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Media

Media plays a central role in shaping the humanitarian field, from mediating and drawing attention to humanitarian crises, to serving as a platform for alerts about unfolding crises, to reporting on the hidden and underlying causes of crises. Media is here broadly understood as both the medium, whether press, radio, or television, as well as online news media and the media actors—the editorial teams and journalists of respective media outlets—who make decisions about events to cover and how to cover them. Social media outlets are increasingly also studied in the framework of media studies, where news is both produced (by social media users) and relayed from other news sources. Different types of media exercise significant power in framing perceptions about the key issues at stake in an emergency setting.

The war in Biafra between 1967 and 1970 led to the emergence of a new visual culture in modern humanitarianism, and the establishment of Médecins Sans Frontières was essentially motivated by the need to “bear witness” (*témoigner*). This mobilized media coverage of the war and the ensuing suffering. Following this, photographic images came to be seen as central to mobilizing Western political attention towards ongoing crises and to ensuring humanitarian access.

Scholarly literature has extensively focused on the role of the media in prioritizing certain humanitarian crises. This literature has debated whether there is a “CNN effect,” or other types of effects, that media coverage of a given situation would have on the political responses and “calls for intervention” (Robinson 2002). In order to assess which political contexts in Western capitals are more or less likely to give the media a decisive role in shaping responses, the focus has been primarily Westerncentric, mainly looking at North American and European media channels and how they portray crises occurring elsewhere.

Media is generally omnipresent in humanitarian studies, even beyond media studies. In the critical literature that discusses what humanitarianism is or should be and its moral underpinnings, the role of the media is either explicitly pointed out or is a background element that mediates the relationship between the external “humanitarian actors” and the victims and “beneficiaries” of humanitarian aid and compassion. Peter Singer (1972) argues that we are as obliged to help a distant stranger in dire need as we are to help somebody in extreme distress who is in close proximity to us—that distance per se does not have any impact. Yet media coverage of such distant suffering is what makes it possible to mobilize funds and aid workers to provide assistance “elsewhere.” Along the same lines, Deen K. Chatterjee, in seeking to make sense of duties to help distant strangers, writes: “Today we live in a world in which spheres of interaction are constantly expanding, while advanced technology makes it easy to reach the distant needy and vividly broadcast their plight to all” (Chatterjee 2004). Lilie Chouliaraki also studies distant suffering and how it is mediated through news media, and emphasizes the “asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the spectator’s television screens” (2006: 4).

Media plays an important role in framing humanitarian crises in certain ways, shaping narratives about ongoing crises and the way they are understood in the public sphere. For this reason, humanitarian organizations rely on mass media to draw attention to otherwise forgotten crises. This, in turn, is seen as the gateway to increased donations and political attention (Powers 2014). At the same time, humanitarian actors are used by journalists to provide factual information, from statistics to broader political context.

The emergence of new technologies has impacted the communication of humanitarian actors, for example with the growing use of social media to share campaign ads and short videos in social-media friendly formats. Such platforms have opened up for online activism, another form of engagement for humanitarian causes, allowing almost anyone to launch their own awareness raising campaigns or crowdfunding for specific causes.

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Medical Neutrality

Medical neutrality refers to the principle of non-interference with medical services during conflicts and other humanitarian crises. The concept of medical neutrality is grounded in statutes in international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law, and is informed by ethical codes such as the Hippocratic Oath (Bouchet-Saulnier et al. 2013; Roberts and VanRooyen 2013). It requires three things: (1) the protection of and non-interference with the operations of medical facilities, medical transport, and medical personnel; (2) the provision of the best medical care possible to all who need medical attention, combatants and non-combatants alike, regardless of their political affiliation or participation in conflicts and politics; and most generally, (3) the mandate that warring factions both protect and refrain from targeting civilians during conflicts. Numerous non-governmental aid and human rights organizations, United Nations agencies, and state signatories to international laws and treaties support and variably enact the principle of medical neutrality. For example, alongside the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Physicians for Human Rights has led many initiatives to define and enforce medical neutrality.

The four Geneva Conventions, which allude to the idea of medical neutrality, were ratified in 1949. Protocols I and II were added in 1977 to, among other things, specify the meaning of medical neutrality and more generally expand the application of IHL to account for the nature of 20th-century conflicts. Protocol I sets out new rules regarding the treatment of the deceased, the protection and care for civilians and prisoners involved in and affected by conflicts, and the protection of all forms of medical units and personnel. Protocol II adds the protection of victims of non-international and internal armed conflicts to those already covered within the laws of war. These additional protocols