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Chapter Eleven

From Pictures to Policy: How Does Humanitarian Reporting Have an Influence?

Suzanne Franks

News coverage does not in itself determine policy despite what proponents of the CNN effect might content. But it does wield influence in the democratic interaction between public and government. (Seib, 2002)

The degree of influence of media coverage upon policy is part of a longstanding debate. There are many and varied strands to these relationships and the way that media coverage may or may not influence political decision making in relation to foreign policy. Trying to separate out the precise impact of media effects is invariably complex and often opaque. This chapter analyses the state of the contemporary debates. But it also uses historical analysis to assess the arguments about how media influence affected decision making in the period after the television coverage of the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s, which was a key moment in the way that television reported humanitarian crises.

CNN Effect Defined

The term ‘CNN effect’ was first formally used during the first Gulf War in 1991 to describe the way that real-time news coverage of foreign stories appeared to affect the decision making of political elites, either directly or through the influence upon domestic audiences. It was defined as a ‘generic term for the ability of real time communications technology via the news media to provoke major response from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national

events' (Robinson, 2002). But versions of this argument that media coverage influence foreign policy had been around already for years.

The distinction which arose in the early 1990s was not just the wider question of media influence upon policy, but specifically the way that real-time live pictures, often transmitted via newly emerging 24 hour news TV channels, might potentially have a role in shaping decision making. (Robinson, 2011) And in recent years this has widened into a consideration of how an ever-changing range of online and social media might influence considerations of foreign policy. Yet in the period since 1991, as the debates surrounding the CNN effect developed, there have been many further discussions about cases, where retrospectively media coverage may have appeared to have had an effect upon foreign policy or at least prompted action in relation to foreign events. There have been considerable debates between those who highlighted the effects of media reporting upon political decision making and those who downplayed the role of the media (Robinson, 2000).

So the overall term 'CNN effect' subsequently became used retrospectively to analyse the more widespread effects of media coverage upon previous foreign crises, in a period long before the advent of 24 hour real-time news coverage. It is particularly linked to so-called humanitarian reporting and the presentation of extreme suffering as a driver for politicians to react. But the question of how this mechanism might operate, let alone whether there is in fact a causation between pictures of humanitarian distress and policy response is complex and often unresolved.

In fact according to this interpretation versions of a CNN effect (when defined as the wider impact of media upon policy) was already discernible even centuries earlier, where there are examples of press coverage of a crisis stimulating a response to 'do something' among readers and politicians. The Bulgarian atrocities in the nineteenth century are an early example.

In the mid-1870s there was dramatic newspaper coverage of the Turkish slaughter of the Bulgarian Christians, in the reporting of the American journalist A. J. MacGahan for the *London Daily News* and by W. T. Stead in the *Northern Echo* (Goldsworthy, 2006) These articles prompted former prime minister William Gladstone to produce a famous pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*. And the reporting ultimately inspired Gladstone to return to active politics and to campaign energetically on behalf of the Christian population in order to persuade the British government, in spite of Disraeli's initial indifference, to become involved (Little, 2012). The media coverage of the Turkish atrocities was a critical catalyst in Gladstone's campaign for Western intervention and the establishment of the Christian state of Bulgaria. So although the term was only invented during the first Gulf War in 1991, the phenomenon has been around in different versions for a very long time.

Differing Views of Influence

In general politicians have tended to be critical of what they regard as the overweening and inappropriate power of the media—and in particular television pictures—as a catalyst for public pressure, especially on foreign policy. The former UK Conservative foreign secretary Douglas Hurd felt strongly about the inappropriate pressure of media coverage as an influence in policy making in particular during the Balkan crises of the 1990s. He gave a speech in 1993 titled *The Power of Comment* which the Times reported as 'Foreign Secretary warns of Media role' ("Douglas Hurd Speech", 1993) and the *Daily Telegraph* as 'Hurd Hits out Again at Media' (1993). And the American journalist George Kennan made similar disapproving observations about US policy and intervention in Somalia. Writing in the *New York Times* he argued that the media was effectively dictating foreign policy making and had triggered the ill-thought-out US

intervention (Kennan, 1993). Two years later, in 1995, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros Ghali went as far as saying that CNN operated like the sixteenth member of the UN Security Council.

We have 16 members in the Security Council: the 15 country members plus CNN. Long-term work doesn't interest you because the span of attention of the public is limited. Out of 20 peacekeeping operations you are interested in one or two . . . And because of the limelight on one or two, I am not able to obtain the soldiers or the money or the attention for the other 17 operations. (Smillie & Minear 2004)

In 1999 Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, made a similar observation in his Chicago speech on foreign policy when he remarked that politicians were 'still fending off the danger of letting wherever CNN roves be the cattle prod to take a global conflict seriously' (Blair, 1999).

Summarising the various complaints by politicians, Piers Robinson points out 'the CNN effect has been asserted rather than demonstrated . . . and became an untested and unsubstantiated "fact" for many in foreign policy and humanitarian circles' (Robinson, 2002). These continual assertions about the inappropriate influence of media coverage on foreign policy decision making were important in encouraging a substantial academic examination of the matter.

Over recent decades there has been a vigorous debate about how instrumental media coverage really has been in affecting foreign policy. An early example of this had been a retrospective reassessment of the role of the media in the Vietnam War. Perceived wisdom had always asserted that the media had a major effect upon the conduct of the war. The images of civilian suffering combined with the 'body bag' pictures of the US military were supposed to have affected the decisions in Washington on the conduct of the war. And in later years, during

the Iraq War for example, access to this kind of material of returning bodies was, as a result of these sensitivities, much more limited. However Daniel Hallin, in the *The Uncensored War* (1986), argues that the effect of the media during Vietnam was, in fact, far more subtle than originally assumed and that the media were actually reflecting a consensus against the war that had already been reached within important parts of American society and politics at the time. In other words it was not the direct effect of the media upon domestic American opinion that caused popular opposition to the war, which then influenced politicians.

This more measured view of the CNN effect and a modification to the way that the causation really works has continued in more recent times. Nik Gowing (1994) and Steven Livingston (1997) have argued that it is only in the case of weak governments and indecisive policy that the impact of media coverage will change directions of foreign intervention. Media reporting will have an effect if there is a policy vacuum or moments of 'policy panic'. According to Philp Seib, quoting the US TV correspondent Peter Jennings, 'Political leadership trumps good television every time. As influential as television can be it is most influential in the absence of decisive political leadership' (2002). So the CNN effect will only take place in a policy vacuum. Seib concludes unambiguously that the argument that 'televised images especially heart-wrenching pictures of suffering civilians will so stir public opinion that government officials will be forced to adjust policy to conform to that opinion' may sound appealing, but although 'there is a certain logic to the theory and it cheers (some) journalists who like to think that they are powerful . . . there is a fundamental problem: it just ain't so at least not as a straightforward cause and effect process' (2002).

The Western intervention in support of the Kurds in Northern Iraq during the period following the first Gulf War in 1991 is sometimes cited as an example of a CNN effect, because

policy appeared to shift in reaction to media coverage (Shaw, 1996). There were grim pictures of Kurds huddled on cold mountains, which supposedly were significant in the formation of the policy of creating safe havens pursued by John Major's government. Shaw distinguishes this crisis and the way the media were influential as an example of policymaking on the hoof in response to dramatic media pictures. A gradual consensus emerged from these various analyses that television pictures do inspire public opinion, but if they result in a (successful) call for action they are much more likely to trigger calls for aid and humanitarian assistance. It is less likely that they are the source of pressure for sustained political intervention or military force.

Nevertheless Susan Carruthers is not so certain that media is so limited in its impact on policy—she also casts doubt upon a methodology that is all about interviewing politicians and asking them how much they were swayed by dramatic media coverage (2011). Her argument is that any politician worth his or her salt will say that they remained steadfast despite being unreasonably pressured by the media. This puts the comments by politicians like Douglas Hurd in a different context. When they complain about a CNN effect they are really talking about feeling under pressure, not that they necessarily give in to the pressure. Carruthers frames the issue as the diffuse effect that media coverage has upon public opinion, which then in turn may influence democratic leaders. Yet here again the kind of intervention is far more likely to be a call for humanitarian assistance rather than direct military involvement, especially ground troops. Andrew Natsios also observes,

The CNN factor may have consequences for fundraising for NGOs and for sustained congressional funding but is not essential to early (military) intervention except where troops for security are critically important. Even then media coverage may not be sufficient to force a robust international response. (1996)

This is consistent with Michael Ignatieff's observations. He characterises the CNN effect not as a real trigger for action to change. He argues that television pictures are more likely to give us a moral drama with sentimental tales of suffering using a poor country as a backdrop, which serves to stimulate exercises in generosity and even reinforces the donor's sensation of moral superiority, so that the 'CNN effect will have little effect to drive policy but will have a big effect to promote humanitarian intervention' (Ignatieff, 1998; Harvey, 2012). If the media does have a role in prompting military action it is at most able to influence the timing of an intervention. So, for example, the Kosovo crisis in 1999 is deemed to be an example where media coverage prompted intervention (Bahador, 2007). But Rupert Smith argues that in the case of Kosovo the use of force would have happened anyway and the effect of the media pressure was that it potentially speeded up the process (Smith, 2006). In the Syrian crisis during the period 2011- 2013 once again there was plenty of impetus for humanitarian assistance, but the media images did not result in the use of outside military force despite what some politicians in Western nations may have wanted.

So the consensus is that large-scale international relief efforts and also a 'something must be done' urgency to intervene may be affected by media coverage, and especially pictures, but it is not clear that this extends beyond the impulse to donate aid, either to persuade governments to commit aid or for the public to make their own contributions. Furthermore there are some instances where governments might even encourage media coverage as a way of gaining public support for a policy which they were already keen to promote.¹ This use of the CNN effect by

¹In a keynote speech by Gordon Brown at a Vatican seminar on development 9 July 2004, Brown recognised the importance of popular pressure on aid policy, and also after the July 2005 Gleneagles G8 summit he acknowledged the role of international media pressure on those governments initially reluctant to agree to the debt relief proposals. Professor Paul Collier, author of *The Bottom Billion* (2007) has also spoken about the growing role of 'the street' in influencing politicians on development issues. Hay Festival 29 May 2007. www.hayfestival.com/archive.

politicians as an enabling effect is another dimension discussed by both Robinson and Shaw. Nicholas Wheeler points out how the media can be used by policymakers to build support for an intervention that they want to pursue for non-media reasons (Wheeler, 2003). This was discernable in the question of whether the West should intervene in the Syrian crisis in August 2013, following the use by the Syrian regime of chemical weapons. Media coverage was prompting humanitarian assistance both in private donations and encouraging governments to act. However there was less enthusiasm for any kind of official military intervention, as had been the case in Libya eighteen months earlier. The UK government under David Cameron tried to create a consensus towards military support for the Syrian rebels and media coverage (much of it obtained from locally based citizen journalists) formed a key part of this, since it was the only way that the Western public could engage with the crisis. Nevertheless, despite the powerful media images of suffering and atrocities, this was not sufficient and the consensus amongst the public (demonstrated in opinion polls) and the formal rejection of a motion in the UK Parliament showed that there was not national support for military intervention, despite the Government's view.

Media and Humanitarian Appeals

What is now apparent is that there are in fact a number of variants of a CNN effect and the way it might impact upon policy. The narrow view is only concerned with direct foreign policy responses as a reaction to media coverage. Here the consensus is now that there is limited connection, with the exception of humanitarian intervention. However there is also a wider interpretation of a CNN effect which concerns the influence of media coverage of foreign events on mainstream domestic opinion and responses—in particular the role of philanthropy. In this

case there does however appear to be a correlation between the nature and level of media coverage and the overall scale of humanitarian assistance. In the article ‘Humanitarian Crises: Testing the CNN effect’, Olsten, Carstensen, and Hoyen contrast the coverage of the Orissa flooding following the cyclone that hit India in late 1999 with the Mozambique floods in early 2000 (Olsen & Nils Carstensen, 2003). The Indian authorities severely restricted media access to the flooded areas in Orissa and there was very little television coverage. Meanwhile the Mozambique flooding attracted dramatic coverage, with helicopters rescuing people from the tops of trees. Its climax was the remarkable rescue by a passing South African helicopter of a woman giving birth. The international aid response to the Mozambique floods was substantial whereas the response to the floods in Orissa was far more limited by comparison. There was a Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) appeal for funds to Mozambique, launched in March 2000, which raised more than £30 million—at that point the third highest total for any of their broadcast appeals. Beyond this there was substantial official aid offered to Mozambique—including of course the helicopters from South Africa that made possible the remarkable rescues. Mozambique welcomed international relief assistance but this was largely dependent upon sufficient media coverage of the disaster, which it was prepared to facilitate.

There had also been a DEC appeal in November 1999 for the flooding in the Eastern Indian state of Orissa. Although it will accept official charitable donations to disasters, the Indian government does not usually request international assistance for disaster aid, which may be part of the reason that it was not concerned to give media access to the affected area. In contrast to Mozambique this appeal raised a mere £7 million. Moreover the Orissa appeal happened first which would suggest that there might have been a sense of *déjà vu* by the time the Mozambique appeal took place. And the Orissa appeal was in the comparatively ‘fruitful’ Christmas period,

when charitable donations are traditionally more forthcoming. Yet clearly other reasons led to the Mozambique appeal yielding a higher level of donations. The images are critical in inspiring assistance. The DEC were aware in their assessment that the limited media coverage of the Indian crisis would result in a lower level of donations than for other emergencies but still felt the appeal was worth making. In the official request to the BBC chairman to authorise the broadcast appeals it was pointed out that over the previous year there had been appeals for the Kosovo crisis and a hurricane in Central America, 'however . . . the scale of human distress is actually greater (in Orissa) than in either of these other two emergencies'.² This view was supported by the Department for International Development (DfID) and the estimates were that 10 to 15 million people were affected and 2 million were homeless with millions at risk of cholera and other epidemics. The Kosovo appeal was launched in response to overwhelming media coverage of the refugee crisis. It is interesting that this appeal with its repeated images of (light-skinned) refugees on cold mountains yielded £53 million, which was at that time the highest ever level of donations to a broadcast appeal.³

However an interesting contrast with the Orissa appeal occurred a year later when a devastating earthquake affected the state of Gujarat in northwest India. Once again the Indian government said that it would accept charitable donations and an appeal was launched by the DEC in February 2001. Tony Vaux, who once worked for Oxfam and later wrote about the role of NGOs, produced an assessment of the Gujarat appeal contrasting the response to the two Indian disasters of the Gujarat earthquake with the Orissa floods (Vaux, 2001). There was far greater television and media coverage of the earthquake and the public response in the UK was

² BBC Written Archive Centre RX27 B114-4-5 Appeals Disasters Emergency Committee-India Note from Wendy Jones, Deputy Secretary, to the BBC Chairman, 4 November 1999.

³ BBC Management Registry B114-4 undated memo on 'DEC key aspects' Kosovo appeal was in April 1999.

correspondingly three times greater than for the flooding. The DEC appeal for Gujarat raised £24 million, more than three times as much as the total for Orissa. Although the UK has closer links with Gujarat than Orissa it is still hard to explain this discrepancy, except through the images. The response to different disasters is so variable because ‘there is no objective reason but simply a subjective response to selected images.’⁴ Vaux argues that the reason that donations to emergency appeals constantly break new records is that the global media are better and better at producing shock horror images. The coverage of the Asian tsunami at the end of 2004 was a prime example, exceeding all previous totals. Hilary Benn as international development secretary observed in 2006 that fundraising appeals yielded \$10 per head for the humanitarian crisis in the Congo compared with \$1,000 a head for the Asian tsunami, a difference he attributes to the media coverage.⁵

In the wake of extensive media coverage of a crisis, Smillie and Minear comment on the intense pressure that governments may face in being seen to do *something* to alleviate suffering, even if it is, practically speaking, of little use. In the case of the Mozambique floods, the UK Government responded by sending some helicopters. This entailed a huge cost because of the long distances and anyway the helicopters arrived too late to be of much use, ‘giving the media a second stick with which to beat the government’ (Smillie & Minear, 2004). It would have made more sense to contribute towards the helicopters easily accessible from South Africa.

In recent years the CNN effect has not even been perceived as a necessary stimulant to humanitarian action. Political interests and proximity are cited as more powerful stimulants to the decision to send official aid (Smillie & Minear, 2004). Examples cited are those such as the case of North Korea where there is almost no media coverage and yet because of strategic

⁴ Interview with Tony Vaux, June 2005.

⁵ Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development, speaking at Media and Politics seminar, Nuffield College, Oxford University, 13 October 2006.

interests there is still significant humanitarian assistance. Similarly according to Smillie and Minear, the conflicts in both Angola and Sudan were for many years the subject of minimal media attention and yet they received a reasonable amount of aid. The current consensus is that just as the CNN effect is most likely to affect foreign policy where there is no strong political direction, it is most likely to influence humanitarian intervention where there are no particular strategic interests involved. In those cases the media may have a substantial effect on prompting calls for wide-scale assistance and aid. As the strategic certainties of the Cold War eroded during the 1990s, media coverage was more effective at prompting humanitarian relief. It appears therefore that the media might be a sufficient but not always a necessary trigger to sending official aid, even if they are much more crucial in the galvanising of individual and private donations.

So the history of the CNN effect is that the original view (held by politicians and some self-important journalists) was that the media coverage could play a critical role in pushing governments in foreign-policy decision making. Then there was an academic consideration of the problem which broadly concluded that it is only in cases of policy uncertainty and lack of direction that the media could have a more significant effect. This was far less likely to have been the case during the Cold War period when foreign policy was more likely to be driven by overriding global strategic concerns. An exception was made for humanitarian suffering and relief where the literature concluded that the CNN effect was powerful, but it is important to understand that this is largely because of the way in which it was refracted through public opinion. However in more recent years, it seems that this conclusion too may be tempered so that even in matters of sending official foreign aid there is not necessarily a strong relationship to media pressure, provided governments have a strong strategic goal.

CNN Effect and Ethiopia—a Case Study?

The media coverage of the Ethiopian famine in 1984–1985 is one of the best-known examples of humanitarian coverage which is generally assumed to have had an influence and impact upon decisions about aid policy. Although many scholars agree that there is now very often a doubt about the extent of media effects on the overall policy process, in particular the degree to which coverage can result in a military intervention, there has nevertheless been considerable consensus between Robinson and others that in the case of *humanitarian assistance* the media is more likely to have a substantial effect. Despite uncertainty about the way that media coverage might influence wider foreign policy there was some agreement that in the case of stimulating humanitarian action there is a discernable link to the influence of the media reporting of a crisis. Indeed Robinson even calls the Ethiopian famine in 1984 ‘a seminal case of the CNN effect where media coverage led to an apparent dramatic humanitarian intervention’ (2002).

The benefit of hindsight provides some interesting insights. Through examining archival records and conducting interviews with those who were involved at the time it is possible to illuminate the precise ways that media coverage influenced policy, because this kind of analysis uncovers motivations and causations which were taking place inside government at the time, despite other claims that might have been made, for public consumption. A series of documents available through Freedom of Information requests as well as those released to the National Archive and available in the written BBC archives at Caversham are useful in shedding light upon this question: to what extent did the powerful media coverage, in particular images of suffering, have an effect upon decision making within government?

What becomes apparent is the persistent issue that so often foreign policy is influenced by and cannot be uncoupled from domestic concerns, that is, responding to the voters. In more recent times the memoirs of Bill Gates, the former US Defense Secretary, made the same observations that so often it is domestic political pressures which are pivotal concerns in the framing of foreign policy (Gates, 2014)—in his case the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. As is often the case from examining FOI material it is also evident from studying the contemporary documents that there was a distinct contrast in the ways that the crisis in 1984 was being discussed in public by the UK government from the concerns and pressures that were being raised within private documents and conversations.

Both the US and the UK Government, by late 1984, had already known about the famine in Ethiopia for months, if not years, before the global media coverage arising from the BBC TV report by Michael Buerk and Mo Amin on 23 October. The documents make clear that diplomats on the ground had, on many occasions, warned their superiors of the problem.⁶ An urgent cable had been sent from the US Embassy in Addis to the State Department on 4 April 1984, about the prevailing food situation. It stated that ‘a very serious situation could develop in Ethiopia this year and we will be remiss if we are not adequately informed and prepared.’⁷ Meanwhile British diplomats had urged that senior figures from the UK should visit and observe the impending crisis, but to little avail. NGOs had tried to lobby government based upon the evidence they had received from their staff working in the north of Ethiopia, but once again this yielded no response. Indeed even a junior minister, Malcolm Rifkind, responding to these reports, had

⁶ For example, see the paper headed ‘The Drought in Africa’, prepared for Tim Raison, Minister for Overseas Development, 26 July 1984. Obtained under FOI.

⁷ Peter Cutler presented his research as *The Development of the 1983–85 Famine in Northern Ethiopia*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1988.

written to colleagues warning of extreme food shortages.⁸ Yet senior officials and ministers did not react to these warnings and there was a distinct unwillingness to engage with the issue.

However on 24 October, the day after the BBC TV news report of the famine, the foreign secretary, in a specific response, announced in an emergency statement to the House of Commons that in the light of the news about this crisis, the government would donate £5 million to famine relief in Ethiopia. The documents make clear that not only had the government long known about the famine, they were specifically sponsoring some research in Ethiopia into food security issues.⁹ But it was only when the media images appeared on TV that the government chose to respond. This is a compelling and clear example of a CNN effect. But the question is really, how much substance was there in the response?

An Ethiopian Drought Group was convened by the Overseas Development Administration within the foreign office after the media coverage, which met twice a day and had links to Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence. Yet the overwhelming emphasis was to respond to public concerns. A contemporary note indicates that within a week of the BBC news reports, letters to the prime minister were running at 200 a day (quite substantial in a pre-email and social media era).¹⁰ And this was taken as an indication of the need to acknowledge public concern.

The principal form of assistance that the UK Government and notably the prime minister wanted to provide was airlifts of food by the Royal Air Force. It is evident from the

⁸ The National Archives Public Record Office ODA 53/5 memo from Malcolm Rifkind to Sir Geoffrey Howe 8 October 1984, and memo from Malcolm Rifkind headed 'Famine in Africa', 17 October 84. Obtained under FOI.

⁹ Cited in Cutler (1988).

¹⁰ TNA PRO OD 53/8, 3 November 1984.

contemporary notes and documents¹¹ that there was an insistence that the aid should take this form, even if it was not necessarily what was being requested or suggested from those on the ground by the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission or the NGOs who were most closely involved. Furthermore contrary to perceptions, even after the media coverage, it is now evident that government provided virtually no additional money and certainly no long-term assistance. There was even an instance of that familiar government trick of re-announcing the same funding to make it appear as if it was a fresh initiative—so that the minister had then to apologise for misleading MPs.¹² And the Foreign Affairs Select Committee (under a Conservative chairman) delivered a stinging report criticizing the government for its meanness in dealing with the famine and refusing to authorize any new funding.¹³

Meanwhile a letter from the prime minister's office made clear that the airlifts were specifically to be funded by the MOD and the ODA and 'they must settle the costs between them.'¹⁴ This edict led to considerable inter-departmental bickering.¹⁵

It is not surprising that the famine and requests for emergency aid recurred in Ethiopia a couple of years later. Moreover the policy which the UK government did pursue was not a reaction to the facts of the famine itself or even media coverage of the famine, but a reaction to public opinion's dramatic response to the media coverage. The Government had strong ideological (i.e., anti-Soviet) grounds not to help and so explicitly did what made them look good

¹¹ Letter from Charles Powell (foreign affairs advisor to PM) to C. R. Budd at Foreign Office, 29 October 1984. Obtained under FOI.

¹² TNA/PRO OD 53/11. Letter from Timothy Raison, ODA minister to Sir Anthony Kershaw, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 10 December 1984 (about an announcement made by Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe on 23 November 1984).

¹³ *Famine in Africa 1984-85*, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee HMSO Session 1984/5

¹⁴ Letter from Charles Powell (foreign affairs advisor to PM) to C. R. Budd at Foreign Office.

¹⁵ TNA PRO OD 53/7 letter from Timothy Raison's private secretary to the private secretary of Lord Trefgarne at the MOD, 2 November 1984.

domestically and reaped the best possible public relations benefit.¹⁶ Ethiopia was firmly within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, receiving immense military support from it. The regime of Colonel Mengistu operated on extreme authoritarian Communist principles and identified with the East European regimes. The guest of honour at the regime's 10 anniversary celebrations in 1984, when the media reports first emerged, was the East German leader Erich Honnecker. This background was reinforcing the resistance of the UK Government towards providing aid on the basis that if Ethiopia was so firmly within the Communist camp, then any assistance needed to be carefully weighed up with that in mind.¹⁷ These calculations are evident in the way that the Downing Street and the Foreign Office sought to formulate a policy, once the media images had made this an imperative.

Conclusions

In contrast to the contemporary media perception the government aid provided to Ethiopia was pretty much existing money that was reconfigured and, despite appearances, there was no 'new money' (Franks, 2013). The UK Government rejected any longer term ongoing engagement and was just concerned with short-term emergency relief, appearing to be generous in reaction to disturbing media images. Furthermore Ministers were concerned that the relief that was provided (airdrops of food by RAF planes) should garner the maximum possible domestic political benefit and reap the best political dividend vis-à-vis Cold War adversaries.¹⁸

¹⁶ See, for example, confidential briefing note for a House of Commons appearance by Tim Raison. Undated but appears to be late October 1984. Obtained under FOI. 'Pity that Soviet assistance to Ethiopia is mainly military: their contribution to famine relief so far sadly inadequate. They must play their part, not least because Ethiopia professes to be a Marxist government.'

¹⁷ FCO confidential paper, 'The Ethiopian Famine: Policy Problems', 29 October 1984. Obtained under FOI.

¹⁸ TNA PRO OD 53/10, 'Ethiopia and Longer Term Aid', Background briefing note to Minister, 21 November 1984.

It is apparent from this analysis that the ability of the media coverage to produce change in official policy and official assistance was less apparent than might first have appeared.

Ultimately the impact of the coverage was far more significant upon driving public opinion and (with the advent of Band Aid) in the way it changed the nature of charitable giving and private philanthropy. So that in terms of policy effects the media on this occasion appears to have a greater effect upon the policies and institutions of the voluntary sector and NGOs. If the 1980s is considered the 'decade of the NGO' (Hellinger, 1987), then the response to the media coverage of Ethiopia played a key part in this expansion.

Thus, we can see that in response to the media coverage of the Ethiopian famine the ability of news coverage to push official policy was far less substantial than may have appeared at the time. When in successive academic debates the Ethiopian famine is considered historically as a case of a 'strong CNN effect' that is not strictly speaking true. Public policy did not shift as a result of powerful media coverage of suffering. Official humanitarian assistance was severely limited and there was no change of heart about development aid.

Despite superficial appearances not really that much changed as a result of the government reaction to the media coverage of Ethiopia. There was a substantial reaction in the short term but what the government did was in response to domestic public opinion, which was, in turn, reacting to the media coverage. It is evident from FOI documents cited earlier that the facts about the famine were well known within government long before autumn 1984. However once there was a public reaction to the sudden media coverage this made officials and politicians want to be seen to care. So in this case it appears that although there was a CNN effect which might have prompted humanitarian action by government, it was primarily for short term domestic political effect which was reacting to public opinion within the UK. At this point in the

Cold War and under a Conservative Government there was a strong strategic direction to politics which meant that policy decisions were far less likely to change or be influenced by media coverage. This is consistent with the literature over the past ten years which points to the rather more nuanced influence of the media on wider foreign policy decisions. So that even though the CNN effect is perceived to be more likely to happen in the case of providing humanitarian aid, in response to media portrayal of suffering, this has not necessarily been the case to the extent that has been hitherto anticipated.

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