Support, not solutions: how the news media used statistics during the 2017 South Sudanese Famine.

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Abstract

The communication of statistics has a monumental impact on public policy - determining the existence of problems, measuring their severity, dictating the type and level of response and holding these remedies to account. This is no more evident than during a humanitarian crisis, especially a famine. Therefore, this research set out to understand the role of statistics in the UK news media's coverage of famines. The coverage of the 2017 South Sudanese Famine by two news media outlets - one national newspaper (*The Guardian*) and one television news programme (*BBC News*) - was collected. In adopting a general inductive approach, the three sub-research questions were used to thematically analyse the raw data. This highlighted three interlinked findings: one, the United Nations was the source for the vast majority of statistics; two, these statistics were unilaterally accepted as indisputable truths by the news media; three, they underpinned and constructed a narrative of constitution-measurement-solution. These findings were then used to construct a meta-model, which addressed the main research question, called *support-not-solutions*. This framed journalists' use of statistics as serving to reinforce existing power dynamics of the humanitarian field. This model is then related to the wider literature on the topic to both contextualise the model and to highlight where further research is necessary.

Introduction

As the FAO explain, famines are a humanitarian crisis because 'food security is a fundamental human right' (FAO, 2012: 3). Famines are also one of the most extreme symptoms of poverty. As with poverty, famines are the site of contested power. Organisations and actors seek to define and measure food insecurity in order to allocate resources and decide upon solutions. The news media play a crucial role in this process. To take a line from Jairo Lugo-Ocando (2015), 'in accepting definition and measurement of poverty [or famine], the news media are in effect ratifying a specific type of policy.' During the 2017 South Sudanese Famine these definitions and measurements, as well as the policies implemented, were statistically defined. Thus, understanding how journalists used statistics during this famine is of crucial importance - a topic empirically explored in relation to the UK news media.

This research task is suspended between two bodies of literature. The discipline of humanitarian communication examines the representation of humanitarian crises yet only focuses on quantifiable information in psychological studies (Kogut & Ritov, 2005a, 2005b; Slovic, 2007; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Whereas statistical communication centres on crime (Lugo-Ocando, 2018; Lugo-Ocando & Brandao, 2015), war and conflict (Ahmad, 2016), development (Lugo-Ocando & Lawson, 2017; Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017) and healthcare (Dentzer, 2009) but does not cover humanitarian crises.

Instead of using the existing literature to theoretically frame the research, this paper takes a general inductive approach. This entails an analysis of the raw data based on the research questions. First the findings of the sub-research questions are outlined, followed by the overarching model to understand this type of statistical communication. The meta-model encourages the researcher to view the use of statistics by journalists during humanitarian crises within a support-not-solutions framework. This is then related to the wider literature on the topic. It would be absurd to argue, however, that the research questions were not influenced in one way or another by the existing literature given the researcher's wide reading on the area.

There are two aspects of humanitarian communication and statistical communication that are particularly relevant to the model. NGOs and the United Nations dominate the production of statistics. Therefore, the literature on the relationship between humanitarian organisations and traditional news media is especially relevant (Cottle, 2009; Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Franks, 2008; Jones, 2016; Lugo-Ocando & Hernandez-Toro, 2015; Orgad, 2013; Powers, 2014; Waisbord, 2011). This work is twinned with the literature on statistical communication. Whilst this discipline does not focus on humanitarian crises, their empirical insights are instructive. They highlight how journalists do not challenge statistical sources and often over-rely on a limited number of institutional sources, explaining this phenomena through journalist sociology and institutional changes (Ahmad, 2016; Lugo-Ocando, 2018; Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2015).

As it will be highlighted, the United Nations are central to the construction of the meta-model. A brief background of the United Nations is necessary to contextualise the findings. The first is in regards to the constitution of famine. Only the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system can declare a famine. It was developed in 2006 by the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), a subsidiary of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) - a department of the UN. It uses a range of statistics to classify food insecurity into different categories. It calls for food, agriculture and nutritional humanitarian assistance for those within area-based Phase 3 (crisis) up to Phase 5 (famine). Similarly, the United Nations have exclusive control during the subsequent response. OCHA – a UN department - operates in a management position for the entire international relief effort. This covers three areas: one, the communication of the severity of the problem as well as impact of current intervention programmes (OCHA, 2017a); two, the finances – including funding targets, funds raised so far, and amount donated by organisations and individuals (OCHA, 2017b); three, they manage the operations of all organisations and actors (other UN departments, NGOs, governments, intergovernmental organisations).

Methodology

In this paper, I used David Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach. It analyses the raw data through the creation of a set of themes, based on the sub-research questions, which are then used to construct an overall model that is geared towards elucidating the overall topic (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This means the analysis of the raw information is driven primarily by the research questions and not existing theoretical constructs.

The research follows David Thomas's (2006: 241-242) rules for analysis: one, preparation of raw data files (common format for text - font, margins etc.); two, close reading of the text - raw text read in detail until the researcher is familiar with its content and gains an understanding of the themes and events covered in the text; three, creation of categories; four, overlapping coding and uncoded text; fifth, continuing revision and refinement of category system.

Importantly, findings are results of an interpretative process by the researcher. This is similar to what some call a 'close reading' of the qualitative information, a methodology often used in English literature. This has been used successfully by academics to understand news media coverage (Lugo-Ocando & Brandao, 2015; Rubin, 1987).

To select UK news media sources, I used OFCOM's (2015: 6) survey on news media. It identified the four most popular media for adults when consuming news. In response to '*Which of the following do you use for news nowadays?*', 67% replied television, 41% the Internet, 32% the radio and 31% printed newspapers. The two most popular media were chosen: television and the Internet. For television, BBC One was selected for this research as it was the most popular television news source (OFCOM, 2015: 16). Further, as a public broadcaster, it is the only television news programme that has a role to inform the public. For online news sources, the decision was more problematic. The BBC News website was the most popular Internet source of news but if this was chosen, it would not give the sample a satisfactory spread of different news media producers. Whilst only 4% said they used *The Guardian* online as a source of news (OFCOM, 2015: 16), it has been documented that there is a strong correlation between their coverage and public policy (Van Belle, Rioux, & Potter, 2004).

The BOB archive was used to locate news programmes on BBC One. Whereas Nexis was used for The Guardian online. Two search words were used for both archives: 'Sudan' and 'famine'. With the date range from 20th February (the official declaration of famine) to the 31st March. On BBC One there are five news programmes: Breakfast, News at One, News at Six, News at Ten and Weekend. For weekday broadcasts, BBC News at Ten was chosen as this receives the highest audience figures (Foster, 2016). BBC Weekend was used for Saturday and Sunday. In the case of multiple broadcasts on the same day, the ten o'clock slot was used. For *The Guardian*, two types of articles were excluded: letters and opinions. For both types of news media, pieces that did not focus upon South Sudan (either as a country or as part of a collection of countries affected by food insecurity) were omitted. This resulted in seven BBC News television programmes and 10 articles from *The Guardian*. In order to analyse this raw qualitative data, a general inductive approach was taken. Only the textual aspects of the data was analysed. It was deemed that this would allow for a fruitful combined understanding of the two sources of information.

The main research question asked *How do journalists use statistics to articulate news about humanitarian crises?* This was split up into three sub-research questions: *What type of statistical sources do journalists use for humanitarian crises? Do journalists challenge or accept the statistics they use when articulating humanitarian crises? How do journalists use statistics to form a narrative during a humanitarian crisis?*

The sub-questions were used as tools with which the researcher could understand the qualitative information in order to construct the overall model. Whereas normally researchers would explain how their sub-questions were addressed by a specific methodology, the general inductive approach relies on the sub-research questions in order to function. The questions are answered exactly because they are part of the method of analysis.

Findings

The three research questions highlighted how journalists overwhelmingly rely on the United Nations as a source for statistics, that these statistics are not challenged and that the statistics are used to form a definition-measure-solution narrative. These findings were then combined to form the overarching support-not-solutions model, which argues that journalists' use of statistics during famines served to reinforce existing power structures.

South Sudan was not the only country experiencing high levels of food insecurity during the period analysed. This meant that coverage of the South Sudanese Famine was combined or sometimes subsumed into the coverage of Nigeria, Yemen and Somalia. This was especially evident in the BBC News coverage. As they explain 'all this week on BBC News, we'll be taking a look at the hunger crisis of four badly affected countries' (BBC, 2017f). The statistics cited here are only ones used in reference to South Sudan, whether specific to the country or as it sits within an amalgamation (like the Disaster Emergency

Committee (DEC)'s East Africa Famine appeal). The types of statistics can be split into three clear categories.

RQ 1.1: What type of statistical sources do journalists use for humanitarian crises?

The first research question was geared towards constructing a typology of sources that journalists used for statistics during a humanitarian crisis. This was followed by the frequency of each type of source in order to work out the percentage split between the sources.

Problematically, there were two ways that sources were cited. First, and most straightforward, the article directly quoted the source of the statistic. This is evident in the BBC's first broadcast. They explain that 'the government and the UN report around 100,000 people are currently affected [by famine], and just under five million people, 40% of the country's population, are in urgent need of food' (BBC, 2017d). In this category, the UN overwhelmingly dominated as a source - being cited as the source 100% of the time.

Second, the journalist referred to a statistic but the source cited were not the producers of the statistics. This is not to say that the source cited claimed to have produced this statistic. In fact, the source often referred to *their* source for the statistic. Take McVeigh's (2017b) article, she explains how 'aid groups said the move by the labour ministry to increase the cost of permits from $100 to $10,000 (£8,230) was "terrible timing" in a country where 100,000 people are starving and a further 1 million are on the brink of starvation.' Instead of calculating the frequency and percentage share of the cited source, this paper calculated the split for the actual source of the statistic. This revealed that the United Nations dominated again (94%) yet the DEC, DFID and EC were used as sources for 6% of the statistics (exclusively focused on their fundraising pledges).

These findings fit within a long history of academia that show how journalists rely on official sources to articulate news stories (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1978; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Manning, 2001). But this over-reliance on such a small number of sources is not atypical of journalism studies. It is, however, a consistent finding in statistical communication. Lugo-Ocando & Brandao's (2015) findings from their empirical research of the UK media's coverage of crime is remarkably similar to the findings presented above. What should be noted about this site of research is that there are very limited alternative statistics that journalists could use during a famine. The attention, then, can be directed towards their propensity to accept or challenge these statistics.

RQ 1.2: Do journalists challenge or accept the statistics they use when articulating humanitarian crises?

This research question was initially designed to explore how journalists judged the reliability and validity of statistics. The importance of which is exaggerated given the predominance of a remarkably small amount of sources. The findings were consistent across both samples: journalists accepted statistics every time they were used. In other words, none of the statistics used were challenged.

The accept-challenge lens is not just a binary, however. There are different ways that statistics can be accepted by journalists, two of which are specifically relevant to this research. First, statistics are accepted as valid and reliable as well as being indisputable truths about the world. Second, statistics are accepted as valid and reliable yet are regarded as a mathematical discipline that attempts to present one interpretation of the world around us. In all of the news coverage, journalists favoured the first approach to statistics. This is exemplified in Quinn's (2017a) article, stating that '100,000 people are facing starvation.' His statement declares that 100,000 people *are* facing starvation, rather than explaining that statistics suggest that 100,000 people may be facing starvation. This was atypical of the coverage.

This corresponds to the literature on statistical communication. Lugo-Ocando & Brandao (2015) explain that journalists rarely, if ever, challenge statistics or choose to produce their own statistics. Furthermore, statistics are regarded as truths equivalent to scientific fact. Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen (2015) address this issue directly by calling for better statistical education.

RQ 1.3: How do journalists use statistics to form a narrative during a humanitarian crisis?

Unlike the previous two research questions, this one involved understanding the use of statistics as underpinning and constructing a narrative. This involved categorising the statistics into different themes relating to the structure of individual articles and different articles across the sample period. This process produced an understanding of statistics within a linear narrative of constitution-measurement-solution. The following section will outline each of the statistics used in this three-stage discourse.

First, statistics were used to constitute the famine - i.e. bring it into existence as an official famine. Due to the IPC's monopoly on these figures, its classification system was referred to exclusively by the coverage. Two main statistics were used: Phase 3-5 and just Phase 5. The first article from *The Guardian* on 20th February used both. Ben Quinn explains that according to UN agencies there are '100,000 people facing starvation' in South Sudan (Phase 5 statistic). Quinn (2017b) goes on to explain that 'about 4.9 million people - more than 40% of South Sudan's population - are in urgent need of food, agriculture and nutrition assistance, according to an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) update' (Phase 3-5 statistic). *The Guardian* continued to use a mixture of Phase 3-5 and Phase 5 statistics in the subsequent coverage (Quinn, 2017a). As the coverage progressed, however, emphasis was increasingly placed upon Phase 3-5 statistics. In an article from 15th March, Simona Foltyn hints at the reason for focusing on this number. She quotes Serge Tissot (heads the FAO) saying '100,000 in a famine situation we can deal with because we have the logistical capacity. But if we shift to 500,000 in famine situation, it will become too much' (Foltyn, 2017). By emphasising the larger statistic, there can be a greater call for support.

The BBC coverage, on the other hand, consistently positioned South Sudan within the larger African and Middle Eastern food crisis. In a programme from the 11th March, the broadcaster explains that 'its [UN] humanitarian chief say more than 20 million people face the threat of starvation and famine in four countries in Africa and the Middle East - Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen' (BBC, 2017e). This is followed four days later with a declaration that an 'estimated 16 million people facing starvation in Africa. Four countries - South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia - are acutely short of food, water and medicine' (BBC, 2017c). The original broadcast was the only one that produced South Sudan-specific statistics.

The second type of statistic focused upon the measurement of the famine's severity. Whilst IPC statistics serve to classify people on the most general level possible, a range of more specific statistics were then used to highlight the severity of such food insecurity. These included statistics that are used in the IPC. Most prominent was a focus upon children. Ben Quinn quotes the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), who explain that '1 million children are estimated to be acutely malnourished' (Quinn, 2017b). When discussing the DEC's East Africa Famine Appeal, Saleh Saeed (chief executive), explains that 'more than 800,000 children under five are severely malnourished' (Lamble & Quinn, 2017). In their four country famine reporting, the BBC News broadcaster announced that 'tens of thousands of children are at risk of starving to death' (BBC, 2017d).

Statistics on the movement of people, not included in the IPC model, were also predominant. The BBC broadcast explained that famine had 'displaced some 2.3 million people' (BBC, 2017b), quoting the same figure in a later broadcast (BBC, 2017d). With another broadcast on the 26th February declaring that 'thousands of people have gathered in the central areas to be registered.' An article from the 15th March in *The Guardian* explained that more than 20,000 people fled the town of Wau Shilluk, once a sanctuary for those who fled fighting in Malakal in 2014' (Lamble & Quinn, 2017).

Once its existence and severity is communicated, the next set of statistics serve to present a solution.

Third, solutions were articulated using a series of different types of statistics. The first set of solution statistics focused upon fundraising. Initially, the focus was upon fundraising targets set by OCHA – a department of the UN. BBC News referred specifically to South Sudan in their first broadcast, explaining that 'the UN tonight has appealed this year for $1.6 billion to help the situation' (BBC, 2017d). Whereas *The Guardian* focused upon appeal targets for food insecurity across the four countries. Again referencing the UN directly, they explain that 'the UN estimates that $5.6bn (£4.5bn) is needed to address urgent needs' (Watkins, 2017). The subsequent coverage either commented on the low levels of funds received towards the target or highlighting the fundraising efforts of specific organisations. BBC News explains that the $1.6bn appeal for South Sudan by the UN 'has received less than 1% of that figure' (BBC, 2017d). Whereas Watkins (2017) referenced the larger food insecurity appeal, explaining that 'less than 2% is in the financial pipeline' for the £4.5bn target. They serve to expose the low levels of funding received, with an implicit call for more. On the other hand, statistics were also used to strike a congratulatory tone by focusing on the funds raised or pledged towards the centralised appeal. Within two days of the declaration of famine, both the UK government (through the Department for International Development (DFID)) and the European Commission pledged money to South Sudan, totalling £170m (Quinn, 2017c). The launching of DEC's East Africa Famine Appeal on 15th March was also covered. Lamble et al. (2017) explained that the 'crisis appeal to support the millions at risk of starvation in east Africa has raised £26m in the first six days.' At the intersection of private and public donations in the coverage, McVeigh (2017a) explained that 'the UK government has said it will match pound for pound the first £10m donated by the public.' Specific to the UN, Lamble and Quinn's (2017) article explained that 'some $18.5m (£15m) has been released from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund.'

The second statistical theme is the impact of previous, current and future funds. The initial announcement from DFID explained that they pledged 'new UK support to provide lifesaving food, water and emergency healthcare which will save more than a million lives in each country' (Quinn, 2017d). UNICEF were cited by both BBC News at Ten (2017d) and The Guardian's (Quinn, 2017b) as looking to build upon the existing 600 feeding stations and planning to treat 207,000 children for severe malnutrition. Whilst the coverage above pointed to the potential impact, only two pieces referenced actual impact. Foltyn (2017) explained that 'food has now been delivered to 330,000 people in southern and central Unity state' by aid agencies. Whilst BBC News refers vaguely to 'tens of thousands of people' who are starting to 'see food aid arrive in the region [Unity state]' (BBC, 2017g). The relatively small coverage of the solutions could be due to the small amount of time between the declaration of famine and the cut off point for sources used in this study (39 days in total). It should be noted here that DFID's press release on the 22nd February included a milieu of statistics in reference to what their aid has done and will do in South Sudan. This was quoted directly by a range of national newspapers (but not *The Guardian*).

Overall model: support-not-solutions discourse

News media's seemingly uncritical acceptance of statistics, produced predominantly by the United Nations, combined with a narrative of constitute-measure-solution can be judged as a contestation of power. These three dynamics mean that journalists reinforce the existing humanitarian paradigm. This can be brought into an overall model of *support-not-solutions*: there is a famine (IPC classification), the magnitude is so severe (health and displacement indicators) that the UN, DFID and DEC need more money and legitimacy to intervene in the area (fundraising levels and targets) to implement pre-set solutions (impact statistics). This intervention is not restricted to times of crises yet also includes long term development. In order to highlight the problems involved in this discourse, we can look at what this serves to marginalise. By positioning audience participation within such restricted parameters for action (donations and moral support), it discourages people from being critically engaged with the solutions to humanitarian crises. In using statistics uncritically, the discourse discourages the questioning of statistics as a subjective form of knowledge. Furthermore, it calls for an uncritical approach to the authority of the United Nations systems that produces them. The implications are clear: the already powerful institutions maintain or even extend their power during a humanitarian crisis.

The ability of statistics to exercise power is at the centre on the literature on critical development studies (or post-Development). Most notably, the recent collection of work on macro-economic indicators, such as gross domestic product (GDP), have shown how statistics are an ideological tool to control the developing world (Fioramonti, 2013, 2014; Jerven, 2013; Philipsen, 2015). A recent publication by Lugo-Ocando and Lawson (2017) is the first to address this dynamic within the field of communication. Mirroring the work of Rahnema (2001), they show how the pluralist definitions of famine has been singularised to a statistical construct. The universal definition of famine allows for its measurement. Measurement allows for the presentation and evaluation of solutions to the problem. Crucially, the definition, measurement and solution are all determined by the same institutions, producing a circular logic - a humanitarian tautology masked as ingenuity.

Chiming with the consensus among statistical communication, the coverage of the 2017 South Sudanese Famine conflicts with two principles of western journalism: acting as a watchdog and verifying information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Matching more closely with the 'mirror of reality' ethos outlined in the similar work of Lugo-Ocando & Brandao (2015). This meant that the media functioned as a reproducing agent of existing power, a mouthpiece for humanitarian organisations. This points towards the importance of two disciplines: the mediatisation of humanitarian organisation and journalist practices.

In her 2008 essay, Susanne Franks warns that if journalists and NGOs [including the UN] are too close, the news media cannot hold these international companies to account. Whilst the over-reliance on official sources during a humanitarian crisis is not new (2017: 24-26, 46), the increasing media sophistication of NGOs and the UN over the past decade is a development that needs to be considered. This relationship has been explored in the sub-discipline of NGO mediatisation. The logic from this literature is as follows.

Humanitarian organisations have developed sophisticated PR/media departments that can provide a solid media-logic news package to news media outlets. Additionally, they are utilising new media technologies to communicate original content directly. This information is rarely, if ever, challenged by journalists, affording NGOs an increasingly powerful position on the media landscape (Cottle, 2009; Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Franks, 2008; Jones, 2016; Lugo-Ocando & Hernandez-Toro, 2015; Orgad, 2013; Powers, 2014; Waisbord, 2011). This development has come at the same time as resources for foreign news desks have been falling and the demand for stories has been increasing (Lugo-Ocando & Brandao, 2015: 723; Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017: 26-28). This field, however, has traditionally focused on international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) rather than the United Nations.

There are three journalist practices that allow for the uncritical approach to statistics and the reproduction of an institutional narrative. First, statistics neatly dovetails with rituals of objectivity. Statistics are often afforded the status of objective scientific facts in contemporary western society. As Andreas and Greenhill (2010: 13-14) explains, they ‘are often uncritically accepted and reproduced because they are assumed to have been generated by experts who possess specialised knowledge.’ Whilst a collection of academics have shown how statistics are highly subjective forms of knowledge (Desrosieres, 1998; Hacking, 1990; Porter, 1995), this is has not displaced the common conception. This is also the case in much of journalism. Compounding this dynamic, Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen (2017) explain that journalists perceive their own professional as scientific in a post-Enlightenment sense. This enables statistics to fit seamlessly into journalist practices of objectivity or neutrality – what Tuchman (1978) refers to as rituals of objectivity. Inherent in this dynamic is a co-constructive element – journalists use statistics as it fits within how they conceive of their discipline and then through the use of statistics they further cement the idea that their discipline is scientific. This whole dynamic is exacerbated, Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen (2015) argue, because journalists do not have the statistical understanding to either properly interrogate the statistics presented to them or to produce alternative ones themselves.

The work of Lugo-Ocando and Nguyen (2017), however, uses a mixture of geographically-rooted sites of research to underpin their argument. The following will show how their approach to journalism and statistics is also relevant for UK news media, heeding the warning of Barkovitz and Eko's (2007: 779-780) that 'there is not a singular paradigm for Western journalism, but instead multiple paradigms that grow from the national cultures in which they are embedded.'

There are four main pieces of research/commentary of UK news media (Allan, 1997; Bell, 1998; Chalaby, 1998; Eldridge, Kitzinger, & Williams, 1997). They highlight three interlinked but not entirely interchangeable terms of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity as the key value or professional standard within certain aspects of the British press. But none of these papers conduct a sociological approach, instead producing a historical or anecdotal narrative. Chalaby (1998: 130-133) explains that the repeal of the stamp duty for newspapers, and their subsequent detachment from political parties, created the space for new discursive norms to emerge: neutrality, impartiality, balance, fairness, truthfulness, factuality and accuracy. This position was a central journalistic principle in the formation and expansion of the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s (Allan, 1997: 309-311). An adherence to which has continued into their contemporary news media productions - the most recent editorial guidelines stressing the importance of impartiality, independence and accuracy (BBC, 2017a).

The second and third journalist practice is related to the topic of famine itself. The journalist's preference for events over processes (Franks, 2013: 103) and their inevitable cultural estrangement when reporting famine often leads to a reproduction of existing (false) narratives (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017: 26-28). A whole slew of academic literature from the 1980s onwards has been published to debunk the myth of famines as events, instead explaining that the so-called 'event' is the final part of long process. This conceptual shift has not occurred in imagination of journalists though who generally start reporting on famines when they are declared by the IPC, positioning the humanitarian crisis as an event. Inevitably, this leads the news media to rely on the UN to dictate the story. This is further compounded by the fact that journalist's cultural estrangement leads them to generally prefer authoritative voices, such as humanitarian organisations. This serves to reproduce the famine myth and elevate the importance of the UN as a source.

Conclusion

The uncritical use of statistics from a limited number of sources helped to underpin a narrative that serves to reinforce existing power dynamics during humanitarian crises. This allowed for the exercising of institutional power (namely the United Nations) to go unchecked and unscrutinised – directly conflicting with central principles of western journalism. It is clear that a discussion needs to take place regarding the ethics of humanitarian crisis journalism, especially their role in communicating Famine. This should not only spur a conversation within the news media yet encourage those working in related fields to recognise that the intersection of humanitarian crises, statistics and the news media is worth exploring. Statistical communication should take their work on the communication of quantifiable information and apply it to the field of humanitarian crises. Whereas humanitarian crisis communication must overcome its bias towards qualitative productions and delve into the rich, untapped mine of statistical information used by the news media and humanitarian organisations. More specifically, the discipline of NGO mediatisation does not focus on how this process has manifested in the United Nations. There are two internal UN documents that show how communication strategies are crucial to their operation (FAO, 2012, 2016).

Future research in this area should combine the textual analysis used in this paper with human-based participation research. The research of Lugo-Ocando & Brandao (2015) used in-depth, semi-structures interviews with journalists to comparatively analyse the texts produced by these journalists. The next step in understanding how journalists use statistics to articulate humanitarian crises should follow this example to comprehend this under researched phenomena.

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