



# THE STATE OF HUMANITARIAN JOURNALISM





Vincent Mundy – PANOS

Picture left: Photographers wearing helmets and gas masks cower behind a pillar, taking pictures at an anti government protest while piles of tyres burn behind them. Ukraine, Kiev. 2014

Picture front cover: Children stand in front of a BBC camera news crew at the beginning of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Khwaja-Bahauddin. 2001.  
Photo credit: Yannis Kontos – Polaris – PANOS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Humanitarian journalism plays a crucial role in how citizens, aid workers and international organisations around the world respond to emergencies and human suffering. Research on this journalism has tended to focus on establishing which topics and crises receive the most and least coverage.

But researchers have not explored other important questions such as: how do different funding models for humanitarian journalism change the news that is produced? How do governments influence the international reporting of humanitarian issues? What news do citizens and aid workers want to see more of? This report starts to answer these questions with data from a large scale, four-year multi-country study of humanitarian journalists, the news they produce, and the audiences who consume it.

This study includes interviews with nearly 200 journalists, news managers and media funders as well as extensive newsroom observations. This included fieldwork in London, Geneva, Washington, Bangkok and Nairobi. In addition, we completed major analyses of news content, and report on audience surveys with citizens and aid workers.

## We found that:

- 1 Very few international news organisations routinely cover humanitarian affairs. Only 12 news outlets reported on all four of the humanitarian events we analysed in 2016. Because of the high costs of producing regular, original journalism on humanitarian issues, commercial news organisations do not usually cover humanitarian issues, with the exception of major 'emergencies'.
- 2 Most humanitarian journalism is now funded by states or private foundations. This is worrying because claiming that particular actors or activities are 'humanitarian' is a powerful form of legitimacy. It is important that media about the suffering does not become a vehicle for commercial or political interests.
- 3 A major challenge of foundation funding is its unsustainable nature, as most foundations want to provide start-up money, rather than giving ongoing support. Meanwhile government funding can constrain where and how humanitarian reporting takes place because of foreign policy objectives and diplomatic tensions.

- 4 Journalists are often criticised for sporadic, sensationalistic and de-contextualised news coverage on conflicts, side-lining detailed analyses of long-running crises. But our research shows that news organisations which produce a lot of humanitarian coverage tend to do the opposite. They produce relatively few 'hard news' reports, focusing instead on detailed features, analysis pieces and some campaigning reports.
- 5 There were a number of important gaps in the topics that news reports addressed. Gender was treated in a very narrow way within humanitarian reporting during 2017. Almost no articles looked at the specific problems faced by women and girls in relation to the conflicts in Yemen and South Sudan. Many (largely female) journalists wanted to cover more varied stories about the issues faced by women and girls, but found it hard to get these stories commissioned.
- 6 News articles about humanitarian emergencies quote some sources of information far more than others. International organisations and NGOs were quoted frequently in reports on conflict, for example, while local citizens were not. Affected citizens made up only 16% of sources in coverage of conflict in South Sudan and just 12% of sources in reporting on Yemen.
- 7 Journalists are often accused of producing homogenous and decontextualised constructions of natural disasters. But news outlets vary enormously in how they cover these emergencies. For instance, we found that Thomson Reuters focused on breaking stories about dramatic and timely events, and reported with a largely Western audience in mind. By contrast, the specialist humanitarian news outlet, IRIN, wrote thematic pieces and analysis, targeted at a more global audience.
- 8 Audiences are interested in humanitarian journalism – more than journalists think. In a large-scale survey of international audiences (UK, France, Germany and the US), more people claimed to follow news about 'humanitarian disasters' (59%) either 'closely' or 'fairly closely' than any other type of international news. Another survey of 1600 people working in the aid sector found there was widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of most mainstream news coverage of humanitarian issues. Respondents said they wanted more investigative reporting and consistent coverage of ongoing crises.
- 9 Finally, newspaper headlines don't always have an immediate or direct effect on mass public perception of international aid. The Daily Mail's criticisms of international aid agencies "wasting money" do not seem to have damaged audiences' interest in, or commitment to, international aid.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is vital that funding for humanitarian news is given on a secure, ongoing basis and without strings attached. We call for the aid sector, governments and foundations to recognise that support of humanitarian journalism is crucial to making responses to suffering more effective. However funders should also be mindful of the indirect but significant consequences that impact requirements can have on the journalism they support.
- Editorial teams at specialist news outlets (and their funders) should note the existence of considerable 'gaps in the market', such as more varied reporting on the issues affecting women and girls, investigative reporting and including more diverse and/or local perspectives in coverage of conflict situations.
- Although humanitarian journalism is important, media headlines are not necessarily an accurate reflection of public attitudes towards aid. Government officials should therefore refrain from knee jerk reactions to negative media coverage of particular projects or sectors.
- News editors and managers at major, non-specialist outlets need to challenge the assumption that audiences are uninterested in humanitarian journalism, and should take into account the apparent desire of their audience for wider range of different kinds of humanitarian reporting. They may wish to consider conducting more consistent reporting – including follow-up reports and analyses after the event.

# INTRODUCTION

In 2017, humanitarian need was greater than ever before. The amount requested through UN-coordinated appeals reached a high of US\$25.2 billion, driven by ongoing crises in Syria, Yemen, Somalia and Nigeria and new large appeals in Ethiopia and Pakistan.

According to the 2018 Global Humanitarian Assistance report, an estimated 201 million people in 134 countries needed international humanitarian assistance. However, funding levels did not keep pace. Figure 1 shows that, despite receiving a record volume of funding (US\$14.9 billion), UN-coordinated appeals experienced a funding shortfall of US\$10.3 billion in 2017: the largest on record (Development Initiatives 2018).

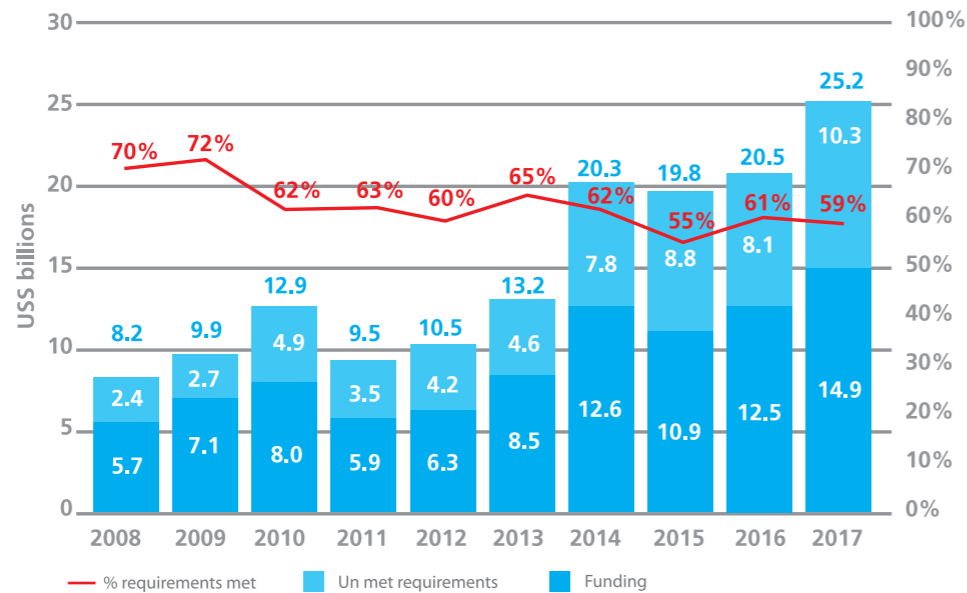


Figure 1. Requirements and funding, UN-coordinated appeals (2008-2017) (Development Initiatives 2018).

Such disparities between levels of humanitarian need and the response of the international community are often blamed, in part, on the failure of the international news media to devote sufficient coverage to humanitarian crises. Indeed, public debate about the state of humanitarian news has previously focussed almost entirely on the extent to which various crises are 'forgotten' or 'ignored' by the international news media.

This is epitomised by regular attempts to document the 'top ten most under-reported humanitarian crises'. For example, a recent report by Care International entitled *Suffering in Silence* (2018) found that, despite 18 million people experiencing food insecurity in North Korea, the humanitarian situation in the country received the least media attention globally – just 51 news articles in 2017 (see Figure 2). They concluded that, 'raising awareness and drawing attention to crises and disasters is vital in order to secure the funding needed to help' (2018:16).

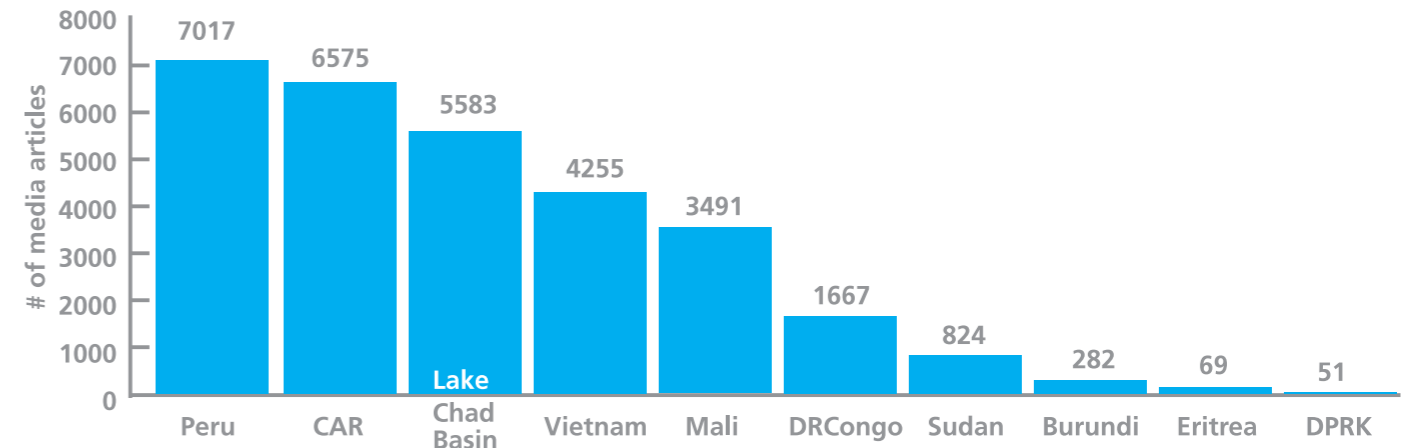


Figure 2. Most under-reported crises of 2017 (Care International 2018)

These studies are extremely important for highlighting the limitations of international news coverage of humanitarian crises. However, the volume of coverage is not the only important feature of humanitarian journalism. Furthermore, while journalists are often committed to covering under-reported regions, most do not agree that generating aid is the most important part of their work (Powers 2018; Wright 2018). Many are also interested in holding aid agencies to account, for example, and have used their journalism to highlight corruption, inefficiency and sexual exploitation in the sector.

There are also many other important but unanswered questions about how journalism relates to humanitarian affairs. We know little about the different kinds of humanitarian journalism produced by different news organisations, the practices and funding models involved, and the impact of such coverage on audiences. Most research has also been heavily skewed towards the West, with little attention being paid to Chinese and Arabic organisations, or to in-country journalists. This report tackles some of these key questions.

1 Which news organisations regularly report on humanitarian affairs? How are they funded, and what ethical problems or professional dilemmas does this create for journalists covering humanitarian affairs?

2 When natural disasters and violent conflicts are reported, what kinds of journalistic coverage do they receive? Do news outlets differ from one another, and if so, how?

3 How interested are news audiences in journalism about humanitarian affairs? How well does existing coverage serve their needs, and the needs of those involved in international aid? Which significant 'gaps' are there in news provision?

4 What effects does news coverage have on public attitudes towards international aid?

The aim of this report is to begin to answer these questions by presenting some of the early results of a four year, global research project into the state of humanitarian journalism around the world. Since 2014, we have conducted interviews with nearly 200 journalists, news managers and media funders; as well as extensive newsroom observations, analyses of news content and audience surveys. This research has included fieldwork in London, Geneva, Washington, Bangkok and Nairobi and has been supported primarily by a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). For further information about this project, including our latest research publications and blogs, please visit [www.humanitarian-journalism.net](http://www.humanitarian-journalism.net)

We are grateful to David Hudson, Jennifer Hudson and Will Tucker for allowing us to draw on data from the Aid Attitudes Tracker (AAT) in several of the following chapters. The AAT is an ongoing survey of public attitudes towards aid in the UK, France, Germany and the US, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It has surveyed 8,000 people in each of these countries, every six months, since 2013 (see Clarke et al 2018). Further information about their research is available at [www.devcommslab.org](http://www.devcommslab.org). We would also like to thank our research assistant, Max Slaughter, for his dedicated and thorough contribution to the content analysis discussed in chapter 2.



Getty images



# WHO PRODUCES HUMANITARIAN JOURNALISM?

## News organisations and funding models

Only a very small number of international news outlets, including the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF) and IRIN News, explicitly describe themselves as producing ‘humanitarian’ journalism. However, a number of mainstream news organisations also regularly report on humanitarian issues and events but don’t self-define as producers of ‘humanitarian news’.

Since there is no universally agreed definition of what ‘humanitarianism’ is, let alone how it should relate to journalism, we needed to find some other way of establishing which other news organisations regularly report on humanitarian issues. So we commissioned the media monitoring company - Kantar - to carry out electronic keyword searches relating to 4 different kinds of humanitarian events in 2016 (See Table 1.1).

Crisis or event	Sample period	No. of original news items
The ongoing crisis in South Sudan	September to December 2016	7691
The 2016 Aceh earthquake	December 7th 2016	4279
The World Humanitarian Summit	May 23rd and 24th 2016	745
The 2017 UN appeal for humanitarian funding	December 4th 2016	334

Table 1.1: Humanitarian crises/events in 2016, selected for analysis

These particular events/crises were chosen because they represent a range of issues, including a rapid-onset ‘natural’ disaster, a slow-onset, conflict-related crisis and different elements of the international humanitarian system. They also took place in different parts of the world and were not widely reported – allowing us to distinguish more easily between different news outlets.

The results, shown in Table 1.2 show that only twelve (English-language) international news organisations produced original news coverage of all four events.

Picture left: Journalist Hamida Ghafour stands amidst a group of US Marines during a briefing at the Bagram air base. Afghanistan, Kabul. 2004.

News Organisation	Type of news organisation
Agence France Presse (AFP)	International news agency
Al Jazeera English	International television broadcaster
Associated Press (AP)	International news agency
BBC World Service	International radio broadcaster
China Global Television Network news (CGTN) (formerly CCTV News)	International television broadcaster
The Guardian	Newspaper
Humanosphere (now closed)	Digital, non-profit
IRIN News	Digital, non-profit
Reuters (including the Thomson Reuters Foundation)	International news agency
Voice of America	International radio broadcaster
The Washington Post	Newspaper
Xinhua News Agency	International news agency

Table 1.2: International (English-language) news organisations that produced original coverage of all four humanitarian crises/events

## International broadcasters, news agencies and government funding

This list is dominated by the major international broadcasters and news agencies. Many of these are funded by governments who support journalism as part of their foreign policy objectives – and to achieve ‘soft power’. Thus, whilst state funding subsidises the high costs of producing regular, original coverage of humanitarian issues and events, there are important questions to be asked about the ways in which humanitarian journalism is influenced by the political manoeuvring of states in relation to one another, and other elites.

Support from Western governments allows radio stations like the BBC World Service and Voice of America to produce regular, original coverage of humanitarian crises around the world. For example, in a separate study, we found that humanitarian issues were mentioned in nearly one in five (19%) items on the news bulletins at BBC World Service and 14% of reports on the more in-depth Newshour programmes.

We found no evidence that government officials directly interfered in editorial output of either World Service or VoA. However, some journalists at these stations had become concerned about the extent to which governments set the strategic priorities of their organisations, which had implications for their ability to cover humanitarian affairs. A key problem, at both the BBC and VoA, was the way in which journalists’ ability to cover humanitarian issues in particular geographic regions waxed and waned in relation to governments’ strategic and funding priorities.

Concerns about humanitarian journalism were particularly pronounced among Voice of America journalists. These were triggered by legislative changes that removed the supervisory role of the bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors, which historically insulated the station from political influence (Borchers 2017; Folkenflik 2016). Subsequent moves to appoint Bannon allies to key positions heightened this concern (Gramer 2018; Mahdawi 2018).

The nature of VOA’s mandate gives it some legal protection from political interference, as it is obliged to provide “accurate, objective and comprehensive news”, and to “represent America, not any single segment of American society”, including explaining debates around US policies (US Foreign Relations Authorization Act, 1977, cited BBG, n.d.). But this mandate also creates problems for humanitarian journalism, as VoA journalists are obliged to explain humanitarian issues in relation to American perspectives and policies – which risks displacing local concerns and contexts.

Several relative newcomers, based outside the West and funded by state money have also become crucial producers of humanitarian journalism. Indeed, state funding from the Qatari government enabled Al Jazeera English (AJE) to provide far more reporting on the humanitarian events listed above than any other news organisation. Yet at the same time, Qatar’s use of AJE to acquire soft power in the Gulf has constrained the ability of AJE journalists to produce some kinds of humanitarian coverage.

This is because Qatar’s neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and its ally, Egypt, have all called for the closure of Al Jazeera and have implemented an international blockade, and related visa and travel permit restrictions, which make it much harder for AJE to cover some humanitarian crises, including the conflict in Yemen. AJE journalists also faced considerable ethical dilemmas about how to cover events in other areas where Qatar was involved militarily, or had diplomatic interests. In addition to Yemen, this included Syria, Sudan and South Sudan.

<sup>1</sup> Whilst the results of this analysis are important, it is also necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this data. Electronic keyword searches do not always produce an entirely reliable account of the nature of media coverage and although Kantar’s searches were extensive – covering over 20,000 English-language online/print news organisations – it was not entirely comprehensive.

Perhaps surprisingly, Chinese state-funded outlets were also found to be prolific providers of humanitarian coverage: including the wire agency, Xinhua, and the cable TV channel, China Global Television Network (CGTN). Rather than focussing on the attractive qualities of ‘soft power’ favoured by his predecessor, the current Chinese President, Xi Jinping, takes a more directive, forceful approach. This has included touring state media outlets to demand journalists’ loyalty in 2016, and announcing in February 2018 that all state media would be combined into a single, centralised organisation, the ‘Voice of China’.

Most CGTN and Xinhua journalists understood their role as being to promote a positive view of China, including emphasising the help given by Chinese humanitarian actors and peacekeepers. They also believed that their focus on other governments’ humanitarian efforts helped the Chinese government to develop its diplomatic relations with other countries. However, they encountered considerable ethical dilemmas and organisational obstacles when it came to explaining the causes and contexts of suffering in any detail, as their Chinese managers were reluctant to allow them to engage in ‘controversial’ political debates that might offend other states.

*Picture right: Anti-government fighters showing off a captive mercenary they have capture during fighting around Brega. Libya. 2011.*

Nevertheless, not all state-supported international broadcasters were found to be prolific providers of original humanitarian news, according to the methodology we used. Russia Today, France 24 and Deutsche Welle are all missing from our list because they relied exclusively on material provided by news agencies to cover at least some of these events (as did the commercial broadcaster, CNN International). Indeed, one of the most striking findings was the extent to which the vast majority of news outlets – both small and large - rely upon the ‘big three’ news agencies (AFP, AP and Reuters (which includes content from the Thomson Reuters Foundation) for their coverage of humanitarian issues. For example, in a separate study, we found that 99% of articles about South Sudan and Yemen in 2017 on the Mail Online was from news agencies. One of the key consequences of this reliance on news agencies is the lack of diversity in news outlets’ sources of humanitarian news.

<sup>2</sup> News items qualified as ‘humanitarian’ either when: (1) the country being reported on was the subject of a UN OCHA humanitarian appeal, (2) the focus was primarily on the aid industry or (3) the news item was explicitly framed in terms of a ‘crisis’ involving human suffering.

*Picture below: The strain starts to show as Executive Producer Carlos Van Meek (centre) takes morning conference at news channel Al Jazeera English in Doha. Qatar, Doha. 2011.*



Tom Pilston – PANOS



Sven Torfenn – PANOS



Lianne Milton – PANOS

*Picture left: Refugees at an informal camp set up by volunteers and aid workers near the Serbian border wait to take a bus to a registration centre. Hungary, Roszke. 2015.*

### Specialist non-profit news sites and foundation funding

Many aid-workers and journalists at mainstream news organisations who produce their own original humanitarian coverage also drew from specialist non-profit sites. These niche outlets are largely funded by private foundations. There are often internal debates at these outlets about the ethics of using foundation funding. These tend to focus on questions of impartiality and editorial independence, and concerns that funders might interfere in the editorial content of specific items.

However, we found little evidence to suggest that foundations tried to interfere in this way (although the representatives of some foundations did occasionally contact journalists with 'story ideas'). But we did find that the nature of foundation funding tended to push news outlets towards certain types of reporting. Most notably, it incentivised thematised, long form reporting. For example, the funder might be interested in supporting a series on 'environmental threats'. This is not necessarily problematic. But it is different from a traditional approach in which editors have a budget to report on the news / features they believe are the most important on any given day. Journalists also struggled with more complex ethical questions about how to negotiate the strategic aims of private foundations, including the common donor requirement that they demonstrate 'impact' with their journalism.

*Picture right: A female reporter for a television news station interviews a young woman who was a witness to the terror attacks at the Bataclan club. France, Paris. 2015.*

The largest specialist non-profit site is the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF) – the philanthropic arm of the global information and news wire agency – Thomson Reuters. The foundation is based in the main Thomson Reuters HQ in London and first launched its humanitarian coverage in 1997 under the brand 'AlertNet'. Although this brand has now been dropped, the foundation still produces a dedicated vertical of humanitarian reporting which, in TRF's words, 'shines a light on the world's humanitarian hotspots; from major disaster, conflicts and under-reported stories'. TRF has its own dedicated journalists, as well as using material produced by the 'mainstream journalists' at Thomson Reuters. TRF stories are filed directly onto newsroom feeds along with other Thomson Reuters material, as well as being published on TRF's website.

The second specialist provider of humanitarian news to feature on our list is the international non-profit news outlet – IRIN News. It has a relatively small team of staff, but a network of 200 freelance reporters around the world. IRIN defines its mission as being to, 'deliver unique, authoritative and independent reporting from the frontlines of crises to inspire and produce a more effective humanitarian response'. It was set up in 1996, and was run as a UN OCHA project until the end of 2014. This arrangement came to an end in 2015 as a result of growing friction between journalists and UN OCHA over questions of editorial control. These tensions culminated in UN officials' request that IRIN refrain from reporting on the Syrian conflict in case this harmed the UN's access (Lynch 2014).



Teun Voeten – PANOS



Journalist Marie Colvin photographed in Tahrir square, the scene of heavy clashes between pro and anti government protesters. Colvin was killed by a shell that landed on a temporary media centre she was staying at in Homs, Syria, on 22 February 2012. Egypt, Cairo. 2011.

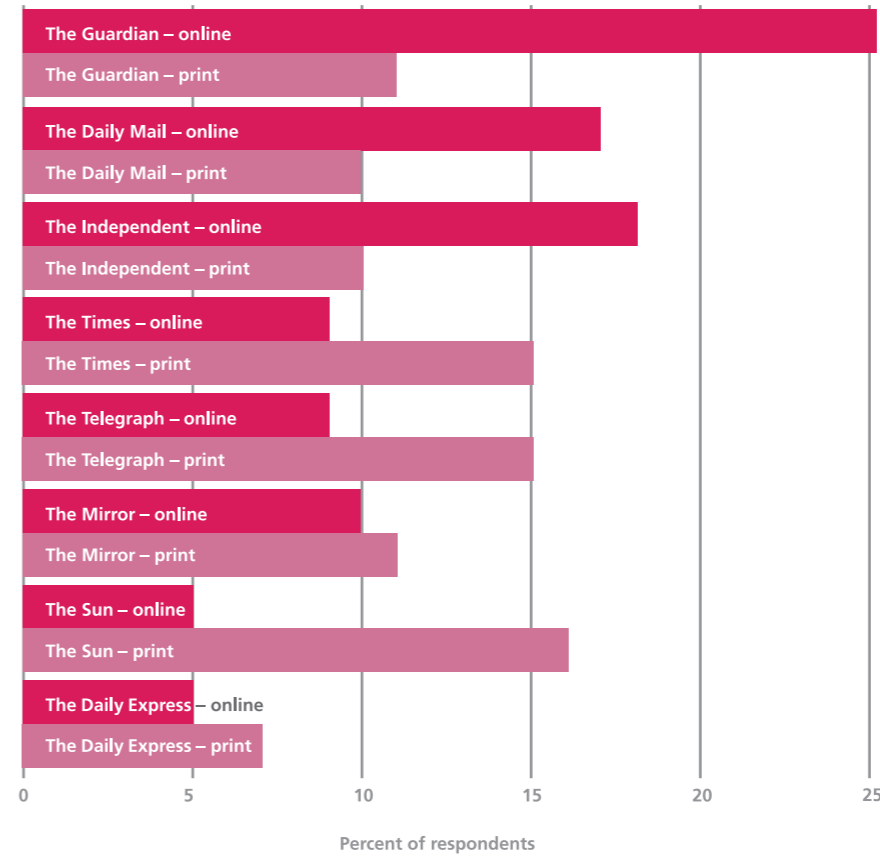


Figure 1.3: Sources of news about 'international development and poverty in poor countries' for respondents in the UK who say they follow such news either 'very closely' or 'fairly closely' (Source: Aid Attitudes Tracker (Clarke et al 2018)).

**Newspapers**

The final two news outlets that covered all four crises were the Guardian and the Washington Post. This finding supports the conclusions of previous research, which suggested that, 'The Guardian shows a commitment to disaster reporting not matched by other papers' (Franks 2006:8). It also corresponds with the results of a survey of the UK public in 2016, given in Figure 3.3, which reveal that The Guardian is by far the most popular source of news about international development in the UK. The Guardian has received support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) since 2007 to cover issues relating to global development.

The fact that The Washington Post produced original coverage of all four events is perhaps a little more unexpected, given its relatively limited resources and lack of foundation support in this area. Indeed, in an interview, the Washington Post's deputy foreign editor admitted to being 'a little surprised' by the finding, since, 'we have certainly fewer reporters than the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal... [and] unlike the New York Times, we do not have a UN bureau'. Despite this, she attributed The Washington Post's commitment to covering humanitarian issues to, 'an interlocking series of factors' including supportive management, commitment from the photo department, a talented and persistent Africa bureau chief, professional competitiveness and a sense of 'social obligation to witness and cover great human tragedies'.

**SUMMARY**

Our analysis shows that the number of international news organisations regularly reporting on a range of humanitarian issues and crises is relatively small (and getting smaller). Moreover, those few organisations that are committed to covering humanitarian news are generally the major international broadcasters and news agencies. Whilst some international non-profits and newspapers do regularly report on such issues, this is often only possible because of a reliance on foundation funding, which may be unsustainable.

But there are also problems with major international news organisations being funded by a single government, as humanitarian reporting is often constrained by diplomatic sensitivities and strategic state priorities, at the same time as benefiting from relatively generous, secure resources. However, it is important to stress that while relationships between news outlets and the states which fund them are all very different, there is a general trend towards 'tightening' of these relationships, so that humanitarian journalism risks becoming something of a political football.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of The Washington Post in this list illustrates that it is not impossible for news outlets to maintain relatively high levels of coverage of humanitarian issues without funding from private foundations or national governments. This appears to have resulted from a number of factors including the newspaper's strong commitment to public interest journalism and particularly tenacious staff members.

IRIN's base was in Nairobi until 2015, when it moved to London where the 'new IRIN' was incubated by the think tank, the Overseas Development Institute. Despite IRIN's relatively small size, IRIN published a significant amount of humanitarian coverage. For example, it published eight original news items about South Sudan during the sample period: the same amount as the Guardian and one more than the Washington Post. IRIN is now based in Geneva and funded by a range of different private foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Open Society Foundations. It is also supported by the Swiss, Belgian and Australian governments. UN OCHA still runs ReliefWeb, a specialised digital service, which aggregates news and information about humanitarian affairs.

The final specialist news non-profit to feature on this list, alongside the major international news organisations, is Humanosphere. This was a very small but active outlet, based in Seattle, alongside the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Humanosphere had a broader remit than IRIN News: specialising in daily coverage of global

health, aid and development issues for both mainstream and 'insider' audiences. Unfortunately, in July 2017, it was forced to close after experiencing a loss of funding and difficulty in attracting new financial backers – leading to a further narrowing of the already limited range of sources of information about humanitarian issues.

Like almost all specialist non-profit news outlets reporting on humanitarian and development issues, Humanosphere was heavily reliant on a very small number of donors to survive. Its experience illustrates two particular limits to a foundation-funded model. First, foundation funding alone rarely offers long-term financial sustainability. Rodney Benson (2016:8) explains that, 'most major foundations see themselves as providing... short-term start-up support with the expectation that non-profits will eventually achieve commercial sustainability'. Second, there just isn't enough donor money to go around. Very few foundations are active in this area; often because of their objectives don't align with those of journalists or because of the difficulty of measuring the impact of their investments.

Although not appearing on this list, there are a number of other non-profit news organisations committed to covering news beats that encompass humanitarian affairs, such as global health or international development. Examples include, Inter Press Service, News Deeply, SciDev. Net, Global Daily, UN Dispatch and The World Post. Although these specialist news organisations are rarely studied (or even acknowledged) in previous research they often report on humanitarian issues and events not covered in the mainstream media. Indeed, these specialist organisations often explicitly position themselves in opposition to mainstream news media; as providing a form 'corrective' journalism by covering 'under-reported' crises. The digital news sites BuzzFeed and Vice News only covered one of the four events each.



# HOW ARE CONFLICTS REPORTED



Tommy Trenchard – PANOS

## A quantitative analysis of international news coverage of South Sudan and Yemen in 2017

The next step of our study was to analyse how those news organisations that produce a lot of humanitarian coverage tend to cover humanitarian affairs. To begin this discussion, we focus on news outlets’ coverage of conflict.

According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) (2017:142), up to eighty percent of humanitarian needs now emanate from violent conflicts. The next chapter complements these findings with an analysis of reporting on ‘natural’ disasters.

Two of the most severe, protracted violent conflicts are in Yemen and South Sudan. In Yemen, an escalating conflict since March 2015 has caused forced displacement, severe economic decline, and the collapse of basic services and institutions. By 2017 an estimated 22.2 million people (equivalent to 75 per cent of the population) were in need of some kind of humanitarian or protection assistance, including 11.3 million in acute need (OCHA 2017a).

In South Sudan, nearly 4.3 million people – one in three people – have been displaced, since conflict began in December 2013. Currently 7 million people in the country are in need of assistance and protection. Although localized famine was stopped in 2017, severe food insecurity continues to increase and 1.1 million children under age five are now estimated to be acutely malnourished (OCHA 2017b). South Sudan has also recently been described by UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock as, ‘one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a humanitarian worker’ because of frequent crimes being committed against aid workers, with apparent impunity.

Despite regularly featuring in studies of the most ‘under-reported’ crises, our aim here is not to document once again the relative lack of coverage of these two crises. Instead, our focus is on establishing *how* news outlets that did report on them, framed each crisis. In the process, we also aim to establish how coverage of these two crises differed. The results of our analysis are summarised in Table 2.1.

*Walther Onzima, a 26 year old volunteer with the Ugandan Red Cross, talks with South Sudanese refugees about the dangers of cholera and how to avoid it. Uganda, Bidi Bidi, Northern Region. 2017*

	Yemen	South Sudan
Change over time	Relatively consistent throughout the sample period	Peaked after the UN declared famine but subsequently declined.
Voices used	Reliance on multi-laterals and INGOs, rather than affected citizens.	Reliance on multi-laterals and INGOs, rather than affected citizens.
Topic	Focussed on conflict/violence, health and international relations. Lack of coverage of gender, religion and the environment	Focus on conflict/violence, food security, displacement and aid. Lack of coverage of gender, religion and the environment
Style	Generally, detailed and/or contextualised reporting. Little ‘breaking news’.	Mostly ‘reportage’ rather than breaking news and a significant amount of ‘campaigning’ coverage.

Table 2.1: General characteristics of news coverage of South Sudan and Yemen in 2017

### Method

The news organisations named in Table 2.2 were chosen for analysis because they represent both some of the most prolific international producers of humanitarian news (see chapter 1) and a diversity of forms of funding, focus and format.

Despite not featuring on our list of leading producers of humanitarian news, CNN International, the Mail Online and Devex are all included in this study to represent some of the most prolific for-profit producers of humanitarian journalism. Both CNN International and the Mail Online produced original coverage of three of the four humanitarian crises/events discussed in chapter 1, but were excluded from the list because they only ran news agency copy in their

coverage of the 2017 UN appeal for humanitarian funding. Devex is a social enterprise and media platform serving the global development community with a strong journalistic division. It also produced original coverage of three of the four crises/events.

To identify relevant content, the website of each news outlet was searched using keywords related to the conflicts. To identify content on the BBC World Service, one news bulletin programme and one Newshour programme was listened to in full each day. Unfortunately, the search functions meant that only CGTN’s Africa and Americas sites could be searched, and not their main Beijing site. Only original articles referring directly to the conflicts in South Sudan and Yemen

and the humanitarian consequences were included in the analysis. The sample period for news about South Sudan was the six months from 18th February to 17th August 2017, while for Yemen it was the six months from 15th April to 14th October 2017.

Given that some larger broadcasters produced significantly more coverage than others, they will have a disproportionate influence on the aggregate findings. We acknowledge or account for this, where relevant, throughout the analysis. Similarly, given the significant differences between the remit and resources of the news organisations in our sample, we only offer general observations about the characteristics of their reporting, rather than direct comparisons, which may be misleading.

	Focus	Format	Funding
Al Jazeera English	Mainstream	Television broadcaster	State funded
BBC World Service	Mainstream	Radio broadcaster	Public Service
CGTN (Africa and Americas)	Mainstream	Television broadcaster	State funded
CNN International	Mainstream	Television broadcaster	For profit
Mail Online	Mainstream	Online newspaper	For profit
Devex	Specialist	Online	For profit
Guardian	Mainstream (+ specialist section)	Online newspaper	Underwritten by a Trust
IRIN News	Specialist	Online	Non-profit
Washington Post	Mainstream	Online newspaper	For profit

Table 2.2: News organisations included in the sample

	South Sudan	Yemen
Al Jazeera English	34	81
BBC World Service	16	10
CGTN (Africa and Americas)	125	5
CNN International	17	36
Mail Online	4	5
Devex	15	12
Guardian	38	38
IRIN News	7	6
Washington Post	18	24

Table 2.3: Total number of original articles covering South Sudan and Yemen over six months in 2017, for different news outlets.



UN Humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien meets with displaced communities in a Protection of Civilians site in Juba. They shared with him some of the challenges they face as a result of the on-going conflict in South Sudan. Civilians – especially women and children – bear the brunt of the war. The Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) called on parties to commit to sustainable peace and warned that if violence continues, the already vast number of people suffering will continue to rise appallingly. Photo: OCHA/Guimomar Pau Sole.

**Volume of coverage**

Overall, both crises received similar amounts of coverage across the nine news organisations in our sample. South Sudan was covered in 789 articles and Yemen in 810 articles. Table 2.3 also shows that most news outlets gave similar amounts of coverage to each crisis. The only major exceptions were Al Jazeera English and CGTN, which focussed significantly more on Yemen and South Sudan respectively. The apparent lack of coverage of Yemen by CGTN likely reflects, in part, our inability to systematically search content originating from their Beijing bureau (mentioned above) rather than their lack of commitment to covering the crisis. Al Jazeera English's far greater coverage of Yemen rather than South Sudan, likely reflects the fact that the news outlet was suspended from South Sudan on 1st May 2017.

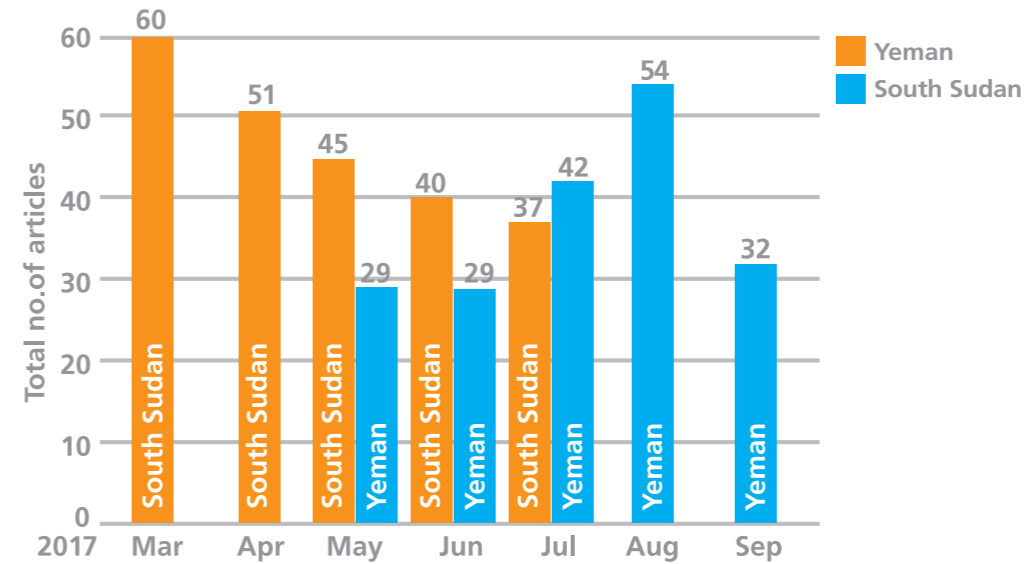


Figure 2.1: Total no. of articles per month about each crisis

**Change over time in coverage**

The results in Figure 2.1 show, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, that coverage of both South Sudan and Yemen was relatively consistent throughout the sample period. This suggests that although news outlets are often criticised for offering sporadic reporting of humanitarian crises, news organisations committed to humanitarian reporting do maintain a degree of consistent coverage. The Guardian, for example, had at least two original news items about each crisis, every month.

However, Figure 2.1 does also show that coverage of South Sudan peaked in March 2017, shortly after the UN declared famine in parts of the country. After this, the total amount of coverage South Sudan received declined steadily each month. Whilst there was also a spike in coverage of Yemen in August 2017, this can be almost entirely explained by a significant increase in coverage from Al Jazeera English only.

**Who speaks?**

The results in Figure 2.2 show that the kinds of sources used in the coverage of both crises were fairly similar. In both cases, the dominant voices were multi-lateral institutions (27%, 28%), such as the United Nations, and to a lesser extent, International NGOs (19%, 12%). The only significant difference between the voices heard in coverage of these two crises was that there were fewer references from local government sources in coverage of Yemen (5%) than South Sudan (14%). Instead, international NGOs (19%), foreign governments (12%) and experts (8%) were more likely to be cited.

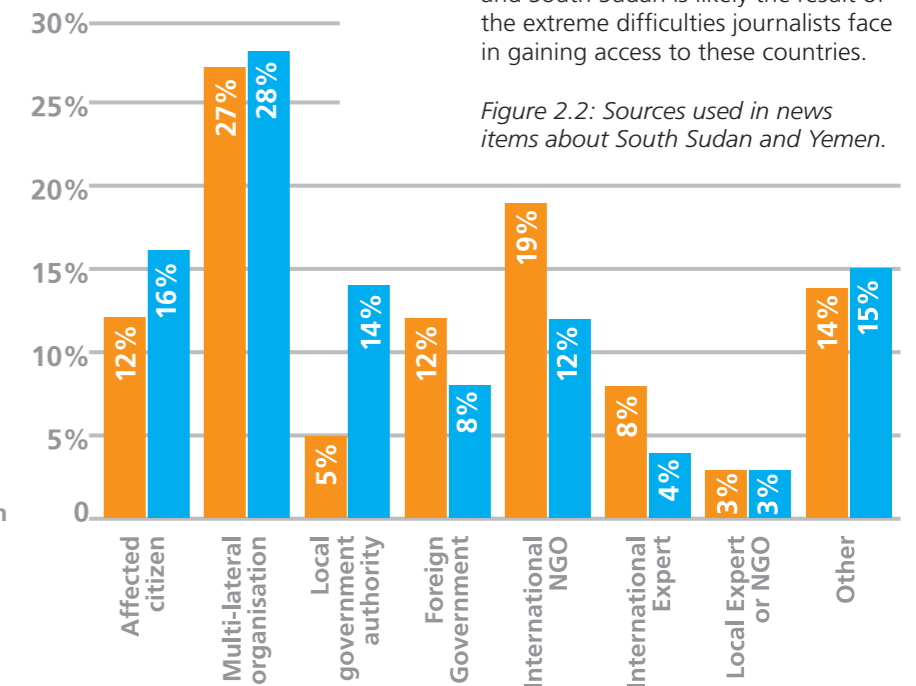


Figure 2.2: Sources used in news items about South Sudan and Yemen.

Figure 2.2 also shows that affected citizens made up only 16% of sources in coverage of South Sudan and just 12% of sources in reporting on Yemen. These findings contrast with the results of previous research into international news coverage, which has revealed a widespread tendency to prioritise the voices of affected citizens over sources within the international organisations. Research by Magee and Scott (2016) revealed that, on average, 35% of individuals cited in international news in UK news bulletins were 'affected citizens' and only 3.5% were representatives of NGOs. The reliance on multi-laterals and INGOs, rather than affected citizens, in the reporting of Yemen and South Sudan is likely the result of the extreme difficulties journalists face in gaining access to these countries.

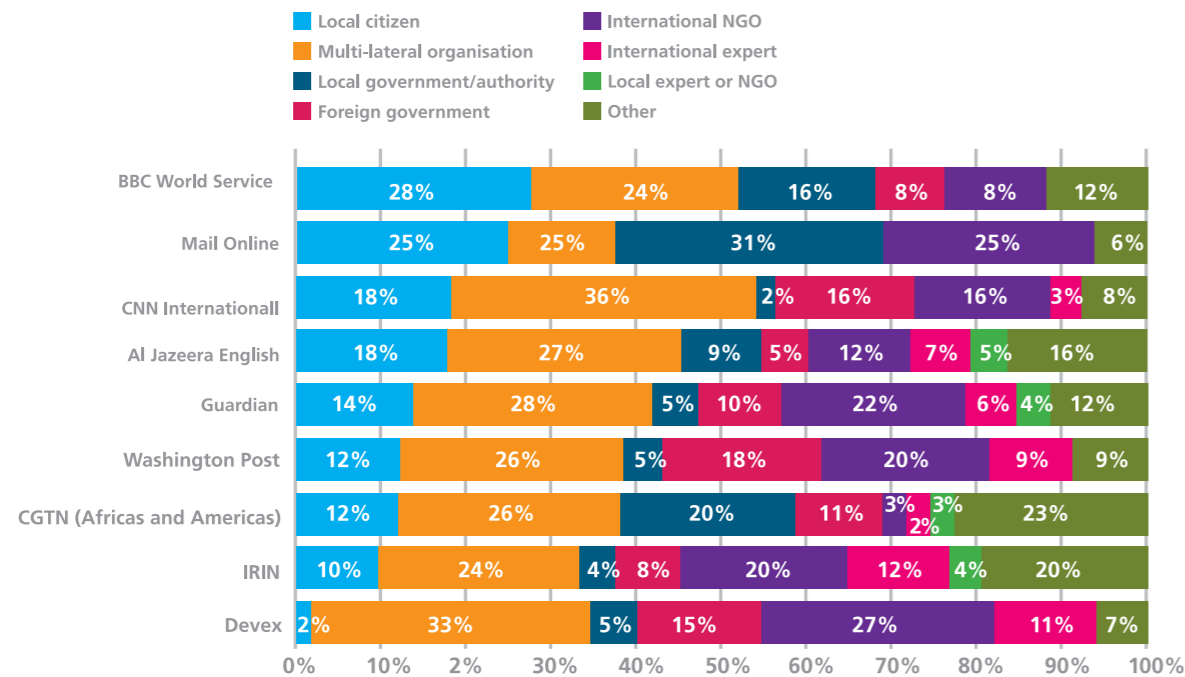


Figure 2.3: Sources used by different news organisations in their coverage of South Sudan and Yemen.

Figure 2.3 shows that the news outlets that made greatest use of the voices of affected citizens in their coverage were the BBC World Service (28%), the Mail Online (25%), Al Jazeera English (18%) and CNN International (18%). The range of voices within the Mail Online's output may seem surprising, given the outlet is often criticised for not focussing on international affairs, and for lobbying against foreign nationals coming to the UK. One explanation is that the outlet uses a lot of news agency copy in its reporting on these crises. The agencies – Thomson Reuters, AFP and AP – often have journalists filing from the field, who address a wide range of issues and have access to local sources.

Figure 2.3 also shows that affected citizens were less likely to be cited in more specialist news outlets, such as Devex (2%) and IRIN News (10%). Devex was more likely to quote representatives from multi-lateral organisations (33%), international NGOs (27%) and local / international businesses (6%). IRIN was most likely to cite international experts (12%) and local NGOs (4%).

The profile of sources used in coverage by the Guardian and the Washington Post was similar, although the Guardian was one of only 4 news outlets to include the voices of local experts or local NGOs. The dominant voices in coverage by CGTN were from multi-lateral organisations (26%) and local and foreign governments (31%) rather international NGOs (3%) or affected citizens (12%).

**Topics**

Table 2.4 shows that 'conflict/violence' was, quite understandably, the most common topic within coverage of both South Sudan (73%) and Yemen (81%). The declaration of famine in South Sudan also explains the focus on 'food security' (44%), while the cholera outbreak in Yemen explains why 37% of coverage was about 'health'. However, Table 2.4 also reveals a number of notable differences between coverage of each crisis. For example, nearly half (41%) of all news items about Yemen were related to international relations. Examples include, 'Dissecting Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen' (CNN International) and 'UN agrees to send war crimes investigators to Yemen' (Al Jazeera English).

In contrast, just 16% of coverage of South Sudan was about international relations and in most cases, the focus was on the levels of support being provided by other countries. This is evident in headlines such as 'EU and UK united in effort to combat famine in South Sudan' (Guardian). Indeed, there was more discussion of aid and aid policy in news about South Sudan (26%) than there was in news about Yemen (17%). Examples of such coverage include, 'Local aid workers on the front line of South Sudan's civil war' (IRIN News) and 'Humanitarian work is being blocked by bureaucracy' (Guardian). Furthermore, the other countries most commonly discussed in articles about South Sudan were Nigeria, Yemen and Somalia – implying that one of the dominant frames of such coverage was the idea of the 'four famines' which were taking place in that year.

Interestingly, the topic of 'children' featured relatively often; in 13% of coverage of Yemen and 12% of coverage of South Sudan. This topic appeared most often in coverage by Al Jazeera English, the Guardian, CGTN and CNN International. Examples include articles entitled, 'South Sudan's orphans seek solace in martial arts' (Al Jazeera English) and 'Yemen aid worker: 'Too many children are dying' (CNN International).

	Yemen	South Sudan
Conflict / violence	81%	73%
International relations	41%	16%
Health	37%	10%
Food security	36%	44%
Aid policy / industry	17%	26%
Children	13%	12%
Domestic politics	12%	24%
Economics	10%	14%
Law and order	7%	4%
Displacement	6%	28%
Weather and climate	4%	8%
Gender	0%	4%
Other	7%	6%

Table 2.4: Topic prevalence in the coverage of crises in Yemen and South Sudan

By contrast, the topic of 'gender' was rarely discussed, featuring in just 4% of coverage of South Sudan and in no news items about Yemen. The only news outlets to cover stories about women and girls were CGTN (6 news items), the Guardian (4 news items), Al Jazeera English (1 news item) and the BBC World Service (1 news item). Examples include articles entitled, 'Mothers and babies at risk amid critical midwives' shortage in South Sudan' (CGTN) and 'Foreign governments must 'pressure South Sudan to end epidemic of rape' (Guardian).

Similarly, the journalists whom we interviewed tended to only discuss women as the victims of sexual attacks by local men, and/or as particularly vulnerable during humanitarian crises because of the risks of being pregnant or giving birth without adequate medical care. As one put it, "I think with women it still seems to be that you've either got to...die in childbirth, or it's got to be a sexual violence thing". Rape was almost always mentioned by journalists in the context of local women being attacked by local men – rarely peacekeepers and never aid-workers, until the major sex scandals broke in spring 2018.

Nevertheless, a relatively small but committed group of (largely female) reporters said they wanted to cover a wider range of issues affecting women and girls, but had struggled to get these commissioned by mainstream news outlets. Some saw journalism about human rights and/or international development as offering them greater scope for telling more varied stories about women's suffering, including issues to do with FGM, trafficking, economic exploitation (and empowerment), LGBT issues, and women's protest movements. The funding offered by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other NGOs was viewed as crucial in supporting these kinds of reporting. However, journalists complained that such forms of reporting could also be stereotypical: tending to focus on powerful or 'heroic' individuals, such as women entrepreneurs and scientists, who sought to relieve their own or others' suffering.

Table 2.4 also shows that other topics rarely covered, in either crisis, include religion (Yemen 1%, South Sudan 1%) and the environment (Yemen 0%, South Sudan 1%).

The two news organisations covering the widest range of topics were the Guardian and Al Jazeera English. The Mail Online had the greatest proportion of coverage focussed on food security, IRIN News focussed most on aid policy, Al Jazeera English on displacement, the BBC World Service on conflict and CGTN on international relations.

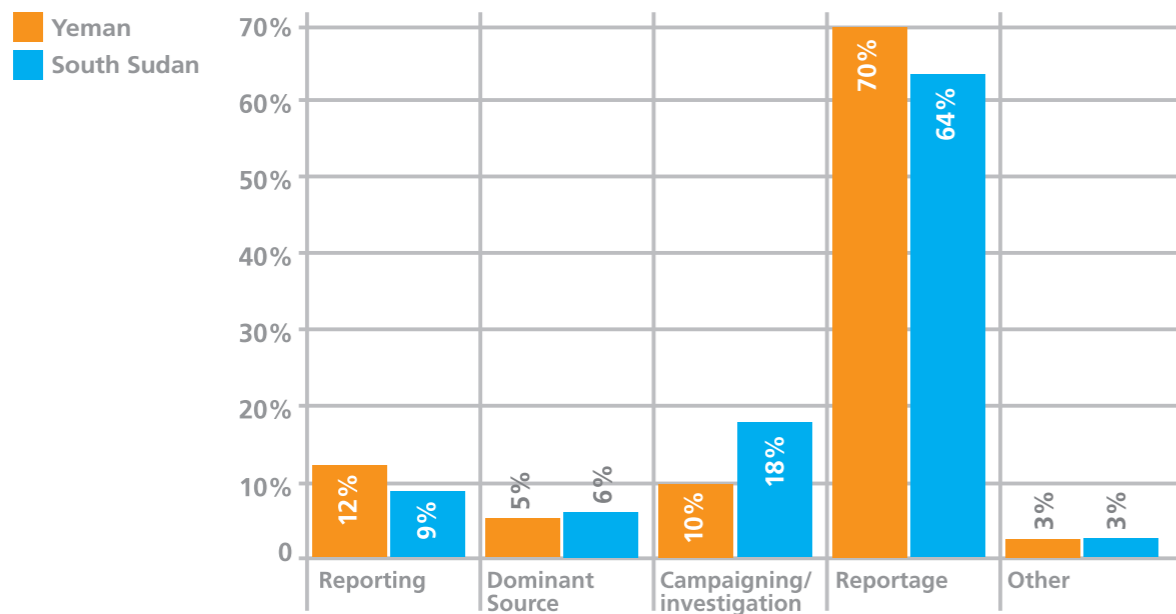


Figure 2.4: Styles of reporting used to cover Yemen and South Sudan (excluding CGTN)

Style of reporting

Journalists are often criticised for sporadic, sensationalistic and de-contextualised news coverage on conflicts, side-lining detailed analyses of long-running crises. But our research shows that news organisations which produce a lot of humanitarian coverage actually tend to do the opposite.

Figure 2.4 shows that only around 10% of coverage of these crises was in the form of conventional ‘reporting’. Cottle and Rai (2011:180) define this as relatively short news items, ‘involving information conveyance and the surveillance of current events, framed in terms of up-to-date’ information and often lacking context’. Examples of such news items include, ‘Airstrike in Yemen kills dozens at hotel’ (CNN International) and ‘13 South Sudanese soldiers appear in court in Juba’ (BBC World Service). (The results for CGTN are excluded from Figure 2.4 because its inclusion would significantly distort the overall findings).

Instead, a significant majority of news items about both Yemen (70%) and South Sudan (64%) were in the form of ‘reportage’. This refers to coverage that, ‘attempts to generate deeper understanding and insights into current news events... through the provision of detailed background, context and analysis’ (Cottle and Rai 2011:181). Examples include, ‘There are no clear winners in South Sudan’s

war’ (Al Jazeera English) and ‘Donors pledge \$1.1bn to Yemen, with ‘one hand tied behind their backs’ (Devex).

In fact, only two news outlets in the sample (BBC World Service and CGTN, which both have a relatively stronger focus on breaking news) did not have at least 50% of their coverage in the form of ‘reportage’. This suggests that, when these news outlets do cover the crises in Yemen and South Sudan, they tend to offer relatively detailed and/or contextualised reporting.

Table 2.5 also show that coverage is not usually in the form of ‘breaking news’. The BBC World Service was the only news outlet to produce a majority of news items in which the principal ‘news hook’ [event on which the story focuses] occurred within 24 hours of the article being published. Interestingly, the results in Table 2.6 also show that coverage of South Sudan was even less likely to be ‘breaking news’ than coverage of Yemen for every news outlet, apart from the BBC World Service.



Picture left: Photojournalist Knowles-Coursin aboard a UN cargo helicopter headed to Jonglei State, South Sudan, in late 2013.

	South Sudan	Yemen
BBC World Service	94%	80%
CGTN (Africa and Americas)	31%	40%
Guardian	21%	26%
CNN International	20%	33%
Al Jazeera English	17%	43%
Devex	13%	50%
Washington Post	10%	42%
Mail Online	0%	40%
IRIN	0%	17%

Table 2.5: Percentage of news items about each crisis that is ‘breaking news’

The most significant difference between the style of reporting used to cover South Sudan and Yemen concerns the use of ‘campaigning’ or ‘investigation’ coverage. Reporting on South Sudan (18%) was almost twice as likely to adopt such a style as coverage of Yemen (10%). A ‘campaigning’ style of reporting refers to news items which either actively campaign for particular causes and issues or which actively investigate, expose or uncover information and practices (Cottle and Rai 2006:175). Such coverage was most likely to be produced by the Washington Post (33%), the Guardian (24%) and IRIN News (21%). Examples include, ‘Britain must seize the initiative on Yemen’ (Guardian), ‘South Sudan’s man-made famine demands a response’ (Washington Post) and ‘South Sudan: Time for humanitarians to get tough’ (IRIN). By contrast, there was no such reporting by the BBC World Service, CGTN, Devex or the Mail Online.

SUMMARY

In summary, our analysis shows that the volume of coverage of both South Sudan and Yemen within our chosen news outlets was relatively consistent throughout the sample period and was usually characterised by detailed and/or contextualised analyses rather than breaking news. However, there was a reliance on voices from multilaterals and INGOs, rather than from affected citizens and a relative lack of coverage of certain topics such as gender, religion and the environment.

Coverage of South Sudan peaked after the UN declared famine in parts of the country but subsequently declined steadily. Reporting on this crisis was more likely to adopt a campaigning tone and less likely to be ‘breaking news’. Reporting on Yemen was characterised by a significantly greater focus on international relations and less of a focus on aid and aid policy.

There were also important differences between news outlets in their reporting on these conflicts. Coverage on the BBC World Service was characterised by a focus on conflict, breaking news and the voices of affected citizens.

Whilst CGTN also had a focus on breaking news, it had a tendency to cite more foreign and local government sources and to focus on international relations. Coverage in the Guardian was amongst the most consistent, diverse and critical/investigative. Al Jazeera English’s coverage was the most diverse of all, though, in terms of the range of topics covered.

Devex was the most likely to focus on economics and to cite local/international businesses. IRIN was most likely to focus on the aid industry itself and to cite international experts and local NGOs. Coverage of South Sudan and Yemen in the Washington Post also focussed on aid policy and economics and, like IRIN, often had a critical/investigative focus. All three rarely produced ‘breaking news’.

The Mail Online made extensive use of news agency material, and produced the least original coverage of both crises. When it did cover the conflicts in Yemen and South Sudan, its reporting was characterised by a focus on food security, conflict and health and quotes from affected citizens.

# HOW ARE 'NATURAL' DISASTERS REPORTED?



Aubrey Wade – PANOS

## Comparing coverage of the 2015 Nepal earthquake by Thomson Reuters and IRIN News

Most research done into the reporting of humanitarian issues has tended to focus on coverage of seemingly natural, rapid onset disasters (Joye 2010; Yan and Bissell 2015).

However, this research rarely differentiates between the approaches taken by different news outlets. We studied this question in 2015, in an analysis of the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal on 25th April that year, killing more than 9,000 people and injuring over 23,000. In this chapter, we examine how this earthquake and its aftermath were reported by two, very different international news organisations: Thomson Reuters and IRIN News. They are the oldest and most established English language news agency, and specialist humanitarian news outlet, respectively. We chose these outlets as they are the only two major international news organisations that explicitly describe at least part of their journalism as 'humanitarian'. Both news outlets also feature in our list of 'top 12' producers of humanitarian news (see chapter 1)

Thomson Reuters is one of the 'big three' international news agencies. These wire services produce original news reports about events in almost all countries and sell them to subscribing news organizations around the world. Given the high costs associated with producing news about humanitarian crises, most news organisations rely heavily on these newswires for their coverage of natural hazards overseas. As a result, they have a significant influence over how citizens around the globe come to understand humanitarian crises. Thomson Reuters also carries content produced by its philanthropic arm – the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF) – which includes coverage of 'the world's humanitarian hotspots' (see chapter 1).

IRIN News is an independent, non-profit news organisation, which reports exclusively on news about humanitarian crises and responses to them. Its main audience has traditionally been those interested or working in humanitarian response – specialists, in other words. It is much smaller in size and reach than Thomson Reuters, although their

website does receive around 180,000 unique visitors each month. During the first two weeks after the Nepal earthquake, 41% of all of the outputs by IRIN News focussed on this event.

To be clear, our aim is not to establish which news outlet produced the 'best' coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath. The way in which Reuters and IRIN News covered this event is a reflection of the extreme differences in their remit and resources, as well as the different audiences they serve. Rather, the purpose of this analysis is to illustrate how 'natural' disasters are covered by influential news organisations and how this reporting might differ. Table 3.1 summarises the results of our analysis.

Picture left: Nepali and international rescue workers celebrate the rescue of two young men pulled alive from a collapsed building in Gongabu-4, Naya Buspark, Kathmandu, five days after the 25 April earthquake. 2015.

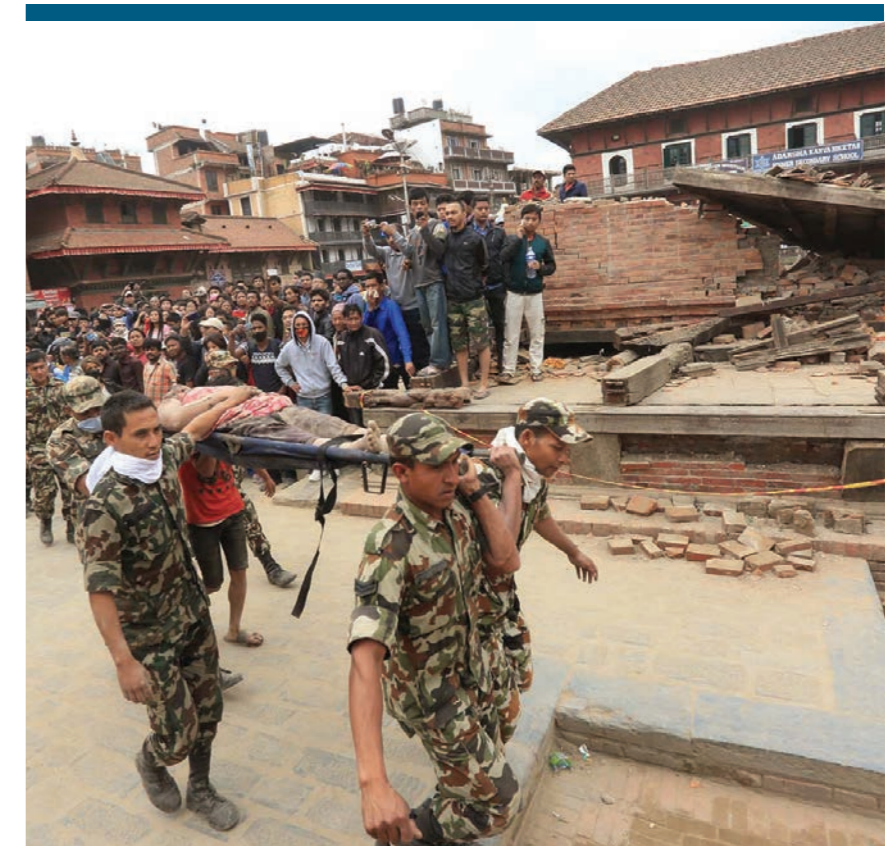
	Reuters	IRIN News
<b>Main humanitarian actors</b>	Foreign governments and multi-lateral institutions.	International (and local) NGOs and local government.
<b>Representation of the Nepalese government</b>	Unable to cope, ineffectual or corrupt.	One of a number of humanitarian actors.
<b>Representation of affected citizens</b>	Focus on non-Nepalese 'foreigners', including 'trekkers'.	Focus on Nepalese nationals.
<b>Dominant framing device</b>	'Conflicts' between international and national actors.	Multiple perspectives on issues related to the effectiveness of humanitarian response.
<b>Thematic focus</b>	Health, illness and disease.	Sanitation, migration, children, governance, gender, refugees, disaster risk reduction (DRR).
<b>Other characteristics</b>	Timeliness, dramatization and a domestic-foreign dichotomy.	Few efforts to dramatize events.

Table 3.1: Key features of coverage of the 2015 of Nepal earthquake by Reuters and IRIN News

### Method

Our analysis involved a combination of content analysis and framing analysis. The sample period consisted of all news items produced by Reuters (including the Thomson Reuters Foundation) and IRIN News within the first 13 days after the earthquake (25.4.15 – 7.5.15). The aim was to analyse all of their journalistic, text-heavy, outputs within this period. So we included all conventional news reports and special reports/features, and photo features that had accompanying commentary.

Articles were excluded if they were text-light or non-journalistic. This included guest articles, brief updates (less than 150 words), liveblogs and video only (with no accompanying text). As a result of this strict qualifying criteria and relatively small sample period a significant number of articles produced by Reuters are excluded from the analysis. In total, 27 articles from Reuters and 17 from IRIN News qualified for inclusion in the study. In each article, we analyse which sources were quoted, the topic focus, and the framing of the disaster.



Laxmi Prasad Ngakhisi / UNDP Nepal

Early on 25 April, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck in Nepal, causing widespread devastation and loss of life. This image shows some of the damage in Kathmandu valley.

	Reuters	IRIN
Local government	27%	9%
Local participant / observer	23%	25%
Multi-lateral organisation	20%	16%
Foreign government	12%	5%
International NGO	8%	22%
Other (e.g. international media)	6%	7%
Other local institution	3%	6%
Think Tank/Academic (International)	2%	1%
Local NGO	0%	8%

Table 3.2: Comparison of the proportion of use of different sources by Reuters and IRIN News

**International actors**

The central humanitarian actor in Reuters coverage of the 2015 Nepal earthquake was the “international community”. Table 3.2 shows that 32% of all sources in Reuters news were either foreign governments (primarily the US) – or multi-lateral institutions, such as the UN or the IMF. These international actors were repeatedly framed as the main actors responding to the earthquake, as is evident in the following headlines of Reuters articles.

- U.S. sending disaster team, initial \$1 million to Nepal – Kerry
- IMF ready to send team to Nepal to assess needs
- Google, Facebook join Red Cross to find thousands missing after Nepal quake
- Celebrities seek funds for Nepal quake

By comparison, IRIN News coverage only quoted foreign governments four times. Instead, Table 3.2 shows that quotations from international actors were dominated by international NGOs – making up 22% of all sources. Reuters articles contained relatively few citations from international NGOs (8%).

**National/local actors**

Although the Nepalese government was the most cited source within Reuters coverage (27%), on most occasions they were the simply the source for brief updates on the death toll. Beyond this, Reuters coverage frequently presented the Nepalese government as either unable to cope, ineffectual or corrupt, as the following headlines help to illustrate.

- An overwhelmed government appealed for foreign help.
- Anger over the pace of the rescue has flared in some areas, with Nepalis accusing the government of being too slow to distribute international aid that flooded into the country.

Within these articles, the Nepalese government was often also presented within a ‘conflictual’ frame: as one ‘side’ of a ‘conflict’ – usually responding to criticisms of its response from international actors.

Senior government officials said customs checks were necessary, because they did not know what was coming into the country. Some rescue workers, for their part, said they were frustrated by what they saw as bureaucratic delays and lack of coordination by the government.

There were also examples within IRIN News’s coverage of the Nepalese government being presented as unable to cope and ineffectual – most notably in the article entitled, ‘Nepal quake fund move is PR fiasco’. However, this was not the dominant feature of IRIN’s representation of the local authorities. Instead, the Nepalese government was presented as one of a number of actors responding to the earthquake. In the article, ‘Why wasn’t quake-prone Nepal better prepared?’ for example, the failings of the Nepalese government were both disaggregated (into capacity, legislation and planning) and integrated into a wider discussion, which included references to geology, geography and urbanisation.

**Affected citizens**

Reuters (23%) and IRIN News (25%) had a similar proportion of quotes from people directly affected by the earthquake. However, there were significant differences between who was being cited, how they were cited, and the distribution of these references within articles. For example, whilst two thirds of all IRIN articles included at least one quote from an affected citizen, this was the case for only one third of Reuters articles. Similarly, 38% of IRIN articles were classified as adopting a ‘human interest’ frame – using a human story or emotional angle to frame the story. This was the case for 19% of Reuters articles.

Moreover, only one of the 20 affected citizens IRIN News cited (5%) was a non-Nepalese national. By contrast, 34% of all such sources in Reuters articles were ‘foreigners’. Examples include, ‘Romanian climber Alex Gavan, who was at base camp, posted on his Twitter account’ and ‘U.S. climber John Reiter [who] said dozens of people had suffered critical injuries, many of them with head injuries’. In fact, Reuters coverage

gave particular attention to the impact of the earthquake on (non-Nepalese) ‘trekkers’. ‘Trekkers’ were the main subject of two articles and were mentioned in over half of all others. By contrast, ‘trekkers’ or ‘climbers’ were only mentioned in one IRIN article and on that occasion, referred to Nepalese journalist – Kunda Dixit.

Both Reuters and IRIN News articles made a number of explicit references to the agency of affected Nepalese citizens in responding to the earthquake. Examples include, ‘In Kathmandu Valley, quake-hit Nepalis fend for themselves’ (Reuters) and ‘A local Nepalese social worker, Harka Bahadur Rai, has taken it upon himself to coordinate community efforts to build temporary...’ (IRIN). However, Reuters also reported on tensions between ‘foreigners and Nepalese’ – once again adopting a ‘conflictual’ frame, as in the following extract.

*Tensions between foreigners and Nepalis desperate to be evacuated have also surfaced. In Langtang valley, where 150 people are feared trapped, a helicopter pilot was taken hostage by locals demanding to be evacuated first, one report said.*

This image shows some of the damage in Kathmandu valley.

**Topics**

In its coverage of the Nepal earthquake, the thematic focus of most Reuters articles was primarily on the implications for health, illness and disease. Examples include, ‘Quake overwhelms Nepal’s weak healthcare system’, ‘Thousands of Nepal quake survivors may face lifelong disabilities: aid workers’ and ‘Monsoons could bring disease, a second crisis, to Nepal – UNICEF’.

In contrast, IRIN News addressed a wider range of topics in its coverage of the Nepal Earthquake. Topics included aid policy, disaster risk reduction and migration/internal displacement. Examples of such articles include, ‘Aboard Flight 652: Nepalese migrants head home to help’ and ‘Aid agencies pour into Nepal – and then what?’



Laxmi Prasad Ngakhusi / UNDP Nepal



Some of the damage in Bhaktapur.

### News values

Timeliness was a key concern for Reuters. 67% of all Reuters articles made reference to an incident / statement or other 'news hook' which took place in the previous 24 hours. This compares to only one IRIN News story (6%). One of the most common news hooks for Reuters reports were updated figures or estimates for the number of people affected by the earthquake. All Reuters articles included some mention of this and a number devoted significant space to discussing and/or updating these estimates.

For IRIN News articles, the most common framing device was a question. 35% of IRIN News' article headlines were framed in this way. Examples include, 'Why wasn't quake-prone Nepal better prepared?' and 'is it really time to call off search-and-rescue in Nepal?' As these examples illustrate, the primary focus of these questions was the effectiveness / adequacy of the humanitarian response – of both the government and of international NGOs. Estimates of the effects of the earthquake were also less frequent and less prominent in IRIN News reporting and often referred to a much wider range of effects than the number of casualties, such as the number of homes damaged and the number of people temporarily displaced.

### Dramatisation

Reuters coverage of the earthquake and its aftermath was also characterised by attempts to dramatize events. The quotes below illustrate how this was achieved.

*Nepal is a crossroads of the ancient civilisations of Asia and economic hub of the Himalayan nation of 28 million.*

*A young girl worshipped by many as a living goddess survived Saturday's earthquake near one of the royal palaces in Kathmandu where most other buildings were flattened. "Her temple stands intact because of her divine powers," Pratap Man Shakya, the girl's father, told Reuters.*

The claim that Nepal has 'the most difficult terrain on earth' and that this was, 'the worst earthquake in 81 years' was also frequently repeated.

Attempts to dramatise coverage were also evident in references to a 'battle' or 'race' against time, within Reuters coverage. This is evident in headlines such as, 'Yaks, helicopters race against time to feed Nepal quake survivors' and 'survivors battle for helicopters near Nepal village that vanished'. IRIN News' coverage was far less likely to dramatize events. It made no reference to 'races' or 'battles' against time and only one reference to the claim that this was 'Nepal's worst earthquake in more than 80 years'.

Picture right: Some of the damage in Bhaktapur.

### Terminology

Reuters often used terminology which reinforced a traditional domestic-foreign dichotomy – frequently using the terms 'Westerners', 'foreigners' and 'locals'. For example, the word 'foreign' was used 32 times in 27 Reuters articles.

*'The dead include at least seven foreigners but only two had been identified.'*

*'Langtang is on a trekking route popular with Westerners and the village had 55 guesthouses catering for visitors.'*

*'Rescue workers are struggling to recover the bodies of nearly 300 people, including about 110 foreigners... So far, the bodies of nine foreigners have been recovered.'*

These quotes also help to illustrate that the number of non-Nepalese nationals affected was also repeatedly – in almost every Reuters article – disaggregated from the total numbers of affected individuals.

In addition, the nationality of affected individuals and the origins of international NGOs – were also frequently stated in Reuters coverage.

*'British charity Save the Children said hospitals in the Kathmandu Valley were overcrowded, running out of room to store dead bodies and short on emergency supplies.'*

*'Devyani Pant, an Indian tourist in Kathmandu, told Reuters.'*

In contrast, IRIN never once used either the phrase 'Westerners' or 'foreigners' in any of their reports. Representatives of international NGOs – such as Save the Children – were only rarely introduced by their country of origin. Instead, their full name and headline was given, such as 'Shawsat Saraf, Asia operations director for Action Against Hunger' and 'Dharma Raj Pandey, head of the disaster unit for the NRCS'.



## SUMMARY

Overall, there were significant differences between how these two news organisations reported on the earthquake in Nepal in terms of sources, topics, and framing of the disaster and its response. These differences are the result of the outlets different audiences and funding models. IRIN aims to address a global audience: humanitarian workers, its key demographic, are based all around the world.

Reuters content, by contrast, is made for an audience that is still primarily based in the West. This may explain their differentiation of 'Nepalese' and 'foreign' casualties, and their focus on quoting international, rather than local actors. IRIN is also a specialist, not-for-profit outlet. They do not seek to make money with their content. Rather, they aim to help improve humanitarian responses, for example, by scrutinising the aid response to disasters. Reuters is a commercial news outlet, and its content reflects the news values of traditional journalism – including a greater emphasis on timeliness and drama.

# WHAT DO AUDIENCES OF MAINSTREAM NEWS THINK OF HUMANITARIAN JOURNALISM?



A protestor holds a placard that reads: 'Putin: Fake News Real Wars' at a 'Stop Bombing Syria and the Mass Killing in Aleppo' protest rally in front of the Reichstag building, Germany, Berlin, 2016.

Having analysed the production and content of humanitarian journalism, it is important to also consider how audiences respond to this journalism. There are a number of common assumptions about the attitudes of Western audiences towards humanitarian and development journalism.

Perhaps the most widespread is that they suffer from a sense of 'compassion fatigue', characterised, in part, by a disengagement from news coverage of overseas disasters and other international crises (Moeller 1999).

Related to this, some editors, funders and NGOs believe that audiences will engage more with 'positive' forms of coverage. In their recent study of NGO communications practitioners, Seu and Orgad (2017) document NGO-workers' tendency not only to eschew 'negative' imagery in favour of 'positive' imagery and language – but also try to make Western audiences 'feel good' when representing humanitarian issues, by reducing feelings of sadness, discomfort, guilt and anger.

But these assumptions – from journalists and NGOs – are often built on rather thin market research, including very small focus groups, as well as being influenced by audience correspondence, feedback from think tanks and journalists' own personal convictions.

In order to provide an overview of the attitudes of Western audiences towards humanitarian news and, in the process, review these assumptions, we discuss the results of an ongoing survey of public attitudes towards aid in the UK, France, Germany and the US. In 2016, the Aid Attitude Tracker (AAT), asked 8,000 respondents in each of these countries questions specifically about the consumption of international news (see Clarke et al 2018).



Picture left: BBC correspondent John Simpson reporting from the Shamali Plain north of the Afghan capital Kabul as Northern Alliance fighters prepare to move closer to the city, Afghanistan, Charikar, Parwan Province, 2001.

Very closely    Fairly closely    Not too closely  
Not at all closely    Don't follow    Don't know

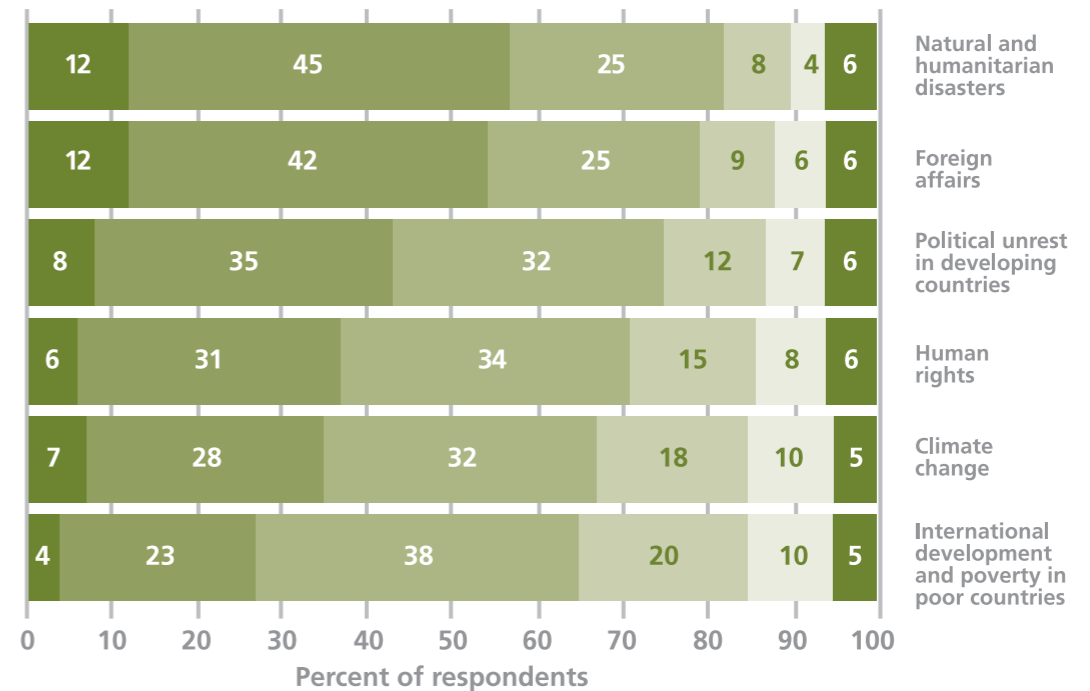


Figure 4.1: The degree to which respondents claim to follow different forms of international news

### Interest in humanitarian news

Contrary to the belief of some editors and journalists, Table 4.1 shows that some forms of humanitarian journalism are, in fact, relatively very popular with audiences. Overall, across all 4 countries in the sample, more people claim to follow news about 'humanitarian disasters' (59%) either 'closely' or 'fairly closely' than any other type of international news, including coverage of foreign affairs in general (53%), and news specifically about climate change (45%), human rights (45%) and political unrest in developing countries (44%). Consumption of news about international development was the least popular overall (32%) – and was particularly unpopular in the UK (26%).

The USA was the only one of these 4 countries in which consumption of news about 'humanitarian disasters' (43%) was not the highest of these 5 issues. Instead, news about foreign affairs (52%) and human rights (45%) were more popular. In both France and Germany, 64% of respondents claimed to follow news about 'humanitarian disasters' (59%) either 'closely' or 'fairly closely'.

There was no significant difference between levels of consumption of news about humanitarian disasters between men and women (unlike for consumption of news about foreign affairs). Political affiliation (left vs right) also had little relationship with the extent to which audiences consumed humanitarian news. The most important demographic factor was age. Older respondents were significantly more likely to report following news about humanitarian disasters than younger participants, especially when compared to other forms of international news.

### Perceptions of coverage as too 'positive' or 'negative'

Furthermore, it appears that audiences are less concerned about the positive/negative tone of humanitarian coverage than journalists and NGO communicators often assume. The results in Figure 4.2 suggest that some Western publics do not feel that news coverage of aid and development is either too 'negative' or too 'positive'. Only 6% of respondents who said they followed news about global development very or fairly closely agreed entirely with the statement 'media reports about overseas aid focus too much on the negatives'. Similarly, just 2% thought that media coverage was too 'positive'. By contrast, half of these respondents did not have a view either way (29%) or said that they simply 'didn't know' (21%).



SUMMARY

These results appear to challenge a number of widely held assumptions about Western audiences' attitudes towards some forms of humanitarian news. First, they seem to contest the belief that Western news consumers are not interested in journalistic coverage of humanitarian disasters overseas. Second, they appear to contradict the assumption that these audiences necessarily want more 'positive' coverage of humanitarian crises. Third, they indicate that concerns over fake news may not feature particularly strongly within audience responses to humanitarian and development news.

There is, of course, much that these results do not tell us. For example, they do not explain why more people claim to follow news about 'humanitarian disasters' than other forms of international news. Indeed, these results may be affected by a social desirability bias – that is, a tendency for survey respondents to answer questions in a manner they think will be viewed favourably by others. Despite this, they do at least remind us that news audiences' attitudes, habits and reactions are complex, dynamic, and rarely predictable.

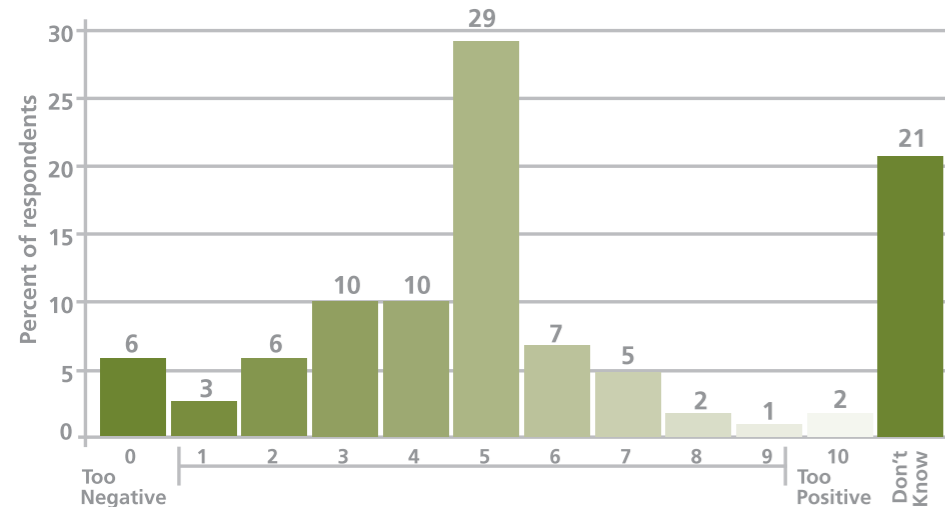


Figure 4.2: Respondents' perceptions of whether news about international aid was too 'negative' or 'too positive'

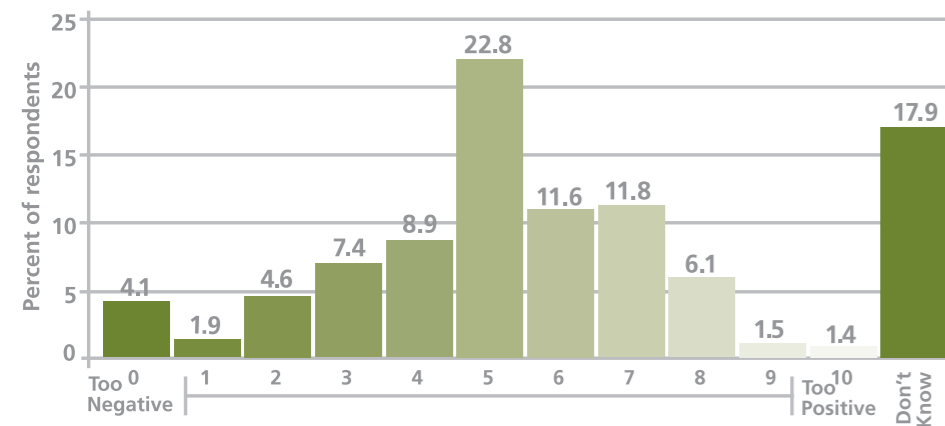


Figure 4.3: Respondents' perceptions of the accuracy of news about international aid

Fake news?

Finally, the survey results also suggest that the apparent crisis of trust surrounding journalism in western countries (the so called "fake news crisis"), does not extend to news coverage of humanitarian crises and development. Trust in the media is at an all-time low in many industrialised countries (Swift 2016). But, when asked, 'how accurate do you think media reports and stories about overseas aid and development are' very few respondents expressed strong views. Although only 1% of those who said they followed news about global development very or fairly closely perceived such news to be 'very accurate', only 4% of respondents thought it was 'not at all accurate'. By far the most common responses were 'don't know' (18%) or a rating of 5 out of 10 on a 10-point scale (23%).



A news team prepares to record a broadcast in front of the blackened remains of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 at the crash site. Ukraine, Grabove, Donetsk region. 2014.

Jeroen Oerlemans – PANOS

WHAT DO THOSE WORKING IN THE AID SECTOR THINK OF HUMANITARIAN JOURNALISM?

One of the most important audiences for humanitarian journalism are those working in the aid sector. We were interested in how aid workers use and perceive humanitarian journalism.

Where do they get their news from? What do they think of it? What types of news would they like to see more of? These questions have not been researched before, but they are crucial factors in assessing the performance of humanitarian journalism, and establishing how it can be developed to best serve its audiences in the future.

We worked with the humanitarian news agency IRIN News to help to answer these important questions. In January 2018, IRIN carried out a survey of individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved in the aid or development sector, including both IRIN readers and non-readers. A section of the survey focused specifically on perceptions of IRIN's coverage, but respondents were also asked about their media preferences and habits in general. The answers to these questions form the basis of the discussion below.

Methodology

In total, 1626 respondents completed the survey, including individuals working for International NGOs (28%), the United Nations (9%), academia (9%), national or local NGOs (8%), government organisations (8%) and the corporate sector (5%). A majority of respondents were either mid-career (32%) or senior professionals (41%) and had either 'some' (34%) or a 'significant' amount (30%) of decision-making authority within their organisation. While most were based in the US or Europe, others worked around the globe, from Mexico to Kenya, at headquarters and in the field.

Given the nature of this survey, it is important to note that regular readers of IRIN News were over-represented in this sample. 59% claimed to use IRIN either 'regularly' or 'heavily', whilst 41% used IRIN 'occasionally' or 'never'. This will have shaped some of the results. It is also worth noting that this survey was carried out before the widely reported sexual misconduct scandals at Oxfam UK and other aid agencies. Opinions about the aid industry, and how it should be held to account, may have evolved since this time.

Volunteers, rescue teams and photographers waiting for a crowded dinghy loaded with undocumented migrants and refugees to arrive on a shore of Skala Sikaminias. Greece, Lesbos. 2016.

Iva Zimova – PANOS



**Criticisms of mainstream news coverage**

The survey results reveal a widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream news coverage amongst those working in the aid industry. Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (26%) that the mainstream news media do not produce enough coverage of humanitarian issues and crises. This sentiment was particularly likely to be expressed by those working for INGOs (77%) and by those in executive management (C-Suite) positions (76%).

Of the 13% of respondents overall (and 19% of non-IRIN readers) who thought that mainstream news *does* produce enough coverage of humanitarian issues, many commented that, 'it's not so much the quantity but the quality that is the problem'. Indeed, the qualitative responses revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the nature of mainstream news coverage, in four particular areas.

First, many respondents felt that mainstream news coverage concentrates on a small number of crises, leaving most 'neglected' or 'forgotten'. One stated that, 'there is a cherry picking of crises that doesn't relate to the severity', whilst another commented that coverage focussed, 'only on bigger catastrophes not the daily suffering of people worldwide'.

Second, respondents also regularly commented that, when crises were reported, the news media had a 'short attention span'. In this regard, mainstream news coverage was frequently described as 'sporadic', 'irregular' and 'fleeting'. As one respondent explained, 'we rarely see humanitarian issues in the news unless it is a catastrophe and then it is only covered for about 2-3 days'.

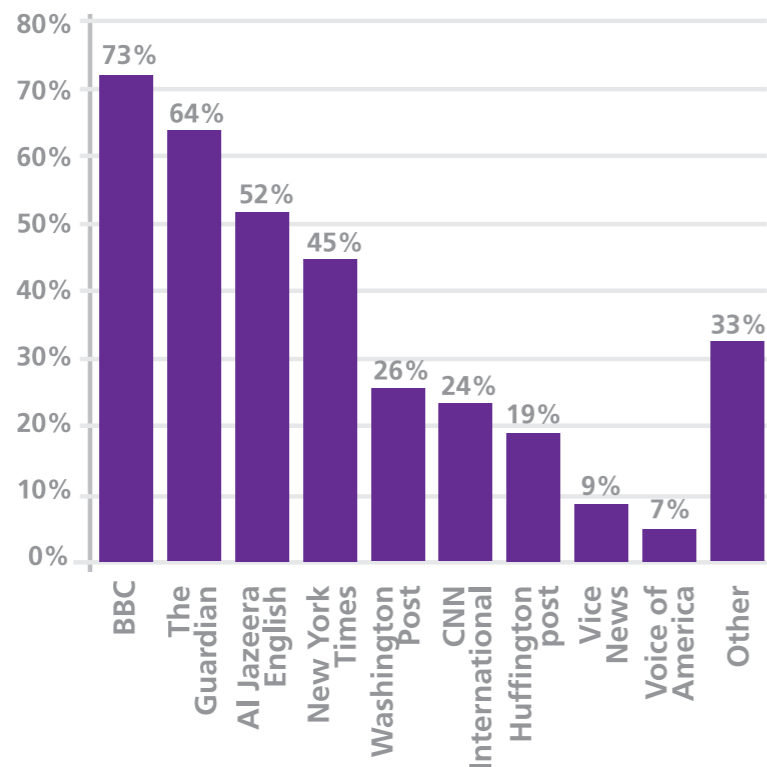


Figure 5.1: Responses to the question: What are your key mainstream sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues? (Select all that apply).

Third, and perhaps most common, was the complaint that mainstream news coverage was 'sensationalist' and 'lacked in-depth analysis'. Reporting of humanitarian issues and crises was frequently referred to as, 'reductive', ' cursory', 'simplistic' and 'shallow'. One survey respondent stated that, 'in terms of quality, depth and analysis: abysmal'. Another wrote that news coverage, 'remains dramatic but often light touch, not going sufficiently to the causes'.

Finally, respondents often claimed that coverage was often 'incomplete' or 'partial' because it was perceived to be shaped by commercial or political interests. One wrote that, 'mainstream media only communicates enough humanitarian issues to not 'rock the boat' on their sales, logins and downloads'.

**Sources of news**

The results in Figure 5.1 show that respondents rely on a very small number of mainstream news outlets for their news about humanitarian issues and crises. Only three news outlets were mentioned by more than half of respondents – the BBC (including the BBC World Service) (73%), The Guardian (including the Global Development site) (64%) and Al Jazeera English (52%). Alongside the New York Times and the Washington Post, these outlets were frequently described as the only 'exceptions' to the general problems of mainstream news coverage described above.

The results in Figure 5.2 highlight a number of interesting features about where these specialists get their news. First, they signal the importance of news aggregators in this field.

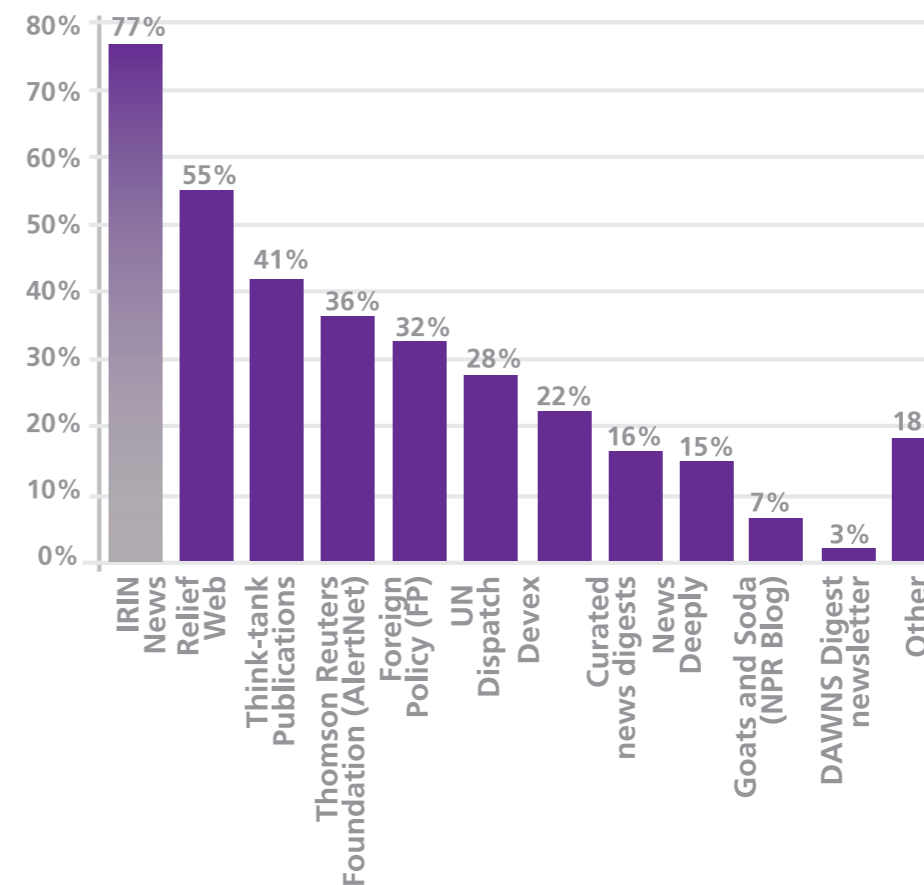


Figure 5.2: Responses to the question: What are your key specialist sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues? (Select top three).

Three of the most popular sources of news and information were news aggregators, including Reliefweb (55%), DAWNS Digest (3%) and other curated news digests (16%) (such as Humanitariannews.org and Humanitarian NewsCuratr). Second, the results highlight the importance of non-journalistic sources as a resource for news and information within the aid industry. 41% of respondents selected 'think-tank publications' as one of their 'top three' specialist sources of news.

Finally, while there are a handful of popular specialist news outlets, including the Thomson Reuters Foundation (36%), Foreign Policy (32%), UN Dispatch (28%), Devex (22%) and News Deeply (15%), none dominates the field. Unfortunately, these results do not accurately show how IRIN News' reach compares to these outlets. Although 77% of respondents selected IRIN as one of their top three sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues, this

will over-estimate IRIN's reach since regular IRIN readers were the main target audiences for this survey.

**The perceived importance and performance of humanitarian news coverage**

The results in Table 5.1 show that, of the news coverage that respondents do consume, the four most highly valued aspects were; expert analysis (58%), investigative reporting (54%), consistent coverage of ongoing crises and issues (52%) and impartial or neutral reporting (52%). The four least valued aspects of news coverage were; voices and stories from the field (43%), solutions-oriented coverage (42%), early warning coverage (42%) and, in particular, breaking news (31%).

Regarding the *performance* of the news media in these particular areas, Table 5.1 shows that respondents perceived the news media they consume to perform relatively well in offering breaking news (37%) and

expert analysis (31%). By contrast, their existing sources of information were perceived to perform relatively poorly on issues such as investigative reporting (21%), consistent coverage of ongoing crises and issues (23%), early warning coverage (29%) and especially solutions-oriented coverage (37%).

A comparison between these two sets of results reveals a number of interesting issues. First, these results show that breaking news was both the best performing aspect of respondents' news sources, but also the least valued. By contrast, what they value most of all from their news coverage is expert analysis. Given this, it is somewhat reassuring that they perceived their current sources of news to perform relatively well in this regard, as it was the second most highly rated feature of news coverage. Despite this, it is also the case that less than a third (31%) of respondents stated that their sources for news about humanitarian issues performed 'above average' in terms of expert analysis. It is also worth remembering that many respondents considered 'think-tank publications' as a key source of news and information.

Second, there was a significant discrepancy between the perceived importance of investigative journalism and its performance. Despite being the second most valued aspect of news coverage, less than a quarter (24%) judged their current sources of humanitarian news to be 'above average' for this criteria. As one respondent put it, 'there's just very little scrutiny of the sector'. Investigative stories were also often mentioned as being, 'the kind of stories [that] have had the most impact'. One respondent wrote that, 'the scandals are those that make me reflect most on the change that needs to be made in areas of my control'.

	Most important aspects of news coverage of humanitarian issues and crises (Top three)	Respondents who thought their main sources of humanitarian journalism were above average in the following ways	Respondents who thought their main sources of humanitarian journalism was below average in the following ways
Expert analysis	58%	31%	15%
Investigative reporting	54%	24%	21%
Consistent coverage of ongoing crises	52%	25%	23%
Impartial, neutral reporting	52%	23%	16%
Voices and stories from the field	43%	23%	18%
Solutions-oriented coverage	42%	15%	37%
Early warning coverage	42%	22%	29%
Breaking news	31%	37%	9%

Table 5.1: The perceived importance and performance of different aspects of news coverage

Another commented that, 'Data protection, sexual harassment of employees, sexual violence committed by UN/aid agency staff, and any other big scoops on internal aid workings and performance. Bosses see and react to these news stories even if employees have been shouting about them to no response for years.'

Third, there was also a discrepancy between the perceived importance of consistent coverage of ongoing crises and the news media's performance. Over half (52%) of respondents cited this as one of the 'top 3' most important aspects of news coverage. In response to a later question, such coverage was also frequently cited as being likely to have impact. One respondent described it as a 'no-brainer' that the most impactful form of news was that which, 'highlights crises that don't [ordinarily] make the news... Congo Brazzaville, South Sudan, "niche" needs of certain populations in crisis'. It is unfortunate, therefore, that this was also one of the areas in which news coverage was perceived to perform least well.

Fourth, solutions-oriented coverage was judged to be by far the worst performing aspect of the news. As one respondent put it, 'there is little coverage of what works'. However, it is vital to note that solutions-oriented coverage was also judged to be one of the least valued aspects of news coverage. Only 42% of respondents selected this as one of the 'top three' most important aspects of humanitarian news. Moreover, in a later question, when asked, 'which themes do you find most useful' (with no restrictions on the number of topics that could be selected) less than half of respondents (47%) selected 'success stories and best practices'. In summary, whilst respondents' news sources may not perform particularly well at providing solutions-oriented coverage, it appears there may not be as much demand for it as is often assumed.

Fifth, the results in Table 1 reinforce the point, made earlier, that the news media are perceived to perform relatively poorly in providing an 'early warning' function. However, as was the case for solutions-oriented coverage, this was also rated as one of the least important aspects of news coverage of humanitarian crises and issues.

Finally, in general, there were mixed views on the importance of voices and stories from the field. Although 43% selected this as one of the top three most important aspects of humanitarian news coverage, others saw this as either somewhat irrelevant, or actively detracting from the value of news coverage. For example, one respondent complained that there was, 'plenty of coverage about issues through personal stories but hardly any critical analysis of issues or policy'. This is significant because there is a growing consensus, at least within many mainstream news organisations about the importance of including voices of affected communities (often instead of NGO representatives) within news coverage.

**Further details about the results of this survey are available in a report entitled, 'Attitudes towards media coverage of humanitarian issues within the aid sector' (Scott 2018).**



# WHAT EFFECT DOES CRITICAL NEWS COVERAGE OF THE AID SECTOR HAVE ON PUBLIC OPINION

## The Daily Mail effect reconsidered

**There is a growing concern within the aid sector that humanitarian interventions may be, as Molly Anders (2018) has reported, 'growing too malleable to media whims'. Specifically, the concern is that aid donors and organisations are avoiding supporting certain kinds of activities because they might draw negative media attention.**

This has been coined 'the Daily Mail effect' because The Mail in particular has a reputation for sustained attacks on UK government aid spending. For example, in January 2017, UK government plans to extend funding to a campaign for girls' empowerment in Ethiopia called Yegna were dropped after critical coverage of project in the Daily Mail and the Telegraph. The Daily Mail described it as a "blood boiling" waste of taxpayers' money. This constituted significant negative attention as the Mail has more than 10 million print readers and more than 20 million online. In short, the fear is that 'looking good' can end up taking priority over 'doing good' (see Enghel and Noske-Turner 2018).

But how influential are critical newspaper campaigns? Do they really drive – or even accurately reflect – public opinion on aid? The results of an ongoing survey of public attitudes towards aid in the UK, France, Germany and the US, suggest they do not. The Aid Attitude Tracker (AAT), funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, surveys 8,000 people in each country, every six months since 2013 (see Clarke et al 2018).

The results do show that the Daily Mail is the second most important newspaper in the UK as a source of information about international development – behind only the Guardian. Daily Mail readers are also more likely than non-Mail readers to think that aid is ineffective, that it "ends up in the pockets of corrupt politicians in the developing world" and that levels of aid spending should decrease.

However, this does not prove the influence of the Daily Mail over attitudes towards aid. It could simply be that individuals who are more sceptical towards aid spending are more likely to read the Daily Mail. Indeed, a number of other results suggest that the media in general,

and newspapers in particular, may not be as important in shaping public opinion, at least in the short term, as is often assumed.

When asked what source of information had the greatest influence over what they thought and felt about global poverty, only 8% of respondents mentioned newspapers or news websites.

Moreover, if public opinion was significantly affected by negative media campaigns, then we might expect support for aid to decline or at least fluctuate over time. The results showed no significant change in UK respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness or wastefulness of government aid spending between 2013 and 2016. Even during the Daily Mail's campaign in 2014 to encourage spending of the foreign aid budget on flood victims in the UK, there was no discernible drop in support for aid from any demographic, including Mail readers.

In fact, the percentage of UK respondents who claimed to be supportive of UK aid actually increased slightly over time, as Figure 6.1 shows.

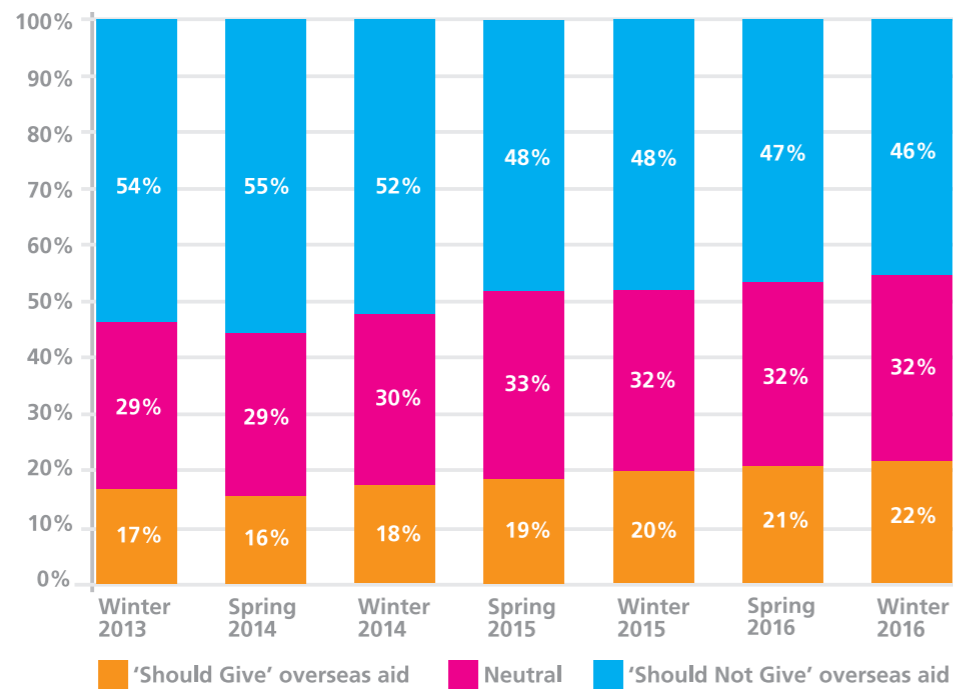


Figure 6.1: Change over time in support for UK government aid spending (Aid Attitudes Tracker (Clarke et al 2018))

In addition, the association between newspaper readership and levels of support for overseas aid was positive, rather than negative. Those who regularly used newspapers and news websites as a source of information about news and current affairs were more likely to be supportive of aid.

Finally, the results show most people are simply not interested in news about aid specifically. In the UK, only around a quarter (26%) of respondents claimed to regularly follow news about international development. As mentioned in chapter 4, this was significantly lower than for any other international issue – including human rights (37%), climate change (37%) and foreign affairs coverage in general (55%). And, despite its general popularity, only 16% of UK respondents claimed to use the Daily Mail or Mail Online as a source of news about international development.

The point here is not to suggest that news coverage doesn't matter. It does. And misleading headlines should be challenged, particularly

because of the potential longer-term effects they might have on public attitudes, which are much harder to capture in surveys. It is also important to highlight the crucial role that effective media scrutiny can play. MPs rightly acknowledged that the Mail on Sunday's coverage has helped to uncover serious issues in UK aid spending, for example. It is also unclear what effect the sexual misconduct scandals, which emerged in spring 2018, have had on public attitudes towards aid.

Instead, the key conclusion is that newspaper headlines are not necessarily an accurate reflection of what people think about aid. Nor do they appear to have an immediate, direct and mass effect on public perceptions. If aid donors and organizations do interpret public attitudes towards aid through media headlines, they are wrong to do so.

**A version of this article was first published in the Guardian on 23rd June, 2017, under the title *Does the Daily Mail's criticism of aid matter?***

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