around the world, journalists celebrate a wide variety of news values and role perceptions. They do not even agree on whether their central occupational task—discovering and representing truth—is possible. Moreover, in recent years, technological disruption, and the rise of citizen journalism, has raised questions about who is considered a journalist.

Given these debates, how can we define and understand the interaction between humanitarianism and journalism? At the most general level, we can define "humanitarian journalism" as the production and distribution of factual accounts of crises, events, and issues relating to human welfare. Within this very broad definition, we can identify two distinct approaches. The first, and most common, is to view "humanitarian journalism" as a specialty or news beat within traditional journalism. This approaches "humanitarian journalism" in terms of its subject matter. Research projects—and journalists—will delineate that subject matter in slightly different ways. Powers (2012, p. 3), for example, has defined humanitarian journalism as including reporting on "humanitarian organizations" and "humanitarian events." Cottle and Cooper 2015, p. 1), describe humanitarian news as simply "the reporting of humanitarian disasters," while Ross (2004, p. 3) defines it as "media coverage of relief efforts."

An alternative – more controversial – approach, is to locate humanitarian journalism within the tradition of humanitarianism. It can be defined as a communication act that aims to alleviate suffering and improve human welfare. This might include, for example, a report that explicitly encourages charitable donation or that disseminates information that is useful for those suffering from—or responding to—a humanitarian crisis. In this approach, the concept is defined in reference to the practitioner's communication goal. It places humanitarian journalism under the broad umbrella of "advocacy journalism," which includes movements such as peace journalism and solutions journalism—reporting that aims to improve or promote social well-being.

Critics of advocacy journalism have argued that it should not be considered an act of journalism because "real journalism" must be neutral and cannot have an agenda; this crucial criterion, they argue, is what separates journalism from propaganda or marketing material. Supporters of advocacy journalism, by contrast, maintain that traditional journalism has never been objective or neutral and that, provided practitioners are transparent in their motives and factual in their work, it is an acceptable subgenre of journalism (for a discussion, see Waisbord, 2009).

Although seemingly in conflict, there is overlap between the two approaches; we should not overstate the distinction between journalism about humanitarianism and journalism as

humanitarianism. There have always been outspoken and partisan news outlets who use their reports to lobby for change. The activist Yellow Press in the United States, for example, often campaigned for humanitarian and charitable causes, as did the highly influential Christian newspapers of the era (Curtis, 2015). This practice continued through the 20th and 21st centuries at many well-regarded newspapers, TV stations, and websites, and the notion of the journalist as advocate is celebrated in many media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Moreover, as Cottle and Cooper note, the global news media frequently performs the work of the humanitarian community—through surveillance, early warning, and monitoring the treatment of citizens (2015, p. 4). Blurring the line still further, humanitarian organizations often pour considerable resources into their media relations teams and, in some cases, even directly subsidize or pay for traditional journalism about humanitarian crises.

Having introduced the parameters of existing debates about definitions of humanitarian journalism, this article now focuses on the evolution of humanitarian reporting. In particular, it examines how it evolved as new technologies were introduced and the humanitarian sector expanded. This history further illustrates the close relationships between the work of humanitarians and journalists, as well as the multiple approaches that practitioners have taken in their reporting on issues of human welfare.

The Evolution of Humanitarian Journalism

The humanitarian impulse to help others and improve human welfare is as old as humankind. But the humanitarian system as we know it in the 21st century—a semi-permanent, international arrangement of institutions and actors who coordinate their efforts to address human suffering—only started to emerge in the early 19th century (Davey Borton, & Foley, 2013). Several key humanitarian organizations were founded at that time, including The International Committee of the Red Cross (1863); international agreements and laws were introduced to govern warfare; and there were several large-scale, transnational efforts to alleviate suffering during crises.

In the 19th century, journalism was also becoming more international and systematic. The Times newspaper in the United Kingdom hired its first foreign correspondent in the early 1800s, and the international newswires were established and rapidly expanded from the middle of the century, "following the telegraphs," and providing the basic foundations for rapid information flow around the globe. The reports of these early journalists from crises including the Crimean War, famine in India, and atrocity in the Congo, played a crucial role in raising awareness of distant suffering; this

journalism was a key factor in the expansion of the humanitarian ethic and development of a more coordinated humanitarian response system (Barnett, 2011, p. 29).

Technological innovations throughout the 19th and 20th centuries made journalism about distant crises increasingly immediate and vivid to readers "back home." The development of the camera had a particularly profound impact. Early journalists argued that written text was insufficient to convey the horrors they encountered in humanitarian crises (Curtis, 2015, p. 29). Photography helped to overcome this barrier—what Scarry has called, "pain's inexpressibility" and resistance to "verbal objectification" (1987). During a devastating famine in India in 1876–1878, a British military official took a series of photographs depicting extremely emaciated men, women, and children. Newspapers did not have the technology to print these photographs, but missionary magazines and illustrated journals reproduced them as engravings and sketches, and they had a profound impact on the way British elites and audiences mobilized and responded to the famine (Twomey, 2015). Twomey argues that this crisis introduced the practice of displaying shocking images to "evidence" bodily suffering and deprivation in order to prompt humanitarian action (2015, p. 52).

In 1888 the portable Kodak camera was introduced, making photography more simple and widespread; in the 1890s, advances in halftone printing techniques made it economical for periodicals to reproduce these images directly. Missionaries and campaigners were quick to realize the potential (Davey et al., 2013). Many believed that sympathy "was a sentiment stirred primarily through sight" and that barraging the public with "pictorials" was an effective tactic for compelling viewers "to 'compassionate' across barriers of status and race, as well as geographic distance" (Curtis, 2015, p. 28). Christian newspapers in the United States ran extensive campaigns, illustrated with stark and disturbing images, to raise awareness of famine in India in 1897, and many publications carried disturbing images of atrocity in King Leopold's Congo as part of a sustained reform campaign (Grant, 2015, p. 65). Save the Children, founded in 1919, continued this tradition—disseminating pamphlets with images of starving babies as well as taking out newspaper adverts to implore readers to donate (Barnett, 2011).

The introduction of household television sets further revolutionized the representation of distant suffering. The Biafra famine in the late 1960s is often described as the "first televised humanitarian crisis" (Heerten & Moses, 2014, p. 176; Ignatieff, 1997, p. 124). The images of suffering and starvation from Nigeria were broadcast directly into peoples' homes on this relatively new medium and had a profound effect. As Heerten writes,

Witnessing these scenes in full color, motion, and sound—the TV reports usually featured the children crying—amplified the excruciating impression they left. The representational force of TV and photographs lent a ghastly "reality effect" to the reports. (2015, p. 256)

The power of broadcast was further underscored by Michael Buerk's now famous reporting from the famine in Korem, Ethiopia, in 1984. Unusually, Buerk's seven-minute report was broadcast at the start of the BBC news. It was seen by half a billion people in total (Sambrook, 2010) and prompted a massive charitable response—the largest in history at that point in time (Franks, 2013). Notably, this broadcast also led to Live Aid and Band Aid movements, spearheaded by the musician and celebrity Bob Geldof, and sparked what is often described as a new era of celebrity involvement in humanitarian fundraising, campaigning, and media (Brockington, 2014;; Ritchey, 2016).

The Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia in 2004 has become emblematic of a new era of humanitarian journalism in which user-generated content (UGC) plays a pivotal role. Digital cameras and smartphones were now widespread, and with few professional journalists in the region when the tsunami hit, international reporting was dominated by photos and video taken by tourists and citizens caught up in the tragedy. Cooper describes it as "perhaps the first disaster where the dominant images we remember come not from journalists but from ordinary people" (2007, p. 5). The entrance of these new "citizen journalists" raised a host of important questions about journalistic authority, as well as new challenges for journalists in terms of fact-checking and ethical qualms in reusing the work produced by others (see also Pantii, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012).

During the earthquake in Haiti seven years later, citizens were again at the forefront of crisis reporting—this time using Twitter to provide updates and information. In the initial aftermath of the earthquake, radio, TV, and phone networks were down, and for the first 48 hours, international media gathered information almost exclusively via Twitter (Bruno, 2011). Citizens were not just creating media content during this crisis, they also disseminated it directly through social media, circumventing the traditional media altogether.

Humanitarian journalism continues to evolve alongside technology. Notably, virtual reality tools are facilitating the creation of "experiential journalism," in which audiences can directly experience (a reconstruction of) a crisis as it unfolds. In addition, big data and surveillance technology has let audiences become active participants in monitoring crises and alerting authorities. Like many previous technological innovations, virtual reality and big data blur the line between journalism and humanitarianism and bring the audience closer to the crises they witness.

The Content of Humanitarian Journalism

A large body of research has drawn on content analysis and textual analysis methods to examine which humanitarian crises receive news coverage, which are neglected, and how these stories are framed (e.g., Bacon & Nash, 2004; CARMA, 2006; Cottle, 2009; Gutiérrez & Garcia, 2011; Hawkins, 2008; Joye, 2010; Moeller, 1999;). Generally speaking, these studies find that the topics and frames within humanitarian journalism continue to reflect the priorities and worldview of audiences in the Global North.

A long-standing critique of international news coverage is that it focuses too much on humanitarian issues in the Global South and overemphasizes "negative" topics such as "coups and earthquakes" (Rosenblum, 1979). Such coverage, it is argued, serves to reproduce a dominant stereotypical view of the Global South as a place of chaos, tragedy, and helplessness. In the 1970s, such criticisms formed part of a wider set of concerns about uneven global communication flows. In the MacBride report, Many Voices: One World, for example, it was argued that,

The almost permanent spectacle of other people's suffering relayed by the media generates little more than indifference, which appears to be transmuted into a kind of progressive insensitivity, of habituation to the intolerable. (MacBride, 1980, p. 180)

These criticisms sparked demands for a New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) in the 1970s.

The idea that international news focuses too much on topics related to conflict and suffering is still voiced today, but it lacks the same level of political support. In addition, recent empirical research suggests that while "war, conflict and terrorism" may be among the most common topics of international news (alongside sport, politics, and international relations), coverage of "natural" disasters is far less frequent (DFID, 2000, p.20). In the largest ever cross-national content analysis of foreign news coverage—involving 17,000 news items across 17 countries—Cohen and colleagues (2013, p. 55) find that coverage of war, terrorism, and military activity accounted for 15% of coverage on average. But coverage of "accidents and disasters" was far less prevalent, making up, on average, 6% of international news coverage. Similarly, in a study of US television news coverage of Africa, Golan (2008) found the most common topics to be armed conflict (27%), international relations (22%), and the global war on terror (13%), while humanitarian crises (6%) and "natural" disasters (5%) were far less common.

The supposed dominance of humanitarian crises in international news about the Global South, especially sub-Saharan Africa, has been further questioned by studies that highlight the emergence

of new, more positive narratives (Bunce, 2017; Nothias, 2014), as well as academics' own tendency to engage in negative selection, choosing only news about famines, genocides, and other disasters to research (Scott, 2017).

Researchers have also examined the nature of the crises and conflicts that receive coverage, finding that a small number of "high-profile" conflicts take up the vast majority of news coverage, leaving others marginalized and hidden (Hawkins, 2011, p. 59). Hawkins analyzes the coverage of conflicts in 2009 across the main US television networks and the New York Times and finds the following:

The top four conflicts accounted for an incredible 97 percent of the total broadcast time allocated for all conflicts in the television news, and 82 percent of the total conflict coverage in The New York Times. The fifth most covered conflict by the television media was Darfur, but it only attracted 27 minutes for the year on all networks combined. Television coverage of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was just 7 minutes. (Hawkins, 2011, p. 58)

Similar disparities are identified in studies of news coverage of "natural" disasters. For instance, in an analysis of major US newspapers from 2004 to 2014, Yann and Bissell (2015, p. 11) find that the 10 most covered disasters took almost 80% of all coverage, while the remaining 282 disasters covered received, on average, one article in each newspaper. Furthermore, over half of the disasters (51%) received no coverage at all.

Research has repeatedly suggested that the volume of coverage of humanitarian issues does not reflect the number of people affected but, rather, the geopolitical significance and cultural proximity of the crises. Adams (1986, p. 113), for example, finds that "the severity of foreign natural disasters explains less than ten percent of the variation in the amount of attention they are given in nightly U.S. television newscasts." Similarly, in his analysis of four Flemish newspapers between 1986 and 2006, Joye (2010) concludes that the severity of the crisis is not the most important factor; rather, it is the cultural proximity of the country in which a "natural" disaster occurs—that is, factors like cultural affinity, historical links, geographical distance, trade or economic relations, and psychological or emotional distance (Joye, 2010, p. 256).

Further key determinants of the coverage of "natural" disasters include national self-interest, the impact of the disaster on the global economy, and its adherence to key news values such as unexpectedness, spectacularity, and the involvement of nationals (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). The privileging by Western news organizations and their journalists of some disasters as worthy of extensive media coverage and yet conspicuous underreporting of others around the world has been well documented in the research literature (e.g., Bacon & Nash, 2004; CARMA, 2006; Cottle, 2009;

Gutiérrez & Garcia, 2011; Hawkins, 2008; Joye, 2010; Mody, 2010; Moeller, 1999; Seaton, 2005; Soderlund et al., 2008). As a report by CARMA International (2006, p. 5) concludes, "Western self-interest is the precondition for significant coverage of a humanitarian crisis."

In addition to this focus on the events that receive coverage, studies have examined the ways in which humanitarian stories are framed. Researchers have identified an apparent set of "standard characteristics" within reports that frequently appear regardless of the characteristics or location of the crisis (Bacon & Nash, 2004). These include a focus on the actions, interests, and perspectives of international relief organizations as opposed to the agency, voice, and resilience of affected individuals. Hammock and Charny (1996) describe news coverage of humanitarian emergencies as repeatedly conforming to a ritualized "morality play" involving, initially, a heroic response from international actors but whose noble acts are ultimately obstructed, either by "UN bureaucrats" or "local military authorities." This script is unsatisfactory, Hammock and Charny argue, because it misses an analysis of root causes, the role of local relief efforts, or a close examination—and, potentially, critique—of the credibility and capacity of international relief agencies. In a similar vein, in their analysis of Spanish press coverage of the Darfur crisis, Gutiérrez and Garcia (2011) conclude that reporting was dominated by a humanitarian frame that privileged the perspective of European humanitarian organizations, drew attention to the consequences of events rather their causes, and presented Dafuris as playing a passive and secondary role.

Most research on the media framing of humanitarian crises has been based on single-case studies. One of the few analyses of multiple humanitarian crises is a content analysis of Spanish press coverage by Ardèvol-Abreu (2016). This research identifies four dominant news frames: those associated with war and violence, Islamic terrorism, and crime. None of these frames, Ardèvol-Abreu argues, "pointed out the responsibility that 'Northern countries' have or the real causes of poverty" (2016, p. 50). These frames prevailed across the sample of newspapers despite their different editorial viewpoints. Ultimately, Ardèvol-Abreu (2016) conclude that there is a dominant macro-frame of Spanish press coverage of humanitarian crisis which characterizes such events as a threat to the "North," produced by corruption, terrorism, and political incompetence, which can only be resolved either by foreign military force or humanitarian assistance.

Who Makes and Funds Humanitarian Journalism?

Humanitarian journalism is rarely profitable. It is very expensive to fund the time-consuming research necessary to explain the complex causes and contexts of humanitarian crises (Sambrook,

2010). Moreover, humanitarian journalism does not generally help news outlets attract mass audiences, enter lucrative new media markets, or secure advertising from luxury brands (Aly, 2016). This section introduces the handful of organizations that do routinely report on humanitarian issues today: international newswires, public service broadcasters, specialist outlets (often supported by philanthropic foundations), and humanitarian aid agencies. Although these organizations are crucial producers of humanitarian communication, there have been few production studies of their work processes.

The international news agencies—in particular, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP), and Reuters—are rare examples of news organizations that routinely produce original coverage of humanitarian actors and events. They sell these reports to the tens of thousands of news organizations around the world who cannot afford to produce original foreign news reports. The result is that a relatively small number of media actors—based in the Global North—have a significant influence over the nature of humanitarian news (Kwak & An, 2014). In Galtung and Ruge's (1965) seminal study of foreign news content, for example, newswires accounted for 80 to 90% of all foreign news stories in Norwegian newspapers. More recently, Paterson (2007) has shown that wire copy made up a significant amount of the international news coverage for many news organizations, including ABC (91%) and MSNBC (81%), and even for news outlets that audiences might assume produce original news content, such as The Guardian (62%), CNN (59%) and the New York Times (32%). Paterson notes that "In a typical result, for a 642 word CNN story on UN troops in the Congo, 553 words existed in phrases (strings of five words or more) copied from Reuters, and 29 words existed in phrases copied from AP" (2007, p. 62). The dominance of newswires is significant because these outlets privilege a certain type of humanitarian journalism: breaking, "spot news," that is, short updates about events—how many were killed in a landslide, for example—rather than longer or more thematic explorations of more complicated issues such as climate change or structural barriers to relief.

Humanitarian journalism is also routinely produced by news organizations with a strong commitment to public service values, who are often supported by state subsidies. In the United States, the most frequent producers of original news about humanitarian actors and events on television and radio are NPR and PBS. In the United Kingdom, it is the BBC. As well as supporting the information needs of their populace, this reporting can help states who seek symbolic capital and soft power on the international stage (Dencik, 2013). BBC World Service, for example, has historically been funded as an arm of foreign policy, while Al Jazeera English is funded by the government of Qatar primarily because of the reputational benefits it generates by providing counter-hegemonic content (Figenschou, 2014).

Unfortunately, state funding for public service media has fallen in a number of European countries, including France, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom (Sehl et al., 2016). The independence of public service media is also coming under increasing attack by political parties and by the intrusion of commercial imperatives (Sehl et al., 2016). Thus, like their private counterparts, many public service outlets have cut their travel and staffing budgets as well as their numbers of foreign correspondents and news bureaus. One notable exception to this is the BBC World Service, which, after a major row involving parliamentary select committees, has not only had its funding ring-fenced but actually increased. In 2015, it received a pledge of an additional £85 million from the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (BBC News, 2015). The station remains one of the most frequent providers of journalism about humanitarian actors and events in the world.

The BBC, like other British broadcasters including Channel 4 News, and the commercial channels, Sky News, ITV, and Channel 5, also have an agreement with the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which coordinates major international aid agencies in the United Kingdom in the event of a joint fundraising appeal. These broadcasters allow DEC members to broadcast pre-recorded messages at peak times in the first few days of the appeal. Franks (2013) has argued that the DEC agreement has been hugely influential in shaping how journalists relate to humanitarian agencies during news production processes. Using archive material and interviews, she argues that the Ethiopian famine of 1984 was a key turning point in this relationship, during which BBC journalists began to rely far too heavily on the interpretative frames promoted by British international aid agencies. Indeed, she argues that the influence of these aid agencies has now spread far beyond the broadcasters that are part of the DEC agreement. This finding is supported and developed in a wider research literature on the symbiotic relationship between aid agencies and journalists.

As noted in the historical overview, from the earliest days of international reporting, humanitarian agencies, NGOs, and campaigners have sought to shape media content about humanitarian crises. Today, this work is performed by slick, well-funded communication teams who provide logistical support, construct newsworthy events, and give journalists access to case studies and news sources. With budget cutbacks at international news outlets, large numbers of former journalists have moved into communications roles at humanitarian organizations, and this has resulted in ever-closer relationships between the world of aid and journalism (Cottle & Nolan, 2007); some aid workers even refer to themselves as journalists (Abbott, 2015). Researchers are ambivalent about the implications of this aid–journalism relationship. Some have noted it provided a crucial form of support, others that it has led to a rise of "media logic" within the world of humanitarian action. Fenton (2010) argues, for example, that aid agencies' commitment to newsmaking is undermining their ability to provide alternative perspectives and worldviews, so they simply "clone" the news,

rather than radically challenging news norms. Recent work has provided nuanced analysis of how these tensions play out in different contests, with implications for the logic and practices of both the humanitarian field and the journalistic field (McPherson, 2015; Moon, 2018; Powers, 2018; Wright, 2018).

A final, important source of humanitarian journalism are private foundations and philanthropic donors. These funders support the small, specialist news organizations, such as Thomson Reuters Foundation and IRIN, who make in-depth journalism about humanitarian issues. Regular donors to humanitarian journalism include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Humanity United, the UN Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation, as well as some bilateral agencies. News organizations and their respective funders regularly assert that the journalism that results from this funding is independent from the direct editorial influence of donors (Edmonds, 2002, p. 1; see also Browne, 2010; Nee, 2011). However, recent research suggests a more complicated dynamic. While donors rarely attempt to exert any direct editorial influence over the journalism they fund, they do regularly define its thematic focus, with direct implications for the topics that are most reported (Bunce, 2016; Scott, Bunce & Wright, 2019). In addition, donors commonly require journalists to generate and document "impact" with their work, and this may encourage journalists to adopt a more outcome-focused role perception. As a result, journalists may be likely to engage in a closer, more symbiotic relationship with particular target audiences and may not wish to offend the actors they hope to influence (Bunce, 2016). Some in-depth empirical research on this question examines the impact of philanthropic funding on IRIN, a major humanitarian newswire formerly supported by the United Nations. It concludes that donor funding only shapes journalism indirectly, and it is heavily mediated by the professional values of the journalists involved (Scott, Bunce, & Wright, 2017; see also Wright, Scott & Bunce 2018).

The Reception and Impact of Humanitarian Journalism

Funders of humanitarian journalism often believe it has the power to bring about social change. This belief is reinforced by the very strong positive correlation between levels of humanitarian news coverage and financial donations (Cooper, 2015). However, audiences do not have predictable and uniform responses to humanitarian journalism. Although studies in this area are relatively scarce, it is clear that audience responses are shaped by numerous factors—many of which have nothing to do with media texts (Seu & Orgad, 2017). These include audience members' age and gender (Hoïjer, 2004) and political commitments (Kyriakidou, 2015), as well as their socioeconomic status, personal domestic habits, and even the time of day (Wright, 2011).

Early work on audience responses to humanitarian journalism argued that audiences suffer from "compassion fatigue" when confronted with images of distant suffering (Moeller, 1999). This has since given way to more complex understandings, which draw upon Cohen's (2001) work about denial. Scott (2015, p. 638), for example, has identified a number of "culturally acceptable justifications," which allow audiences to avoid responding to images of distant suffering "whilst retaining a positive moral self-image." In the most extensive study to date of public responses to humanitarian issues, Seu and Orgad (2017, p. 1) demonstrate the importance of "taking into account sociocultural and political scripts as well as biographical, emotional and psychodynamic factors" as well as recognizing that public responses are "complex, multi-layered and contingent." The authors ultimately argue that members of the public only respond proactively to mediated humanitarian knowledge when it is emotionally manageable, cognitively meaningful, and morally significant to them (Seu & Orgad, 2017, p. 23).

Researchers have also considered the potential impact of humanitarian journalism on policymakers, although this research is now dated. The famous idea of the "CNN Effect" was coined by critics to discuss the supposed impact on policymaking of the blanket, 24/7 coverage of the Somalian famine of 1991–1992 by cable channels. This simplistic model has been challenged by empirical research into the Somalian famine and the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that demonstrated the reverse: humanitarian news coverage actually followed government actions that had already been decided upon (Natsios, 1996). Toward the end of the 1990s, other work emerged that took a more balanced line: that is, that extensive international news coverage can sometimes shape changes in governments' foreign or aid policies when political objectives and strategies had not already been clearly defined (Livingston, 1997).

In addition to the reasonably short-term effects of charitable giving and policy impact, it is important to consider the long-term impact that humanitarian journalism may have on audiences and, in particular, the way it may inform their understanding of the global system more generally. Critics of the humanitarian system have argued that it operates as a "global welfare institution" that addresses emergencies but not the underlying capitalist structures that create risk and instability in the first place (Barnett, 2011, p. 23l; In addition, by replacing many state-like services in countries experiencing crises, humanitarian action is accused of promoting the privatization of the state, thereby allowing the capitalist system to expand into new areas (Donini, 2010, p. 229).

Humanitarian journalism may help to legitimize this market-driven humanitarian system: first, because humanitarian journalism tends to focus on isolated incidents of suffering rather than offering structural critiques of the system more generally. Second, humanitarian journalism may

operate with a limited "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Hallin, 1994) if it is financially supported by actors who might benefit from the naturalisation of pro-market ideologies (Feldman, 2007, p. 444). In one of the few studies to investigate this issue empirically, Wright (2015) offers some evidence, in the form of journalist testimonies, to suggest that the "position-practice systems" engendered by BMGF funding at the Guardian Global Development website led to the privileging of "demands for the accountability of political, rather than private, forms of power." Third, humanitarian news may play a role in the reproduction of capitalism by promoting an elitist, technocratic approach to social change, which legitimizes ameliorative, rather than transformative, approaches to humanitarian action. In Tyranny of Experts (2014) Easterly accuses many donors and NGOs of helping to advance a "technocratic illusion" in which global poverty is constructed as a purely technical problem amenable to technical solutions, rather than as an issue concerning political and economic rights. In a rare example of a study that seeks to document how this discourse appears within media representations, Wilkins and Enghel (2013) analyze the BMGF-funded "Living Proof" campaign. They show how it focuses on narratives of triumph over tragedy, due to individual empowerment, made possible through the saving grace of US aid. Wilkins and Enghel (2013, p. 168) ultimately conclude that "The emphasis of private aid initiatives on individual empowerment resonates with a broader agenda of neoliberalism that reduces social change to entrepreneurship in a market-based system, and civic involvement and voice to clicktivism."

Future Research on Humanitarian Journalism

Current research on humanitarian journalism tends to be rather patchy. Much of the available literature has focused on the content of this news—an approach that allows researchers to study humanitarian journalism "from afar." While this is very important work, there is a great deal we do not know about the sociology, politics, and economics of humanitarian journalism. Three particular areas would benefit from further research:

1. What is humanitarian journalism, and how is it practiced and operationalized by journalists and communication workers? As noted in the introduction, there is little consensus around the term "humanitarianism" or where its boundaries are drawn. Who gets to be considered a "humanitarian actor" is a political question, and journalists wield influence through their power to name and label some crises and actors in this way. It would be helpful to better understand how journalists approach this topic and negotiate its many tensions. In particular, little research has been done on journalists outside organizations based in the Global North/West. The vast majority of the research literature has focused on news organizations based in Europe and North America.

2. There are a range of important, unanswered questions regarding the factors that influence the production of humanitarian journalism—in particular, the relationship between different funding models for this journalism and the resulting news outputs.This is a pressing issue; journalism business models are unstable, and non-traditional funders, such as philanthropists and foundations, are playing an ever-more-central role in the media landscape. In addition, as discussed throughout this article, aid agencies are key influencers and producers of humanitarian journalism. However, there has been relatively little empirical research on how they shape news practices (although see Scott, Bunce & Wright, 2019) Again, scholars have neglected this issue with regard to philanthropic foundations and aid agencies outside the Global North/West.

3. A third area for future research is the effects of humanitarian journalism on policymakers and other kinds of audiences. There has been a rich and important theoretical consideration of the relationship between audiences and distant suffering (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013; Ignatieff, 1997; Silverstone, 2006; Sontag, 2003). But there is far less empirical research on how humanitarian journalism actually, in practice, influences audiences.

Discussions of the agenda-setting impact of humanitarian journalism often continue to rely on research from the conflict in Somalia and Rwanda—even though this work is decades old and was conducted before the emergence of online journalism and social media. Newer research about the interplay of journalists and policymakers suggests that interelite forms of reflexivity may be more important than so-called “public opinion” (Davis, 2007). That is, there are no straightforward causal links between particular kinds of humanitarian media texts, audience responses, and policy change. Rather, the production and texts involved in humanitarian journalism seem likely to interact with other generative mechanisms in “cumulative, complex, indeterminate and unpredictable process[es]” (Orgad, 2012, p.41). How this process works in practice is an important topic that demands further attention.

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