

Conflict, Disaster and the Reporting of Suffering – an Accountability Paradox

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Recommended citation: Martin Searle, 'Conflict, Disaster and the Reporting of Suffering – an Accountability Paradox', NTS Insight, No. IN17-02 (Singapore: RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre)).

INTRODUCTION

In late April 2017, photojournalist Souvid Datta submitted a photograph of a trafficked child being raped in Kolkata, India, to a photography contest run by Magnum Photos, one of the most established agencies in the industry.¹ They published it. This incident highlights a dilemma the media industry must navigate between reporting on important issues and helping those in need. It further shows the perverse logic that can encourage journalists to withhold assistance in desperate circumstances, and ignore concerns of privacy and dignity. These tensions and the incentive structures relating to them are especially difficult in these types of humanitarian settings where people can be extremely vulnerable and often experience particularly acute suffering.

One attempt to reduce this concern is to transform media personnel simultaneously into disaster responders, or include journalists formally in rapid response teams. Both of these collapse the divide between media and humanitarian worker and thus combine the imperatives of each: to give immediate assistance and to raise awareness with the goal of mobilising more help. This article considers the implications of this dual role of journalists as humanitarian responders as it has been realised by the Philippines. It describes the way this innovative combination of media reporter and aid worker appears to reduce the dilemma facing journalists. It then considers the criticism that this further entrenches the position of the powerful at the expense of the disempowered, arguing that this sadly is not a shortcoming unique to this novel arrangement. However, the commentary further argues that the reporter-aid worker combination ultimately diminishes overall scrutiny of aid organisations, in particular accountability towards those whom aid organisations seek to help.

JUDGEMENT CALLS

Ethical questions surrounding the interaction between journalists and the vulnerable people they depict occur repeatedly through the history of foreign news reporting. Most infamously, they coalesced around Kevin Carter and his tragic Pulitzer

¹ Olivier Laurent, 'Shaken Photojournalism Industry Questions Itself After Souvid Datta Scandal,' Time Magazine, 9 May 2017, <http://time.com/4772234/souvid-datta-question/>, (accessed 22 May 2017)

Prize winning picture of a vulture coolly surveilling a starving Sudanese girl trying (and ultimately failing without his help) to reach a UN feeding centre in 1993. Journalists in these settings face an extremely difficult challenge. They must balance the critical need to increase the public visibility of groups desperately requiring assistance – famine victims, trafficking survivors, victims of natural disasters, those living in conflict zones – with the moral imperative to respect and assist individuals in imminent danger. Moreover, that decision is unduly weighted: their own career is furthered by publicising the suffering they witness in an industry becoming more competitive due to declining budgets, whereas assisting someone in need at the expense of capturing a striking or illustrative moment does not.

Combining the role of crisis reporting with giving aid appears at first sight to ease this tension. Media houses in the Philippines like GMA Network and ABS-CBN have done precisely this, formally making their reporters and other network staff into disaster first responders.² The mission statement of GMA Network's charity arm, Kapuso Foundation, expresses the twin objectives of "providing quick-response relief operations to fulfil the most immediate needs in times of crises" while "recogniz[ing] the power of media and its role in eliciting compassion and a sense of responsibility from our donors."³ In the words of one GMA network news anchor, 'It's just irresponsible if we arrive and do nothing but just cover, when people are actually dying, or buried in the [rubble]...'⁴

MARGINALISING THE MARGINALISED

In the Philippines in particular, commentators have already thoroughly problematised attempts of privately-owned media networks in the Philippines to characterise their humanitarian actions as 'revolutionary, nationalistic, honest and service-oriented'⁵. They note instead the media tendency in the country to push their brand and entrench existing patron-client dynamics within society.⁶ This criticism is especially bitter given that the disenfranchised are, by definition, more likely to suffer adversity during any conflict or disaster and so are more likely to need assistance. Imagine, for a moment, being forced by desperate circumstance to accept aid given under watchful cameras broadcasting the distribution in such a way as to reinforce stereotypes of your community's passivity or dependence. Yet this criticism is not uniquely applicable to media in the Philippines, or indeed media that is simultaneously engaged in disaster response; it is a problem with media reporting of suffering in general.

Lilie Chouliaraki has produced a compelling categorisation of different attempts to communicate the reality of distant suffering to more comfortable and generally more affluent audiences through media.⁷ She identifies three types. The first approach is the shock campaign, which focuses on the physical manifestation of suffering through longshots showing the sheer numbers of people affected or excruciating close ups of diseased bodies reducing those portrayed only to their

² Jonathan Ong, 'Charity Appeals as "Poverty Porn"? Production Ethics in Representing Suffering Children and Typhoon Haiyan Beneficiaries in the Philippines,' in *Production Studies, the Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*, ed. Miranda Banks et al. (New York & Oxford, Routledge, 2015), 92

³ Kapuso Foundation, 'Who we are,' *GMA Network.com*, accessed 19/6/201, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/kapusofoundation/aboutus>

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.* 93

⁵ Jonathan Ong, 'The Television of Intervention: Mediating Patron-Client Ties in the Philippines,' in *Television Histories of Asia* ed. Jinna Tay and Graeme Turner, (London & New York, Routledge, 2015), 144

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lilie Chouliaraki *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, (London, SAGE, 2006)

physicality. Examples abound of this in the form of news reports of skeletal bodies with bellies swollen from beriberi. Portraying a group by focusing only on the physical manifestation of their suffering and minimising the other aspects of their being is an effective way of dehumanising and thus disempowering.

The second approach is the positive imagery approach. This provides greater agency and individuality to the people portrayed but is prone to obfuscate the causes of their suffering, and thus prevent those responsible from being held to account. Consider campaigns or human interest reports showing people using skills they have been taught to support themselves, or to organise their communities to advocate more strongly for their interests. Rarely do they enquire into the structural causes that prevented those people from learning those skills or organising in the past (obstacles that may well remain in place). Ignoring and distracting from those causes contributes to their perpetuation.

The third approach is the so-called 'posthumanitarian' approach. This resorts to abstract methods of representation that detach issues from any factual basis and remove the sufferer from consideration entirely. Instead, the focus is on the brand, with the aid organisation or news agency name and logo front and centre. Amnesty International's #stoptorture campaign video is a prime example of this, showing an archetypal torture chamber with swinging lightbulb overhead and a lump of clay in a vaguely human form being subjected to various torture techniques.⁸ While dehumanising a suffering group already functions to marginalise them, what could be more effective than making them invisible altogether?

As such, the accusation of entrenching power imbalances and marginalising those already marginalised appears in fact to apply to media in general. At least the Philippines media industry has the redeeming characteristic of offering material assistance at the same time. However, there are further concerns with this setup.

UNCOMFORTABLE BEDFELLOWS

Different but equally relevant criticisms regarding close relationships between humanitarian organisations and media stem from within media circles themselves. Journalists in conflict and disaster zones already work very closely with aid agencies. This allows them to reach areas and gather crucial contextual information for reporting that they might not otherwise be able to access, and do so in a way that suits the shrinking budgets available for foreign reporting. In return, aid organisations gain brand awareness – so crucial to fundraising – and an opportunity to pass advocacy messages. But this symbiosis is lopsided; aid organisations can function as gate-keepers able to name their terms of cooperation. This is often for justifiable reasons of security and local perception. In an environment in which local state and non-state actors fear your foreign staff may be spies, there are places it is unwise to travel, especially with a 300+mm telephoto lens pointing out the window of your vehicle. Nonetheless, while the issue of editorial control remains a negotiation, the implication is clear: journalists must accept a level of influence over their reporting.

While it is true that aid workers and journalists share an interest in raising the public visibility of people needing assistance, any influence of the former over the latter matters. Humanitarian organisations' fundraising logic inevitably per-

⁸ Amnesty International, 'Stop Torture,' Amnesty International Website, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/stop-torture/>, (accessed 30 May 2017)

meates their media interactions and their corresponding communications strategies, arguably slanting interactions with reporters.⁹ Further, it is by no means certain that aid organisations – still generally headed by foreign staff – fully grasp the realities of the places in which they work. As they build themselves higher walls and deeper bunkers amidst a perception of increasing insecurity and deliberate targeting of their staff, this can only become truer. This has been the topic of some belated soul-searching among both media professionals and NGOs acknowledging that each relies significantly on the other.¹⁰ Thus the more influence humanitarian groups exercise over a journalist's reporting, the greater the risk that stories will lack important contextual nuance to explain events in conflict and disaster zones. Of course, removing all such influence absolutely does not guarantee insightful reporting; journalists are quite capable of reproducing the same tired clichés of sectarian and ethnic tension¹¹ or perceived cultural backwardness¹² to explain unfamiliar contexts without the influence of overbearing aid organisations. Nevertheless, the closer the relationship between media and humanitarian groups, the greater the pressure is on reporters to surrender editorial control over the stories they produce. This trade-off of independence for access, which is particularly sharp when the dividing line between journalist and aid worker is erased, is especially troublesome when we consider questions of accountability.

AN ACCOUNTABILITY PARADOX

Aid organisations, like all service providers, must answer for the behaviour of their staff and the work they do, especially to those they purport to help. Yet, almost by definition, humanitarians work in environments in which popular access to conventional accountability mechanisms is limited. This is either because the state's capacity and/or legitimacy are fundamentally in question, or because its capabilities have been reduced by the onset of conflict or disaster. Where impunity prevails, media have an increased responsibility to scrutinise what all governance institutions are doing and how they are doing it. This includes aid agencies, many of whom operate as quasi-governmental organisations due to the fundamental nature of the services they provide and the limited opportunities people have to go elsewhere.

It is on questions of both effectiveness and ethics that the role of the media in humanitarian settings is plainest. Of those two, the media's implication in the former is more developed, likely because it concerns not only accountability to those receiving services but also to the more powerful donors funding them (and, where relevant, the taxpayers funding them). Media reports on the recovery process following the 2004 tsunami in South and Southeast Asia revealed that the UN and the UK's Disaster Emergency Committee had respectively concluded that half of money pledged was unspent two years after the disaster,¹³ and much of the work that was done prioritised 'headline grabbing' over needs.¹⁴ In the US in 2015, media outlet ProPublica revealed that the American Red Cross had raised half a billion dollars to assist Haiti following the 2010

⁹ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, 'Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid-Media Field,' *Journalism Studies*, 8, 6, (2007): 862-878

¹⁰ Ben Parker, Polly Markandya, Lisa Reilly, Michelle Betz and Siobahn Sinnerton, 'To Embed or not to Embed? "Mutual Mistrust" Between NGOs and Journalists,' Panel discussion held at the Frontline Club, 10 February 2015, London; see also Linda Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2010)

¹¹ Aziz Douai and Sharon Lauricella, 'The "terrorism" frame in "neo-Orientalism": Western news and the Sunni-Shia Muslim sectarian relations after 9/11,' *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 10, 1 (2014): 7-24

¹² Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2013)

¹³ Paul Vallely, 'The Big Question: What happened to the money raised to help victims of the Asian tsunami?' *The Independent*, 21 December 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-big-question-what-happened-to-the-money-raised-to-help-victims-of-the-asian-tsunami-429417.html>, (accessed 26 May 2017)

¹⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation, 'Mixed report for tsunami efforts,' *BBC News*, 12 January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4604646.stm, (accessed 26 May 2017)

earthquake, and done little beyond building six houses.¹⁵ Just last month, the Associated Press released an investigation into the dizzying amount UN agencies spend on travel compared to other aid organisations, far higher than they spend on combatting many diseases.¹⁶

Despite this focus on questions of effectiveness, and the apparently more robust debate around that, it is stories of ethical violations that reveal the real importance of media for providing some level of accountability to those receiving aid. Again following the 2004 tsunami, there were media reports of people being trafficked to and around Indonesia to work on construction sites run by NGOs as part of the recovery effort.¹⁷ This prompted a deeper, multi-year investigation from one journalist.¹⁸ Elsewhere, in the latest of a series of similar revelations about the behaviour of UN peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic, in 2017 the Associated Press published its investigation into a child sex ring involving peacekeepers, this time in Haiti. Underscoring the lack of access to other justice mechanisms, the report notes that of an estimated 2,000 allegations of abuse and exploitation levelled against UN peacekeepers in various missions over the past twelve years, 'only a fraction of the perpetrators were ever jailed.'¹⁹

In view of such precedents, it is crucial to underscore that the media's ability to scrutinise aid is already diminished by the extent of their dependence on aid agencies in their broader reporting. The 2007 case of NGO l'Arche de Zoë is instructive in this regard. The French organisation 'rescued' over a hundred orphans from Darfur and attempted to resettle them in France; however, those children were, in fact, predominately Chadian and had at least one parent or guardian.²⁰ Furthermore, in many instances they appear to have been misled into leaving their families. Crucially, there were French journalists embedded with the team to cover the operation, but they failed to report what was happening. With the closeness of media and humanitarian organisations already producing such incidents, increasing their proximity by removing the line that separates them is very likely to exacerbate the risk of occurrences like this. It decreases the chance of abuses being reported by institutionalising a conflict of interest. It is far harder to scrutinise and report publicly on mistakes and errors of judgement made by one's own organisation, which pays one's salary and directs one's career, than those of another, which does not.

CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, these attempts to increase journalists' answerability for their ethical role to assist those in desperate need by making them formally responsible for providing humanitarian aid ultimately diminish accountability. Making journalists into

¹⁵ Justin Elliot, 'How the Red Cross Raised Half a Billion Dollars for Haiti and Built Six Homes,' Propublica, 3 June 2015. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes>, (accessed 24 May 2017)

¹⁶ Maria Cheng, 'AP Exclusive: Strapped UN Health Agency Spends Big on Travel,' Associated Press, May 2017. http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/E/EU_MED_WHO_TRAVEL_ASOL-?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT, (accessed 24 May 2017)

¹⁷ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Red Cross tsunami workers abused,' CBC News, 17 March 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/red-cross-tsunami-workers-abused-1.901738>, (accessed 26 May 2017)

¹⁸ Virgil Grandfield, "'Are You Ready to Die Today?': What Really Happened in Post-Tsunami Indonesia' Eighteen Bridges, 6 January 2016, accessed 19 June 2017, <http://eighteenbridges.com/story/are-you-ready-to-die-today-what-really-happened-in-post-tsunami-indonesia/>

¹⁹ Paisley Dodds, 'AP Investigation: UN troops lured kids into Haiti sex ring,' Associated Press, 12 April 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/7ccc5fbc-05124fa9b0f42ce2edb62d9d/AP-Investigation:-UN-troops-lured-kids-into-Haiti-sex-ring>, (accessed 24/5/2017)

²⁰ Associated Press, 'Africa charity workers charged with kidnapping,' syndicated by NBC News, 30 October 2007. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/21547226/ns/us_news-giving/t/africa-charity-workers-charged-kidnapping/, (accessed 24 May 2017)

humanitarian responders, or including them as members of response teams, may well reduce the tension between assisting a population through increasing public visibility of their plight and assisting individuals in imminent danger. However, such a measure appears to reduce overall scrutiny of aid. Most worryingly, it reduces the ability of people who are ostensibly the targets for humanitarian assistance to hold aid organisations, which have extensive power over them, to account. That accountability is crucial both for the effectiveness of aid and to minimise the abuse of people temporarily (and sometimes less temporarily) rendered extremely vulnerable.

Media-driven accountability is far from efficient, and it cannot be relied upon to ensure scrutiny of those purporting to help people in desperate need. All actors working in this field need to improve their scrutiny of humanitarian operations and do so in a way that makes aid organisations more answerable to those they purport to help. But in the meantime, in conflict and disaster zones where recourse to other mechanisms can be difficult, if not impossible, the media have a particular role to play. That role needs strengthening by decreasing the extent to which media rely on humanitarian organisations to gather news from conflict and disaster zones, not collapsing the distinction between journalist and aid worker entirely. Increasing budgets for foreign news reporting would be an excellent start.

By extension, when it comes to balancing the need to raise public visibility of widespread suffering with the imperative to help individuals in desperate need of assistance, we must still rely on journalists' personal judgment. This remains the case despite all its attendant biases and vulnerability to subversion stemming from the increasing competitiveness of the industry. For the time being at least, we are likely to see repeats of this shocking incident like involving Souvid Datta.

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