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## THE NEGLECT OF AFRICA AND THE POWER OF AID

**Suzanne Franks**

**Abstract** / Since the end of colonial rule, Africa has on the whole been inadequately covered by the western media. It is rarely reported except as a backdrop to disaster or as the scene of a celebrity visit. There is an absence of sustained and well-informed reporting about Africa in the mainstream media. And when the media do cover it they often get the story very wrong, partly because there is no ongoing understanding of and engagement with the continent. Using exclusive access to the BBC archive, the article examines how and why media coverage of Africa has been misleading and misinformed in the postcolonial period. It examines the extent to which the close relationship between media coverage and aid agencies has damaged the cause of informing the public. Aid agencies have seen a huge growth since the mid-1980s – partly precipitated by the power of media imagery. As media organizations have reduced their commitment to investing in reporting on Africa so journalists have in turn become more dependent upon aid agencies, which have filled a vacuum. This symbiotic relationship requires a degree of transparency otherwise there is a danger that it can compromise journalistic accountability.

**Keywords** / Africa / aid / humanitarian disaster / media / NGO / reporting

The compelling book by Joris Luyendijk, *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden van het Midden-Oosten* [*People Like Us: The Truth about Reporting the Middle East*] (2006) contributes a whole new dimension to the manner in which we interpret foreign news reporting. It demonstrates a recurring series of paradoxes about the way that the media covers and explains international news. It also exposes the paradigms that journalists use to construct our understanding of other places. The observations Luyendijk makes are especially pertinent when we are considering stories from very faraway places, where the media are in most cases the only available source that audiences have to understand a difficult, complicated and remote location. And nowhere is this lack of comprehension more evident than in the reporting of Africa – that most misunderstood of continents.

An interesting counterpoint to Luyendijk is another account which highlights some of the contemporary paradoxes of reporting Africa; the bestselling book *Blood River* by the *Daily Telegraph* journalist, Tim Butcher (2007). He sought to follow the historic journey of an earlier *Telegraph* correspondent, Henry Stanley, the 19th-century

hero who uncovered Dr Livingstone, and traced the course of the Congo river. What Butcher discovered is that travelling across the country that now calls itself the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2004 was in many ways more difficult and dangerous than the same journey would have been in the period following 1875. Again and again he observes that history in this part of the world has in a sense 'moved backwards' (Butcher's words). Grandfathers are more likely to have gone to school, travelled on trains and experienced urban amenities than their grandchildren. Yet not only is daily life more rudimentary and also more dangerous in this country that is so well endowed with natural resources, Butcher also demonstrates a further paradox: how despite the technological advances that enable us to access the remotest places, many parts of Africa are less understood and less well reported in this period than they were several generations ago. We may have access to sophisticated satellite communications that enable reporters to broadcast live or to file stories from the middle of a desert or a jungle, but that has not led to equivalent understanding and explanation of what is happening in remote and faraway places.

In the colonial period, when Henry Stanley was reporting, Africa mattered to the European powers. Denis Wu has illustrated the role of economic interaction as an important indicator in the range and extent of foreign reporting (Wu, 2003). Colonial powers had much at stake, economically and politically, and as a result of this, news from Africa was more comprehensively covered by journalists. Even middle-market UK newspapers had full-time locally based Africa correspondents who showed a real understanding and context of the places they lived in and were reporting on an incremental basis. Serious reporting of Africa carried on during the immediate postcolonial period. From the 1960s, the colonial paradigm as a means of understanding Africa was replaced by the Cold War. As an important location in the proxy war between the two great powers, Africa continued to matter a great deal to western audiences, so there was still informed and engaged reporting about what was happening there.

Today Africa no longer matters as a colonial or a Cold War story, but has in many cases been reduced to a series of journalistic stereotypes (Franks, 2005). It is commonly a location for inexplicable ethnic wars and assorted disasters or celebrity visits. There is little engagement with the ongoing politics, hence the frequent reference to the category of tribe rather than explanations about political power structures. This kind of interpretation happens because the journalism tends to be episodic rather than the incremental, regular reporting which depends upon a regular presence on the ground. Instead of a network of locally based correspondents, many news organizations now rely on what is called 'parachute journalism' in their coverage of Africa (Pawson, 2007). The series of disasters which so much of African news consists of are covered by journalists who are flown in from newsrooms in the West, complete with all the latest communications equipment. In a 24-hour media market these so-called 'dish monkeys' are expected to perform quickly and the reporting is necessarily superficial and frequently full of stereotypes. The Kenyan writer Binyamin Wainana published an illuminating article in *Granta* magazine, 'How to Write About Africa', which poured scorn on the typical depictions of the continent in western publications:

*Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover . . . unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts – use these. . . . Treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. . . . African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life – but empty inside with no dialogue. (Wainaina, 2005)*

The article continues in this vein pointing to the recurring clichés and stereotypes employed in the way that stories about Africa are covered, which other journalists have referred to as ‘the *National Geographic* syndrome’. The critical message is so effective that the article became the most copied and reprinted feature that *Granta* had ever published.

In fact, the observations that Wainaina makes can be taken much further. It is not simply that the stories about Africa are tired clichés but that sometimes they are also wildly inaccurate. In other cases stories are omitted or ignored as they do not fit the stereotype or because the location is Africa, somewhere that is regarded as a setting apart from normal life. A gross example of this misreporting happened in the coverage of the refugee camps in the Great Lakes area in the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide, in 1994. The murderous killing spree of almost a million people (Tutsis and some moderate Hutus) by the Hutu majority had been ignored by most of the foreign media (Mackintosh, 1996). One reason was that it happened at the same time as the installation of the new democratic government in South Africa and the feeling in newsrooms was that one story at a time from Africa was enough. And the powerful story of the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president was significantly a very rare good news story out of Africa – so when the genocide commenced, all suitable expertise was busy in Johannesburg.

The ignorance of what had happened in Rwanda was compounded weeks later when the Interhamwe Hutu killers arrived in the camps in eastern Zaire. By then the elections were over in South Africa so there was an unseemly rush by both journalists and aid agencies to places like Goma to tell terrible tales about poor refugees and their suffering. For days there were misleading reports where many of the journalists, who knew little about the background, missed the point that the camps were not ministering to fleeing victims of the slaughter, but full of the recent killers and their relatives. George Alagiah covered this story for the BBC. He admitted later that for a whole week when he first reached Zaire he was in effect misleading the audience and he had ‘lost the plot’ (Alagiah, 2001: 120) and was inadvertently telling the wrong story. Alagiah is no more to blame than the rest of the western media in failing to understand what was going on. It took some time before the scale of the misrepresentation gradually emerged. Both David Rieff and Fiona Terry have written extensively about the way that the story of the refugee camps was misinterpreted (Rieff, 2002; Terry, 2002).

According to some observers much media reporting of Africa has hardly moved on from Stanley’s image of the dark continent! (Hultman, 1992). This scandalous level of misinformation evident in the reporting of the Zaire refugee crisis would be unthinkable in most other parts of the world, but in Africa there is a sense that it is all too complicated to understand and probably caused by some ancient tribal rivalries (Allen and Seaton, 1999: Introduction).<sup>1</sup> In the intervening years these

'missing stories' have been compounded. The fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1990s, which was part of the fall-out from Rwanda, eventually claimed some estimated 4 million lives in a continuing war of attrition – the highest death toll in any single war since 1945, yet for western purposes it has been largely invisible.

The long-running Congo war has sometimes been called 'Africa's hidden first world war' (Benn, 2004), because as far as the rest of the world is concerned it is hardly ever reported, despite the enormous death toll. 'The Congo war is so complex – involving the armies of six neighbouring states and an array of dubious mining interests that it never caught the public imagination' (Philps, 2007: 67). Even in 2007, five years after there was supposedly a peace agreement in the Congo thousands were still dying in the fighting – more than in the Darfur crisis that was happening at the same time. Similarly, the fighting in northern Uganda where over a million people were displaced into camps because of the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army – probably one of the biggest population displacements in the world at that time – rarely registered in international news coverage (Allen, 2006). Yet if it had happened elsewhere it is difficult to argue that there would not have been more widespread interest and concern.

On some occasions this double standard about what is newsworthy has led to bizarre extremes, verging on a form of racism. For example in 1977/8 there was a rebellion by local gendarmes in the mining area of Shaba (formerly Katanga) province of southern Zaire. The dictator of Zaire, Mobutu Setse Seko, whose government was threatened by the rebellion, put a clever spin on the story claiming that white miners and their families based in the area were facing danger, recalling memories of the fate of the Europeans in the Congo crisis of 1960. This alert prompted the Belgians to send in an airlift with accompanying troops, whose presence on the ground ultimately saved Mobutu's government. However the media reaction to the supposed threat to white civilians was overwhelming. Associated Press called the rebels' campaign 'a rampage of murder and rape' while United Press International dubbed it 'a frenzy of killing and looting', characterizations based on government press releases which later proved to be largely incorrect.

The BBC sent a total of five correspondents to the area to cover the story of the whites (apparently) under siege, including Clive Small, who had by then left his post as a correspondent in Africa and was specially recalled.<sup>2</sup> In the end, very few whites were killed in the unrest and the victims were overwhelmingly black. But such were the unambiguous racist attitudes in the saturation coverage of a relatively small incident that there were later complaints within the BBC, and the international press produced editorials on the double standards of the scale and nature of the coverage.<sup>3</sup> The distorted attention paid to the Shaba rebellion gives a clear indication of the disproportionate weight accorded to African stories involving whites (Hultman, 1992). It reinforces the notion that as a rule if a story was only about black Africans there was considerably less interest. As Graham Mytton observed in his internal BBC report on the coverage, 'we change our news values when the lives of white people are at stake'.<sup>4</sup>

So Africa is ignored or misreported and when it is mentioned, then horror and disaster are the regular themes. 'Normal' stories about business or cosmopolitan city

life in Africa rarely feature in western coverage of Africa (Gault, 2007). Instead there is a recurring template of bad news from Africa and often this is told in a random way so that there is little engagement with the underlying politics. Richard Dowden refers to this pattern as the 'New Orleans syndrome' (Dowden, 2008). When Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana coast and caused devastation in 2005, this did not become the exclusive identity of New Orleans – as a place of flooding and disaster. This is because audiences and readers have accumulated plenty of other images of New Orleans – associations with music, with holidays and altogether an interesting and diverse location. In contrast many African locations are only known through their disaster coverage. There are rarely 'normal' images of everyday life, for example in countries such as Ethiopia or Sudan, which could offer a counterbalance or alternative to the dominant image of famine.

This default pattern of bad news from Africa is what made the coverage of Mandela and the new South Africa in 1994 so unusual and exceptional. In contrast to that, the BBC journalist George Alagiah, speaking at the Dispatches from Disaster zones conference in 1998, outlined a grim template for the way that African stories are so frequently framed. He pointed to the key requirements for a standard story from Africa – first the image of a starving child, then a feeding centre complete with a woman with shrunken breasts, next is an aid worker (preferably a white woman) battling against the odds and finally a reporter summing up how terrible it all is (Clark, 2004: 699) This is the standard Africa paradigm for western audiences. Those occasions since the Cold War when there has been reporting that is more politically engaged and properly nuanced tend to be stories which are a leftover from colonial times, such as the plight of the white farmers in Zimbabwe or the twilight of Apartheid in South Africa or incidents like the Shaba rebellion. Meanwhile stories about African countries and societies which do not have a former colonial or obviously 'white' angle tend to be less comprehensively reported and explained. The post-election unrest in Kenya, for example, at the start of 2008 was not explained in a nuanced or well-rounded fashion for western audiences but as a simple tribal/ethnic clash, instead of a political confrontation as it would have been framed in a developed country (Manji, 2008).

## Telling Stories about Aid

Alagiah's characterization of the template of a typical African story highlights another common feature of contemporary reporting, which is the central role of humanitarian aid agencies in interpreting the way that much of the continent is understood and framed for western audiences. There is now a close and significant relationship between much journalism and the aid community, which has important implications for the way that Africa is explained to the rest of the world. NGOs are highly attuned to the need for the right kind of media attention. It was the founder of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and currently the French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, who famously and farsightedly said at the time of the Biafra crisis that 'where there is no camera, there is no humanitarian intervention' (Cate, 2002: 5).

Since Kouchner founded MSF, there has been a total sea-change in the role and scale of aid agencies over the past 40 years and this in turn has had a crucial

effect upon the reporting of Africa. The media in fact have played a key part in this growth and expansion. In the 1980s, especially in the wake of the Ethiopian famine and the subsequent Band Aid/Live Aid phenomenon, a number of NGOs doubled and trebled in size in response to the fundraising campaigns, which were largely media inspired. Since the 1980s there has also been, for several reasons, a growing tendency for governments to devolve some of their aid efforts to the third sector. At the same time there was a gradual shift in funding away from long-term development support towards emergency aid, which was in turn channelled increasingly through NGOs. Already in 1976 Henry Kissinger had observed how significant emergency relief was to western governments, when he commented that 'Disaster Relief is becoming increasingly a major instrument of our foreign policy' (Kent, 1987: 81). In the wake of the Ethiopian famine the development writer Alex de Waal put this rather more bluntly: 'For Western governments the political priority became to avoid embarrassment at the hands of figures like Bob Geldof. Aid became a strategic alibi' (de Waal, 1997: 12).

Humanitarian intervention was developing into an important political tool and the role of agencies who provided the aid was also becoming far more prominent. Against this background, the promotion and marketing of the NGOs as large multi-national organizations was also gaining importance and in turn the relationships between the agencies and the media were taking on a new significance. At the most basic level, there was a keen awareness of the role of news coverage in raising awareness and bringing in funding. There is little argument that the volume of aid which a crisis attracts is closely linked to the scale of media coverage, not necessarily the level of need. NGOs know only too well that disaster fundraising follows the news agenda. There are countless instances where a media campaign has had an overwhelming influence in raising money for a particular crisis and conversely where the absence of media coverage has meant only limited funds. For example, in 2005, amid a serious food crisis in Niger the UN launched an appeal for US\$16 million in the middle of May. Two months later barely US\$3 million had been pledged. Then the BBC sent a reporter to cover the story and there were shots on the main TV bulletins of babies in feeding stations, distressed mothers and anxious aid workers. Within a week the UN target had been exceeded.

Tony Vaux, who once worked for Oxfam and now writes about NGOs, remarks that 'you either have an aid bonanza or you have nothing' and he compares the distribution of fundraising to a 'roulette wheel . . . suddenly a particular number comes up and there is wide scale media exposure and the disaster will become high profile and a money spinner'.<sup>5</sup> This is the result of what is known in the aid community as a 'noisy emergency': the crises which 'attract a storm of media attention, a high proportion of official donors funds, generous private donations which leave . . . so many "silent emergencies" and the millions trying to survive them, in the shadows' (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2002: 1).

A classic example emerged in the contrast in fundraising for the Mozambique floods in 2000, compared with the cyclone and flooding in the Indian state of Orissa, just a few months earlier (Olsen et al., 2003). The Indian disaster was more damaging and killed more victims, but there was very limited media coverage, partly due to

the attitude of the Indian government on that occasion. Meanwhile the Mozambique crisis produced dramatic media images, in particular helicopters rescuing people from the tops of trees. Its climax was the remarkable rescue of a woman giving birth by a passing South African helicopter.

A UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) joint charitable appeal for Mozambique, launched in March 2000, raised over £30 million – at that point the third highest total for any of their broadcasts. Meanwhile an appeal for the crisis in Orissa raised a mere £7 million. Moreover the Orissa flood 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 late 1999, during 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.

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 wrote an assessment of the Gujarat appeal contrasting the response to the two Indian disasters, the Gujarat earthquake with the Orissa floods. There was far greater television and media coverage of the earthquake and the public response in the UK was correspondingly over three times greater than for the flooding. The DEC appeal for Gujarat raised £24 million. Although the UK has closer links with Gujarat than Orissa, it is still hard to explain this discrepancy, except through the images. According to Vaux, the response to different disasters is so variable not because of any objective reason ‘but simply a subjective response to selected images’.

In May 2008 there were similar discrepancies between the responses to two different disasters which occurred within weeks of each other: the Sechuan earthquake and cyclone Nargis in Burma. The Chinese, in contrast to all previous expectations, allowed full and frank media coverage in the immediate wake of the devastation. There were remarkable pictures and great stories of plucky heroes rescuing victims, the Beijing government basked in sympathy and the international aid flowed in. Meanwhile, the Burmese disaster resulted in a higher death toll, but the media coverage was tightly restricted and especially in the early period there were few pictures of the disaster and the relief effort. Moreover the stories that did emerge were about the frustration of the NGOs at dealing with the Burmese regime. As a result, the fundraising suffered. Several weeks after the cyclone struck, the DEC appeal had raised only £8 million and by late July the total was £15 million. This might seem a respectable amount, but it is disappointing given that almost a hundred thousand people lost their lives, many more were made homeless and it is only a fraction of what was raised for the Pakistan earthquake in 2006, which again had much more extensive media coverage, despite its remote location. As a frustrated Red Cross official remarked in response to the Burma crisis, ‘If the media isn’t telling the story that there is a need and . . . that there is a way that the public can take action to address this need . . . then fundraising simply isn’t going to happen’ (Franks, 2008: 30).



Media coverage is also critical in the way that an individual agency can promote itself against the opposition. In a crowded market agencies jostle for position and in some crises this competitive branding reaches extraordinary levels. For example, in the aftermath of the Rwanda crisis in 1994 the displays of logos in the refugee camps in Goma apparently looked like a trip down Oxford St as nearly 200 different NGOs struggled to make their mark in front of the cameras. And according to observers, the same rivalry for attention took place at the nightly press conferences.<sup>6</sup>

Similar accusations of competitive posturing for the benefit of the media coverage were also made in follow-up assessments of other prominent relief operations. In 2001, the DEC published an evaluation they had commissioned into the Gujarat earthquake, which again raised many of these same issues (DEC, 2002). It made the criticism that DEC members were more 'fund driven' than 'need driven' in their response and therefore 'became victims of their organisation's fundraising success'. The report asserted that 'there is an underlying problem that funds are skewed disproportionately towards situations of high media profile rather than actual need' and questioned 'whether agencies allow the desire for publicity . . . to outweigh humanitarian principles'. Four years later, the same themes reoccurred in the initial DEC evaluation of the response to the Asian tsunami.<sup>7</sup> This was very damning in some places and in fact the original report which was so critical of inter-agency rivalry and unnecessary media profile that it was not even made public. BBC's *Newsnight* obtained a leaked copy, which included references to 'concern about the proliferation of signboards and the tendency to mark every item with the agency's name' and reference to 'a few cases where relief flights seem to have been used more for public profile than because of real need'.

At the most basic level, disasters which are sudden and unexpected and therefore usually newsworthy are in many cases good news for NGOs. If the media coverage works then they give a sudden and immense boost to the profile and income of the organization. International development and aid charities generally do well from disasters. Hilary Blume of the Charity Advisory Trust observed this process during the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster:

*I watched the BBC TV coverage with increasing distaste as the spokesmen from the large aid charities relished their 15 minutes of fame and got their fund raising campaigns under way. I was reminded of working for a UK aid charity 35 years before when the management hoped for a disaster to secure their finances. (Blume, 2005: 45)*

The incremental and frequently unsung world of development does not often attract sudden or vast donations (with the exception of Bill Gates!). It is hard to focus attention and direct resources for a chronic ongoing problem. Emergencies on the other hand, if they capture the media, can bring in enormous funds quite rapidly. The refugee crisis during August 1994 in Goma in the wake of the Rwandan genocide precipitated a 500 percent increase in NGO income over that period. Michael Maren, who has written about of his experiences as an aid worker, describes with some cynicism the way that NGOs seize upon 'growth opportunities' when disaster strikes (Maren, 1997: 263).

## UGC and the Quid Pro Quo

This pattern of dependence upon media coverage (and sudden disasters) as a central part of an NGO's fundraising strategy is a recurring and familiar one. What is less obvious is the mutual dependence of journalism upon the aid agencies and the impact that this in turn has upon news gathering. A period of tighter foreign news budgets has coincided with the transformation and growth of aid agencies into increasingly powerful global institutions. In many African countries they have a high visibility and significant resources. The aid workers in their land rovers are a familiar part of the landscape. If a journalist cannot persuade the news desk to provide logistic support in order to cover a difficult story, then often the NGO will be happy to step in. It can organize transport and offer access to local resources on the ground as well as helpful briefings with their staff. A reporter who is parachuting in and needs to file a story within hours may be indebted to the NGO staff who are locally based and able to offer invaluable insights. This kind of back-up is even more important for freelancers and stringers, who frequently find it impossible to cover these types of story without the practical support of local aid workers.

In some places, reporters covering humanitarian crises are effectively embedded with aid agencies, which may entail similar trade-offs to going on location with the military. Indeed, some journalists and editors have become wary of accepting any support from aid agencies because they fear the consequences of being compromised by such close ties. Yet in many cases where funds are limited or where the NGO is the only source of support in an inhospitable area, there may be little alternative. When Michael Buerk filmed his world famous reports for the BBC on the Ethiopian famine in 1984, he only reached Tigray in the first place because of a plane provided by the NGO World Vision. In view of the ongoing civil war, no commercial airliner was prepared to fly there from Addis Ababa because of the fighting on the ground. At that time World Vision was quite a controversial agency, which many suspected was linked to the CIA.<sup>8</sup> But despite misgivings by editorial staff about the compromises entailed by such arrangements, the BBC had little choice but to accept the World Vision offer if they wanted to reach the story.<sup>9</sup> Following transmission, World Vision complained to the BBC that their contribution had not been given sufficient credit in the news reports!<sup>10</sup> This tension between the aid agency seeking to maximize its returns from helping journalists and the media organization is not unusual. If foreign news budgets continue to shrink while humanitarian aid organizations become more influential, this dynamic will not change.

The growing media sophistication of NGOs has led to further refinements in the way that they seek to help journalists – and thereby reap a PR reward. As the resources for news have declined, large and well-funded agencies have embraced the new world of user generated content (UGC) and sought to substitute their own material for independent reporting (Cooper, 2007). They will send out expertly trained staff (some of them former journalists) to produce edited packages which are then offered to mainstream news programmes. During the Burmese crisis in 2008 when there was eventually some media access, it was the aid agency Merlin which managed to send its people in to film and the results appeared on BBC TV news. On other occasions, a close reading of the newspaper byline might reflect

that the 'reporter on the ground' is actually an employee of a particular aid agency. At first sight this may seem a neat solution where both the NGO and the journalistic outlet can fulfil their objectives, but sometimes things may become confused.

In one difficult case of UGC, Médecins Sans Frontières hired a cameraman and filmed a piece during a humanitarian crisis in Haiti during 2006. They passed the material on to ITN who ran it on their bulletin with no credit, even referring in the commentary to the work of 'our cameraman'. The agency was pleased to have put its message (and its brand) across, in a manner that looked completely independent. Meanwhile, the broadcaster, by using a report paid for and filmed by someone else, had minimized its outgoings (Cooper, 2007). The problem is that the public was misled. Even if there are proper credits, as there were in the Burma example, there is still a question about the provenance of such material. The aid agency wants a return on its investment and the report is hardly likely to give anything other than a fulsome account of its activities in the field.

This symbiosis of media and aid agencies, while it might benefit both parties, may not always best serve the audience. Just like other large institutions, aid agencies and their activities in the field should be held to account by effective journalism. But if lines are blurred this may not happen. When aid organizations were small and well-meaning amateur outfits there was a sense that they were simply trying to make the world a better place and deserved to be treated as worthwhile causes inspired by well-meaning individuals above suspicion. Today, many aid campaigns are substantial global operations and it is in the public interest that they are reported impartially. If journalists and aid workers embrace each other too tightly this is unlikely to happen.

## Mixed Messages

There is still a huge amount of public trust invested in humanitarian aid agencies, even though these days some of them may be large, quasi-corporate organizations. The public are surprisingly prepared to donate with only the vaguest idea of what the money will be used for and with only limited accountability. Ed Miliband as minister for the third sector remarked ruefully on the wide contrast in public trust between NGOs and political parties (Miliband, 2007). This attitude of aid agencies as 'sacred cows' has extended into journalism, which often suspends its normal habits of scrutiny and questioning when considering the objectives and implementation of aid effort. If the reporting follows the NGO agenda, then there is a danger that understanding will be compromised. The consequences of journalism which is not sufficiently dispassionate about the goals of aid can be seen in a number of historical episodes.

In retrospect, the Biafra crisis in 1968–9 was far from what it seemed at the time. The media account of the crisis focused upon a terrible famine. There were shocking pictures which caused outrage in the West and prompted calls for support to the victims suffering in the rebel province of Biafra. The aid agencies which helped the Biafrans were seen as angels of mercy aiding the starving victims. Then it later emerged that through their support the agencies were helping to feed the rebel

troops. They were providing a valuable (and in fact the sole) source of foreign currency to the rebel government and thereby propping up a doomed and isolated regime, which was bound eventually to collapse to the Nigerians. The effect of the aid effort was to bring in additional arms to Biafra and the result of the influx of money and weapons was that the war and thereby the suffering to the civilian population lasted much longer than necessary. It took many years before it was evident that the aid effort and contemporary reporting of the war were tragically misleading (Barrow and Jenkins, 2001). This was largely due to the absence of any understanding that aid often cannot take place in a 'neutral space' and that intervening is itself a political act. This is the problem which has on many occasions confronted humanitarianism in what are known as complex emergencies.

As far as the media reporting and the aid agencies are concerned, a simple straightforward narrative is desirable. That is more likely to engage viewers or readers and to attract funding. Yet the reality in Biafra (and many other places) was that the problem was a complicated combination of warfare and natural causes and the provision of help to a suffering population was not a simple apolitical gesture.

The Ethiopian relief effort in 1984/5 was an even higher profile story than Biafra. Again it was reported as a straightforward famine, caused by lack of rain which could be relieved by food and assistance from developed countries. Yet the reality was very different. The famine was not in fact a 'natural disaster' as it was portrayed, but the consequence of an ongoing civil war and a brutal regime which sought to punish civilians in what it perceived as rebel territories. Food was available, but it was not reaching the vulnerable. For NGOs the simple story of a natural disaster caused by lack of rain was far preferable to explaining the origins of a complicated human-made insurgency. And the vast majority of the media were quite content to comply with this neat and tidy explanation of starvation caused by failing crops and drought.

When the aid finally arrived from the well-intentioned western agencies, a substantial amount was impounded by the Ethiopian government and used in lieu of payment to their conscripted soldiers, later known as the 'wheat militias'.<sup>11</sup> In other cases, food aid was used as bait in a mass forced resettlement programme to relocate the troublesome rebel populations (Africa Watch, 1991). Yet very little of this story was ever told at the time because it did not suit the purposes of either the aid agencies or the media, which was instead caught up in the fabulous fundraising quest of Bob Geldof and the Band Aid movement that had done wonders to change perceptions about charity in western countries. This was one of the rare occasions when news about black Africans made headlines throughout the media, including popular television and tabloid newspapers. The problem was that the story, partly because it was so intertwined with the aid agencies, had been distorted and misinterpreted beyond recognition (Article 19, 1990).

## Conclusion

The inadequate reporting of Biafra and Ethiopia has been repeated in journalism about Africa in subsequent years. Luyendijk's conclusions about foreign news

reporting have powerful resonance in the case of Africa and the lack of rounded and enquiring coverage. Contemporary news about Africa is very largely about sudden disasters. There is an overwhelming need for more depth and understanding in much of the way that we report news about Africa, enabling audiences to move beyond the rigid stereotypes. The dearth of detailed and regular reporting in western news outlets is exacerbated by the overall cutbacks in foreign news reporting. Africa is expensive and complicated to report, but beyond this there has been a declining interest in the continent, as compared to the colonial period and the Cold War era.

Much of the reporting of Africa which *does* occur originates from within the framework of aid and is facilitated by aid organizations. This happens both on a practical level for economic reasons but also on an editorial level. Journalists without local knowledge who are unfamiliar with a story or location may depend unduly upon helpful aid agencies. However, at the same time, the coverage of the aid story requires proper analysis and independent scrutiny. This is particularly important in Africa where aid agencies (who naturally have their own agendas) continue to play such a significant role in civil society. As NGOs expand their scope and range there is a need for international audiences to hold international institutions to account. At the very least, there is a need for transparency and clarity in this relationship between the media and foreign aid NGOs. If the journalism is too entwined with the aid agenda then the ways that we understand and interpret Africa will be further compromised.

## Notes

1. See also 'If it's Africa, it Must be a Tribe', Africa News Service editorial, 1 December 1990, at: [allafrica.com/stories/200101080391.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/200101080391.html) (accessed 12 May 2007).
2. Interview Graham Mytton, Africa producer BBC World Service. He also produced a detailed internal report for the BBC after the Shaba incident complaining at the biased coverage and the overreaction due to the apparent (but unproved) threat to white Europeans. The report quotes an *Evening Standard* editorial (22 May 1978) and an interview by Stephen Jessell on Radio 4's *The World Tonight* (29 May 1978), which drew similar conclusions, after the event, that the reporting was distorted and placed far too much emphasis upon the fate of the whites.
3. *The New York Times* (27 May 1978) 'Zaire Killings: Despite Black Toll Zaire Killings Viewed as White Bloodbath' and *The Washington Post* (28 May 1978) 'Figures Got a Political Twist'.
4. Graham Mytton 'BBC External Services and the Shaba Story', internal BBC report, see note 2.
5. Interview with Tony Vaux, as quoted in Franks (2007).
6. Richard Dowden speaking at 'War Reporting in Africa' Seminar at St Anthony's College Oxford (4 November 2004).
7. 'Independent Evaluation of the DEC Tsunami Crisis Response', December 2005 is available at [www.dec.org.uk](http://www.dec.org.uk). The original, very frank evaluation was soon removed from the DEC website and replaced by a more anodyne version, but details of the original and more critical report were featured on BBC's *Newsnight* 'Tsunami Report: Before and After' transmitted 12 January 2006.
8. BBC Written Archive Centre: Minutes of Television Weekly Programme Review 3 April 1985 discussing the programme *African Calvary*, which was sponsored by World Vision.
9. Interview with Chris Cramer foreign editor BBC TV news in Franks (2007).
10. BBC Written Archive Centre: News and Current Affairs weekly meeting 6 November 1984, Minute 427.
11. Interview with Dawit Giorgis (Ethiopian relief minister who later defected to the West) shown on *The Hunger Business* Channel 4, two-part series November 2000, and BBC Monitoring Summary of World Broadcasts ME 7788 (31 October 1984) reports on 'wheat aid' given to the troops.

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**Suzanne Franks** is a former BBC TV current affairs producer. She has also written several books including *Dished! The Rise and Fall of British Satellite Broadcasting* (Simon and Schuster, 1990/1) and *Having None of It: Women, Men and the Future of Work* (Granta, 1999/2000) and many articles, both for academic publications and mainstream journalism. From 2004 to 2008 she held an AHRC fellowship at the University of Westminster, where she worked on an official history of the BBC for the BBC History project and completed a PhD on foreign news reporting, 'Famine, Politics, Aid and the Media', which is being published as the book *Reporting Disasters* (Hurst and Co., forthcoming). In 2008 she was appointed as director of research at the newly established Centre for Journalism based at the University of Kent.

**Address** Room Gillingham G-10, Gillingham Building, University of Kent, Chatham Maritime, Kent ME4 4AG, UK. [email: S.Franks@kent.ac.uk]