News you can use or news that moves? Journalists’ rationales for coverage of distant suffering

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This study investigates how journalists covering international humanitarian crises make decisions regarding what types of information to include in stories. Specifically, the inclusion / exclusion of solutions-oriented information is addressed, since crises represent a key time during which the potential for international engagement is discussed in the mainstream media. Interviews with journalists covering hunger crises in Africa reveal an internal tension between maintaining a neutral, unbiased position and writing in a way that supports engagement and action. Ironically, perhaps, journalists find that including solutions-oriented information amounts to unethical and biased coverage, despite the fact that inclusion of solutions to social problems is an accepted and institutionalized aspect of the American news media’s mandate to the public. Reasons for this seeming contradiction are discussed, and I argue that solutions-oriented information not only can be included without demonstrating bias, but that it ought to be included to support ethical coverage that properly informs citizens about potential paths for political engagement.

KEYWORDS Africa; communication about development; distant suffering; interviews; marketplace of ideas; news coverage; solutions

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While most of us sympathize with the plight of distant sufferers (Boltanski 1999) – those victims of oppression, disease, and disaster in other regions of the world – few of us can say with confidence what should be done by outsiders, if anything, to alleviate their suffering. Most members of the public learn about distant suffering through the mass media, but these media presentations often fail to discuss ways to address or solve complex global development problems (Kogen 2015; Mody 2010). Yet the messages that the public does receive from the mass media merit investigation, because these become the foundation upon which the public begins to formulate attitudes about distant suffering and about how it should be addressed. Portrayals of suffering presented in the media implicitly urge audiences to consider what they can do to alleviate it (Kyriakidou 2015, 217). Thus, by analyzing mass media communication about development (CAD) (Scott 2014; Wilkins and Mody 2001), how development issues are constructed for Western audiences by news outlets, and why particular constructions predominate, we can begin to explore the implications of such constructions and how audiences might respond to portrayals of suffering, including which responses they deem the most appropriate.

This study thus questions the role of the American news media in providing information on solutions to society's ills. Discussions of the media's mandate to provide a 'marketplace of ideas' when it comes to addressing society's problems (discussed below) have not sufficiently addressed whether the news media, at least in the U.S., are expected to follow this mandate when it comes to coverage of *foreign* problems. When the media report on hunger in Ethiopia or violence against women in India, ought they report on potential ways to address the issues, or is this outside the scope of what we should reasonably expect from American journalists, given that such issues are likely better addressed by the governments of the countries in which they are occurring?

Here, I look specifically at the case of American news coverage of human suffering during humanitarian crises in Africa. Previous research indicates that solutions to human suffering in Africa are reported on less frequently than solutions to suffering occurring in the U.S. (Kogen 2015; Mody 2010). Here, I investigate journalists' attitudes toward coverage of solutions during distant humanitarian crises. When and why do journalists choose to include information on solutions? I address these questions through interviews with journalists and newspaper editors to try to understand the rationales embedded in decisions regarding news content.

I look specifically at humanitarian crises because they represent a time when American audiences are exposed to regions of the world that infrequently break into the mainstream news media. This is also the time when most private action regarding foreign crises occurs in terms of personal donations (ALNAP, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, we can think of crises as having a particularly strong role in influencing attitudes, discourse, debate, and action among U.S. audiences regarding the problems of distant sufferers and their solutions.

Literature review

Context, Causes, and Solutions in the News

One of the primary ways that Western audiences learn about distant suffering is through mainstream news media outlets, which have a complex mandate regarding the transmission of information about human suffering. The news media are expected to serve several critical roles in a democracy, including providing citizens with information they can use to debate issues of public importance (Habermas 1989), govern themselves (Murdock and Golding 1989), monitor the actions of those who govern them (Bennett and Serrin 2005), and function better in their everyday lives (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001).

As part of this ambitious mandate, the media are tasked with a watchdog role as well: reporting on problems within society and the actors or institutions that are exacerbating the problem or thwarting solutions (Bennett and Serrin 2005; Curran 2005). Extending from this is the responsibility to report on potential *solutions* to issues of public concern – to support a "marketplace of ideas" (Curran 2005; Hutchins Commission 1947). The recent 'solutions journalism' movement focuses on the idea that this marketplace is not being adequately provided to the public. Advocates of solutions journalism argue that the media must get better at telling audiences "how problems could be, or are being, fixed" by reporting on those who are attempting to solve them (Bornstein 2016, para. 5). Indeed, many of the journalists interviewed as part of preliminary research for this study echoed these sentiments, stating, for example, that, "the job of journalists is to let people know when something is going wrong with the system and

how it can be or will be fixed" (Cathleen Falsani, *Chicago Sun-Times*, personal communication, November 9, 2010), and "I think one of the great things that newspapers can do is give people an avenue to be engaged… One of the things we try to do is give people a place to connect to causes or efforts that speak to them (Karen Herzog, *Minnesota Tribune*, personal communication, January 5, 2012).

Reporting on *causes* of social problems contributes to audience understanding of solutions. It is difficult to understand how to address problems if their underlying causes are not properly explicated. Without such explanations, most audiences do not consider a social problem to be something they can act upon (Stone 1989). There is a general consensus within academic literature that U.S. journalism falls short, however, in this regard. One reason for this is that sensationalism and new and interesting events are understood to attract audiences more than in-depth coverage of on-going problems (Galtung and Ruge 1964; Iyengar 1991). Thus news stories are typically framed as interesting, unique, standalone events, sculpted to attract the jaded American eye, not as new iterations of old problems, nor as part of a historical landscape that has contributed to a particular current state of affairs. For example, a story on homelessness in New York City might focus on the number of homeless currently living on city streets rather than provide information about the history of homelessness and the policies and institutions that promote poverty.

This type of coverage also often translates to a focus on human interest stories – narratives about a particular person or family that draw the reader in through personal drama. Human interest stories bring a "human face" to an issue (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000) and tend to focus on individuals, families, friends, and babies (Patterson 2000). Iyengar (1991) argues that focusing on individuals' stories leads certain news issues to be framed as "episodic": ahistorical, aberrant 'episodes' that cannot be tied to historical trends. This lack of historical context makes it difficult for audiences to properly understand the root causes of social ills, and thus the best ways to address them.

Even when context is included, or causes and solutions are already on the public radar, Lemert (1981) argues that the American news media still fail to provide sufficient "mobilizing information," such as the time and location of town meetings audiences could attend to discuss problems. Such mobilizing information, argues Lemert, allows news audiences to fully engage in the democratic process by "[acting] on attitudes they already have" (1981, 118). For instance, a story of local poverty that included information about upcoming state legislation on welfare reform, and how to contact one's local representative to convey a position on the issue, would be more likely to spur participation in the political process than an article without such information. Lemert (1981, 133-134) argues that one reason for the common exclusion of mobilizing information, beyond the economic concerns of papers regarding its newsworthiness, is that such information can come across as partisan, as if the journalist is advocating a particular point of view.

Implications for Reader Response

Overall, the extant literature suggests that news stories lack adequate information related to cause, context, solutions, or general steps that could be taken to address social ills, including mobilizing information. The mainstream news media therefore make it difficult for the public to properly assess and form opinions on potential solutions to suffering, or even potential ways to

ameliorate it. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that this gap in what we might collectively call *solutions-oriented information* leads to decreased citizen engagement.

Nichols et al. (2006) found that human interest frames generally reduced the success of efforts to encourage citizen participation. Likewise, Price, Tewksbury and Powers (1997, 500-501) found that stories with a "neutral" frame resulted in readers making logical connections between government policy and consequence, whereas stories with a human interest element "produced fewer thoughts" about the consequences of particular policies. They also found that thoughts about the individual at the center of the human interest story "deflected" thoughts about policy implications.

There is also evidence that the exclusion of solutions-oriented information, especially with regard to stories of human suffering, leads to disengagement through compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999). Audiences become immune to, or even avoid, stories of human suffering because the information is too upsetting and the media have convinced them that the situation is hopeless – that there are no solutions (Kinnick et al. 1996). Hoijer (2004) found, through interviews with news consumers, that many felt powerless, helpless, or impotent after reading stories of distant suffering. Similarly, Scott (2014, 17), in a focus group study on reactions to news stories on distant suffering, found that many news consumers felt a "perceived lack of agency vis-à-vis distant suffering" in response to typical "this is how it is" news reporting, and that for many this resulted in a general indifference toward de-humanized distant sufferers. Kogen and Dilliplane (forthcoming) found that news stories emphasizing the sorry state of distant sufferers promoted the belief that suffering was unsolvable.

Moeller (1999, 2) argues that this phenomenon is exacerbated when journalists feel the need to "[ratchet] up the criteria" for stories, trying to portray each new crisis as "more dramatic or more lethal than [its] predecessors." Leaving out contextual information contributes to compassion fatigue, argues Moeller, because "the origins of compassion fatigue lie in ignorance" (1999, 315).

This can go one step further, when a lack of understanding actually leads to placing the blame on victims themselves. Iyengar (1991) provides evidence that episodic frames lead audiences to place responsibility for social problems on individuals (and thus dismiss them), rather than question or debate structural elements of society that might contribute to the problems. Maslach (1982, 12) argues that once we lay blame, it becomes "easier to justify treating 'those people' in less than humane ways." This is more likely to occur, Maslach finds, when "the true causes of the victim's problems are not clearly identifiable" (1982, 13).

Stories that *include* solutions-oriented information, on the other hand, are more likely to engage news audiences and propel them to seek structural changes to address social problems. Lemert (1981) provides anecdotal evidence, through several case examples, that mobilizing information leads to greater citizen action. More recently, Nichols et al. (2006) found that problem-solving frames were the most likely to spur citizens to participate in the political process. Similarly, Curry and Hammonds (2014) demonstrated that including solutions within stories about homelessness, poor schools, and lack of clothing among the Indian poor made people feel that there was something concrete they could do to address the problem and made them more likely to say they would talk about the issue with friends or share the story on social media. Kogen and Dilliplane (forthcoming) found that including solutions to distant suffering in news stories led audiences to donate money to a charity addressing the problem.

Institutional Limitations

The study here analyzes how journalists make choices about what information to include in news stories about distant crises. However, these choices are not solely determined by journalists themselves. Numerous newsroom ethnographies have highlighted the fact that editorial decisions – not only about what stories to include in the news but also about how to frame them – are often influenced by actors with more power than those who write the stories. While most professionalized journalists and editors consider it unethical for editors to explicitly dictate how to cover stories, journalists often learn what is expected of them, and what is acceptable, through newsroom cultures (Breed 1955; Gitlin 1980).

It may be the case, however, that journalists reporting on foreign crises, particularly those stationed overseas, have somewhat more autonomy regarding story content and framing. Journalists tend to have increased autonomy when they have greater expertise in a topic than their editor (as would typically be the case with foreign correspondents) and when they initiate stories themselves (Breed 1955, 133). At the same time, however, it is also possible that these journalists have *less* say over what is ultimately published. Because of shrinking newsroom budgets, newspapers are devoting less space to coverage of foreign affairs overall (Pew Research, 2008), and when it comes to printing stories about far-flung regions of the world, editors favor dramatic facts and human interest stories, and often cut more contextual information (Kogen 2015; Galtung and Ruge 1964).

Journalists' decisions regarding story content also depend upon how they view their own role in the public sphere, and whether they see themselves as informants only, who report facts, or as political mobilizers. Gans's (1980) seminal study found that journalists "did not become journalists to advocate values or reform society" (185), yet Weaver and Wilhoit's (1996) study nearly two decades later found that, while the majority of journalists saw their role as primarily concerned with disseminating and interpreting information, a small but significant portion (6.2%) also saw their role as acting as "populist mobilizers," which Weaver and Wilhoit pose as a potential "harbinger of change" (140). In a follow up study (Weaver, 2008), this portion had increased to 10.4%, and added that those populist mobilizers were "more likely to have had journalistic training" (152). This may indicate that there is some sense among journalists of an increased need for the inclusion of information that would spur political engagement, but that it is certainly not the dominant mode of reporting. Indeed, Kogen (2015) found that journalists reporting on Africa during non-crisis news cycles generally saw their role only as informing audiences of the facts, not as spurring audience action.

It is therefore clear that story content is influenced both by reporters and by the media organizations in which they work. For this reason the present study investigates the opinions of reporters *and* editors regarding the selection of news content.

Portrayals of Africa in the news

Even if we assume that journalists have total control over their own storytelling, the challenges of including information on causes, context, and solutions are doubly difficult in countries and regions with which journalists are less familiar, and regarding which American audiences are less interested (Swain 2003). Generally, stories about Africa and other regions of the world must either be *relevant* to domestic audiences (in terms of geographic and cultural proximity, economic importance on the world stage, impact on domestic daily lives, etc.) or otherwise very *interesting* (i.e., unexpected, dramatic) in order to merit inclusion in the

increasingly limited space American news outlets devote to foreign news (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Swain 2003). Since the connection between African poverty and the daily lives of Americans is quite abstract for most Americans, it is perhaps unsurprising that many news stories about Africa focus on what audiences might find 'interesting': death, drama, violence, and conflict (Chouliaraki 2006; Cottle and Nolan 2007; Fair 1993). Cynically, this seems to be the case, at least in part, because profit-oriented news outlets see these stories as more lucrative. However, there is little evidence in the literature, to the author's knowledge, that journalists and editors consciously use this cold logic when selecting and writing stories on distant suffering.

Stories about Africa have often been criticized for their lack of contextual information (Swain 2003). Kogen (2015), for example, compared stories about hunger in the United States and stories about hunger in Africa, both in U.S. mainstream news media during non-crisis news cycles, and found that while *all* stories about American hunger made at least some mention of causes or solutions, only slightly more than half of stories about African hunger did the same. Similarly, Mody's (2010) analysis of the conflict in Darfur, Sudan found that only slightly more than half of *New York Times* articles included information regarding potential solutions to the conflict.

Kogen (2012) found, based on a content analysis, that reporting of solutions decreases during a disaster, and that coverage of dramatic, moving, human interest stories increases. Moeller's (1999, 313) discussion of compassion fatigue suggests that perhaps part of the reason for this is that the media never spend long enough covering the crisis to witness solutions taking shape. The story is dropped when audience interest wanes, even though "few crises… are over and done with within a week."

This study thus builds on the work of Kogen, Moeller, and Mody by investigating *why* reporters and editors are less likely to include solutions-oriented information during a crisis, and questioning the motivations and logic behind news coverage decisions.

This project thus focuses on the following primary research question:

> RQ1: What rationale or logic do journalists and editors use with regard to the inclusion or exclusion of solutions-oriented information during foreign humanitarian crises?

Method

I chose to address hunger crises in Africa specifically, defined as articles that reported on a current famine or other food insecurity emergency.**(1)** As described above, Africa is a region that most Americans conceive of as disconnected from their daily lives. It is therefore the type of region that is most likely to fall victim to news industry trends of emphasizing 'interesting' stories and de-emphasizing solutions-oriented information. For this reason it serves as a useful case for understanding how journalists rationalize their inclusion or exclusion of this information in stories of distant suffering.

The purpose of the interviews was to understand the individual and institutional factors influencing decisions about when to include solutions-oriented information. I conducted 19 phone interviews with 1) journalists who covered hunger crises in Africa for American news outlets (either as foreign correspondents or as local journalists covering policy, local relief efforts, etc.) and 2) the editors of the newspapers in which the sampled stories appeared. Stories were found by randomly sampling articles that covered hunger in Africa. Two separate searches were conducted: one addressing articles covering food insecurity in Africa overall, and one

focused specifically on the famine that struck eastern Africa (primarily Somalia) in the summer of 2011. For the first search, one newspaper for each state (plus Washington D.C.) was selected. All states were included in the search that had at least one first- or second-ranked paid circulation newspaper (based on Audit Bureau of Circulation figures) available in either Lexis Nexis or Newsbank. This resulted in the inclusion of 48 newspapers. 112 dates were randomly selected between January 1, 2008 and May 31, 2011, and all articles appearing on those dates were included.**(2)** For the second search, addressing the Somali famine, PressDisplay was used for the analysis. Sixteen papers were available that were the first or second best-selling in their respective states.**(3)**

The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I asked the interviewees pre-specified questions, but then followed up on those questions as I saw fit. Interviews generally lasted 30-60 minutes, and were conducted between January and June of 2012. They were recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions were used for the analysis. I used the structured set of questions to compare responses across interviewees regarding why certain international stories receive coverage and what type of information the journalists thought ought to be included. I used a semi-structured style to allow the interviewees to serve as "meaning makers" rather than simply as an additional source of information (Warren 2004, 83). This was crucial, here, under the assumptions that journalists themselves have opinions, assumptions, and ideologies about the news process that also influence content.**(4)** Transcripts were then analyzed for themes and patterns.

Findings and discussion

The Central Conflict

Interviews with journalists revealed that many correspondents covering Africa simply wish to "inform" their audiences, "bear witness," "get the story out," or make people "aware of what's going on," without further ambitions regarding what audiences might *do* with that information. They do not see their role as contributing toward fixing the problem. This echoes findings of previous research (e.g., Kogen 2015; Gans 1980; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). In the case of *foreign crises*, however, keeping this scope of work in mind was crucial, in the minds of the journalists interviewed, for keeping *emotions and morality* out of reports on heart-wrenching events.

Morality, in fact, played a key role in journalists' decisions to exclude or include solutions-oriented information in their stories. A significant number of the journalists interviewed did indeed believe that the crises merited political response, but they generally remained cautious about tying their (neutral) reporting to any form of political mobilization. Some of the reporters interviewed, on the other hand, believed their role was to allow audiences to respond. Shashank Bengali, then reporter and national security editor for the McClatchy News Service, stated that "[one goal] would be having… average readers notice the problem and create enough buzz about it that it leads to some kind of a change" (personal communication, May 18, 2012) and Alan Miller, editor of the *Columbus Dispatch*, believed that "people need to know about the suffering of other people in hopes that… they'll do something about it" (personal communication, March 22, 2012).

These kinds of statements begin to reveal an internal tension within reporters regarding the purpose of covering distant suffering and whether coverage ought to do something more than relay facts. They echo Weaver and Wilhoit's findings of a divide in the field of journalism regarding self-perceptions about the journalist as informant only or as public mobilizer (Weaver 2008; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). Even some of the reporters here who stated that their job was only to inform made conflicting statements when pressed about whether they wanted their coverage to accomplish something more. After Bengali stated that his main job was to "report information" only, he also added that "any time you've got innocent people starving to death and they can be helped, that's an obvious injustice that people should know about… You're trying to think about what the impact would be." Several of the reporters evoked this duality and seemed to believe that, at times, their stories had a grander purpose than merely to report facts. However, they also walked a cautious line between what they saw as responsible, and on the flip side biased, reporting. They were typically loathe to say what political response might actually look like in the case of humanitarian crisis.

Adam Nossiter, West Africa bureau chief for the *New York Times*, described Africa as a continent that "is still struggling 50 years after independence, and it needs help; it needs understanding, and people in rich countries are obviously uniquely positioned to provide both" (personal communication, April 16, 2012). But when asked how that attitude impacted his writing, he insisted that it did not: "That is not how I approach stories at all. I mean, I'm a journalist; I've spent almost three decades in the business. So I look for stories and issues that I think are going to grab the attention of my readers in the U.S."

This sentiment was typical, and telling. On one hand, according to these journalists, Africa needs help from the rest of the world. On the other, this acknowledgement is not a suitable starting point from which to write an objective story. But the fact that journalists find it inappropriate to cover stories that address how people can be helped is quite ironic given the history of American journalism. As noted above, creating a marketplace of ideas for solutions to social ills is considered one of the key tenets of American journalism. News outlets are expected to provide audiences with information on potential solutions so that they can decide how they think the individual, community, or country should proceed. And yet, addressing a story about Africa from the starting point of how to improve the lives of Africans is regarded as inappropriate and unprofessional.

Solutions Coverage as Unethical

There seem to be two reasons for journalists' conclusion that solutions-oriented coverage is unethical in the case of foreign suffering. First, the United States, as a nation, does not hold the same obligation to foreign citizens that it does to its own, and therefore writing a story about solutions to a problem may suggest that we *ought* to be implementing solutions, as suggested by Lemert (1981), and therefore may be interpreted as the equivalent of taking a political stance on the issue.

But this is only true if solutions are presented as moral imperatives. Giving Americans options for how to respond to the situation could, indeed, include not responding at all. There are many logical and rational arguments for not becoming involved in foreign crises, including the fact that much U.S. foreign aid has historically been ineffective (Easterly 2009). But to say that covering solutions at all is biased arguably denies news consumers the opportunity to decide for themselves what sort of response they believe is appropriate.

A second reason reporters seemed to recoil at the idea of covering potential responses to a problem is that reporters themselves cannot conceive of political solutions to complex problems of foreign suffering. They therefore associate "political response" with charitable donations only, not with policy. When I asked reporters if they provided information in a way that would allow audiences to respond or engage with the topic, the assumption was almost always that "respond or engage" meant giving money to private charities, not deciding who to vote for, or knowing what kind of U.S. policy to support – the kinds of things we associate with the democratic function of the press in domestic news. Shashank Bengali insisted that a reporter's "main job is to report information and get the story out… Our job is not to solicit contributions for these various groups." Bruce Wallace, then foreign editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, stated: "a large part of this is just education and information... We're not activists" (personal communication, March 16, 2012). Khaled Kazziha, senior producer at the Associated Press, suggested it was the job of the U.S. news media outlet to insert solutions-oriented information: "The broadcaster might decide to put a message at the end of our report to say how viewers can contribute [to charity], but that is the role of the broadcaster, not of the news agency" (personal communication, May 30, 2012).

This sentiment was echoed by editorial page editors. Editorial pages are where we often see strong opinions on controversial issues, but the interviews revealed that most editorial page editors believed there was no debate to be had when it came to distant suffering, and so there was no reason to cover the crisis in the editorial pages. Responses included "I don't think [readers] need the editorial page to tell them it's a tragedy" (Mike Holmes of the *Omaha World Herald*, personal communication, June 6, 2012), and "it's hard to have an opinion about an earthquake; earthquakes are bad" (Andrew Rosenthal, editorial page editor of the *New York Times*, personal communication, June 6, 2012). Everyone agreed that, at least when it came to natural disasters, these events were "bad," and since there was no one arguing that they were "good," there were no terms for a debate. Potential debates over policy responses were not on the radars of these editors, nor therefore on the minds of their readers. Most pieces on crises that did appear in the opinion pages therefore generally reported on the unfortunate state of the crisis and argued for more relief aid.

This finding thus echoes those observations made by Lemert (1981) almost forty years ago, that journalists hesitate to include information that would allow audiences to engage in articles covering controversial topics, at least in part because they do not want to be seen as partisan. In addition, it is apparent from the interviews that reporters and editors, much like their readers, fail to articulate terms of debate because they are simply unaware of them.

Much of the defensiveness regarding articles that might result in donations to charities likely stems from the ambiguous relationship between international charity organizations and journalists. When I asked journalists why they rarely covered the work that NGOs and charities were doing (a common strategy in domestic coverage, and one obvious way to discuss potential solutions to problems), they generally stated that they did not want to "advertise" NGOs, that they did not want to appear as "shilling" for them (Bengali, personal communication, May 18, 2012), or that they "weren't doing infomercials" (Kazziha, personal communication, May 30, 2012). Part of the complication of reporting on NGOs in foreign contexts is that journalists often rely on these organizations for information, transportation, and even housing when they enter a new humanitarian crisis. Some of the reporters described the awkward tension this raises if the NGOs are not then at least mentioned in the article. Journalists have to walk a careful line

between using NGOs as sources of information and writing stories in a way that benefits them (for a summary, see Polman 2010).

'News You Can Use' Vs. 'News That Moves': How Journalists Engage Audiences

For those journalists who *did* hope for political response, they believed that the most effective way to mobilize public opinion and affect government action was by "moving" audiences emotionally, through dramatic depictions of the crisis, *not* by providing information on political response.

Many journalists had evidence to back up this strategy. They told stories of readers that had contacted them after reading a story because they wanted to help (mostly by making monetary donations to charities or individual victims). In other words, these journalists would presumably disagree with the idea that news audiences need a marketplace of ideas regarding solutions to African suffering. For these reporters, the assumption is that believing something terrible is happening is enough to create political action; people do not need to know precisely what needs to be done, they just need to believe that *something* needs to be done – something that, as Kazziha stated, will give them an incentive to "pick up the phone and call their congressman" (personal communication, May 30, 2012).

The desire to "move" audiences was one of the key reasons for the tendency to cover human interest stories, according to interviewees (not, as other interpretations might suggest, that journalists were purely profit oriented, seeking stories that would attract as many eyeballs as possible in order to garner sales). Many of the journalists I spoke with saw including these narratives as imperative for promoting political response. They were not concerned with conclusions of communication research, described above, suggesting that human interest stories promote disengagement and the placement of blame on victims. The conclusion of these reporters, rather, was that making people sympathize with victims would put them in a better position to care about, and therefore address, policy. Emotion was thus seen as more important than solutions-oriented information when it came to political engagement. Shashank Bengali, describing how difficult it was to get readers to read these stories, interpreted his agenda as "report[ing] the news in a way that people will sit up and take notice" (personal communication, May 18, 2012). Khaled Kazziha said that, in his television reporting, he tries to create "a montage of sick, dying, starving babies" so that audiences will feel moved to help (personal communication, May 30, 2012). In other words, they did not embrace the findings of the authors discussed above (Hoijer 2004; Kinnick et al. 1996; Kogen and Dillilane, forthcoming; Scott 2014), or the views of Moeller (1999) and other believers in compassion fatigue, that endless stories of suffering, bereft of efficacious solutions, might ultimately lead to disengagement, rather than social mobilization.

Conclusion: A path forward?

The analysis here reveals that journalists and editors believe that dramatic coverage is necessary to engage audiences, but that explicit attention to *solutions* is unethical and unprofessional. This is due to the fact that journalists view the primary solution to foreign suffering as humanitarian aid, and fear being seen as public relations personnel for charitable groups. Pointing out to readers the charities to which they might donate would threaten the

journalist's independence, especially given the fact that journalists often rely on these charities for help when they arrive on the scene during crises.

The view that reporting on solutions is biased, or that there is no need for a policy debate on foreign suffering, is perhaps unsurprising given that reporters and editors are not themselves immune from the tropes and themes featured in the media. These tropes construct the relationship between American news audiences and distant sufferers and the sea of possible solutions for newsmakers *and* news consumers alike. The media are tasked with constructing these debates for news audiences, but this is impossible if they cannot see potential steps forward themselves. Yet at the same time, it *should* be surprising, or at least questionable, that the media do not seek out these debates, considering that providing a marketplace of ideas on solutions to social ills is an important and accepted part of the news media's role in the public sphere.

The literature reviewed here illustrates that eschewing *solutions-oriented information* – defined as information related to cause, context, solutions, or general steps that could be taken to address social ills – can have the effect of disengaging audiences, creating compassion fatigue, and even stirring up resentment for a population that seems to keep finding itself on the edge of disaster. This repetitive coverage of death and drama may thus promote disengagement not only because of apathy, but also because audiences have not been given the tools to engage nor given convincing evidence that something can be done to address global suffering. When no long-term options are listed, when there is no marketplace of ideas, when there is, in effect, *no choice*, problems become framed as on-going and inevitable.

Many of the journalists interviewed here believe that emotion is more important than information, because information alone will not move audiences to engage with a foreign humanitarian crisis. However, if a steady stream of bad news leads to compassion fatigue and a sense that the situation is hopeless, as the past literature on the subject suggests, we may never move past band-aid solutions, and even these may decrease over time as audiences grow tired of hearing the same story. Indeed, the present U.S. administration, arguably responding to public sentiment and skepticism regarding the benefits of foreign aid, has proposed to cut foreign aid by 28% in part, to "[challenge] international and non-governmental relief organizations to become more efficient and effective" (U.S. Office of Management 2017, 34).

News outlets covering these crises therefore ought to consider providing more coverage of solutions-oriented information regarding distant suffering, including political solutions. Communication about development (CAD) can be made more ethical by treating news consumers as political beings, capable of thinking rationally about different potential responses to suffering.

This is, of course, quite difficult given that solutions to complex foreign crises are not always obvious, and arguably may not exist in the short-term. One way journalists might deal with this, and which would also help them avoid coming across as PR machines for charities, would be to rely more heavily on actual victims of human suffering as sources of information instead of, or in addition to, aid organizations. Aid beneficiaries themselves are arguably best positioned to understand what actually needs to be done to promote positive social change, and there is increasing recognition among development scholars that individuals living in poverty are sources for understanding how to solve problems (Quarry and Ramirez 2009). Existing at the heart of social problems, with first-hand observations of their causes and potential solutions, these victims can certainly do more than provide moving personal anecdotes. Such a shift in news media CAD would be not only a more productive, but also more ethical, strategy toward reporting of distant crises, providing a voice to those all-too-often left out of policy debate.

Future research in this area should therefore address attempts to include the voices of crisis victims in news stories, and whether such inclusion is indeed realistic based on both exigencies on the ground as well as preferences of newsroom editors. It is also crucial to examine audience reactions to solutions-oriented information, and how this information might influence attitudes toward suffering others and toward aid. Finally, discussions with journalists and editors regarding the above critiques and their thoughts on how they might incorporate solutions-oriented information into stories on distant suffering would greatly enhance our understanding of when and how the above ideas might make their way into shifting journalism practice.

NOTES

1. "Famine" is a technical term defined as meeting particular requirements determined by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system ("Guidelines," 2016). Regions that are experiencing extreme food insecurity and malnutrition but which do not meet the official requirements of a famine are variously referred to as experiencing extreme food insecurity, extreme hunger, hunger crises, food crises, etc. All types of food insecurity events were included in the analysis.
2. Keywords (and their variants) were: hunger, starvation, malnutrition, undernourished, famine AND (Africa! or algeria or angola or benin or burundi or burkina or botswana or comoros or cameroon or congo or chad or djibouti or eritrea or ethiopia or gabon or gambia or guinea or ghana or kenya or liberia or libya or lesotho or malawi or mauritius or madagascar or mali or morocco or mozambique or namibia or niger! or rwanda or sao tome or somali! or sudan or sierra leone or senegal or or seychelles or swaziland or tunisia or tanzania or togo or uganda or zambia or zimbabwe).
3. PressDisplay was used because the dates required were not available on Lexis Nexis at the time of the investigation. Newspapers searched in PressDisplay included *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Denver Post*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Baltimore Sun, Detroit News*, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, *The Las Vegas Review-Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, and *The Washington Post*. Because PressDisplay provides full color images of newspapers, rather than text-based records, these papers were searched manually for articles on the crisis.
4. The project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania, and it was determined that it met the eligibility criteria for IRB review exemption.

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