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SOMALIA IN MEDIA IMAGES: BATTLING COMPASSION FATIGUE

The humanitarian disaster in Somalia has once again led to a series of images of emaciated children being published by the media, and with that has prompted questions around the purpose and effect of such photographs on the viewers and our understanding of the crisis. The



first time we are confronted by an image of a malnourished child we are “arrested by guilt” and deliberate over ways we could help. The second time we see the same type of image we pause, ponder and then “turn the page.” The third time we see such an image we turn the page “without hesitation.” The fourth time, we may pause again, not because of guilt, but rather to cynically observe that the image is invasive and manipulative, and placed there to make us feel culpable.¹ At this point, the image has ceased to have a compassion-inducing effect and has instead become an insidious nuisance.

REUTERS: A malnourished child is seen inside a ward at Nadir hospital in Somalia's capital Mogadishu.²

In her book “Compassion Fatigue” Susan D. Moeller describes the above reactions as those the public might have had in 1999 to a child sponsorship advertisement: “You can help this child or you can turn the page.”³ Moeller’s description refers to an advertisement whose sole aim it is to secure sponsorship, but the effect could extend to a reaction to a news media photograph featuring a malnourished Somali child. In Moeller’s construction, over a period of time, news photos have a similar, if not the same, effect on its viewer, and just as we may not have the emotional and financial capacity to respond to every child sponsorship advertisement, we may not have the emotional and moral capacity to respond to each recurring photograph of children

¹ Moeller, S. D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. Routledge, New York, p. 9

² Retrieved from: <http://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/famine-declared-in-new-somalia-region-1.1131519>

³ Ibid.

with bulging bellies and fly-infested eyes. And so, we hastily but reluctantly turn the page to avoid dealing with the sudden surge of demanding, guilt-driven questions.

A look at recent images of the Somali famine published by international media, and more close to home South African media, has brought to our attention, again, that there are existing patterns of media reporting on African crises, raising the question: Why do these patterns exist and can methods of reporting on disasters and famine in African countries, and media's use of imagery that depict malnourished children be changed, and how? This question applies not only to international media's coverage of Africa, but also Africa's coverage of the continent itself.

PUTTING A (CHILD'S) FACE TO THE FAMINE VERSUS MINIMIZING HARM

Children are the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society. They are dependent on us, adults, for care and provision of nourishment. For this reason, when victims of famine are children, and when imagery of famine largely focuses on children, compassion fatigue can be "kept at bay longer" than if we were only confronted by images of starving adults. Adults can be perceived as responsible for their own downfall, while "it's difficult to justify the death of a child."⁴ Therefore, confronted with a photograph of a starving, powerless child we are overcome with a sense of responsibility and innate guilt for having somehow "let this child down" while it simultaneously feeds into a "sense of our own potency, a reassurance of adult capacities."⁵

The stereotypical photograph of a malnourished child has become the poster image of Somalia and its famine. The advantage of such an image is that the crisis now has an innately attributable image. The danger is that the posterity of the image has led to detachment from its content. So, what exactly is the intended and resulting effect of such a photograph on the media-consuming individual? These are complex and multifaceted, touching on patterns of news construction and Africa's colonial history, and how these two interact through discourse and imagery often perpetuates rather than challenges stereotypes in the "social representations of 'self' and 'the other'."⁶

One of Media Monitoring Africa's concerns is to ensure the media minimizes harm when reporting on children, respects their best interests and presents them in a dignified and empowered way. This includes the portrayal of children in photographic images. But in the case of famine, additional questions are raised: Should a photograph of a malnourished child respect

⁴ Ibid., p. 110

⁵ Burman, E. (1994) 'Poor children: charity appeals and ideologies of childhood, *Changes: An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12, (1), pp. 29-36.

⁶ Gorin, V. (2009): An Iconography of Pity and a Rhetoric of Compassion: War and Humanitarian Crises in the Prism of American and French Newsmagazines (1967-1995). Presented at 'War, Media and the Public Sphere' International Symposium of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the University of Klagenfurt

its dignity and protect its identity or does doing so deny the true impact that only a ghastly image of a child's sunken face can have on its viewer?

In their pursuit of *the* image that speaks a thousand words, media are often perceived as robbing its subjects of their last "threads of dignity."⁷ At the same time, this relentless quest is driven by the realization that photographs have the power to determine "how important conflicts are judged and remembered" and consequently how much media coverage and global attention they receive.⁸



An internally displaced woman attends to her malnourished children outside their makeshift shelter at a temporary camp in Hodan district of Somalia's capital Mogadishu. Image by: Feisal Omar/Reuters⁹

WHY IS IT ALWAYS THE AFRICAN CHILD?

*"Once established, it's hard for the stereotypes to disappear."*¹⁰

Media research has shown that images depicting exclusively black victims, such as in this case vulnerable, malnourished black Somali children, reinforce racial stereotypes and can perpetrate the victimization of black Africans. Identical patterns are rarely witnessed to the same extent in cases of conflict in Western, developed nations. An example is the recent attack on youth in Norway, where a Google Image search yields largely wide-angle photos of the island where the shooting took place and none of the children victims of the shooting themselves, whereas a search for terms 'Somalia famine' results in stomach-turning close-ups of skeletal children.

Findings of a past study¹¹ conducted by Media Monitoring Africa in 1999 on racial stereotyping in South African media showed that 'crime' and 'racism' were the two most reported on topics and that 75.7% of sources cited in articles monitored for the study supported the proposition that "Blacks are criminals." Furthermore, while most articles were reported on at a National level this was followed by stories dealing with issues on an African level lending credence to racial stereotyping frequently being applied by the media to the entire African continent. The study also found that "black people's deaths were depersonalised by some media" where media coverage of events that featured deaths of black people "tended to focus on the numbers of people who had died rather than individual deaths." Similarly, "use of graphic images of violence and dead bodies was more common in stories that involved black people."

⁷ Moeller, S. D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. Routledge, New York, p. 107

⁸ Sontag, S. (2004) *Regarding The Torture Of Others*. New York Times Magazine (May), p. 25

⁹ Retrieved from: <http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/editorials/2011/09/05/world-s-focus-must-switch-back-to-bleeding-somalia>

¹⁰ Moeller, S. D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. Routledge, New York, p. 104

¹¹ Media Monitoring Africa (1999) *The News in Black and White: An Investigation into Racial Stereotyping in the Media*. Retrieved from: http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/index.php/resources/entry/the_news_in_black_and_white_an_investigation_into_racial_stereotyping_in_t_h/

“Starving children are the famine icon. [...] An emaciated child is not yet associated with the stereotypes attached to its colour, its culture or its political environment. Skeletal children personify innocence abused. They bring moral clarity to the complex story of a famine. Their images cut through the social, economic and political context to create an imperative statement.”¹²

While the above excerpt states children are not associated to the stereotypes of its colour, why do such images almost always feature exclusively black African children and what is the long-term impact of such photographic stereotyping on our understanding and perceptions of deeply rooted social and racial patterns? Are there alternative ways for the media to report on the Somali famine and its victims? Are we to blame an undoubting certainty that a developed country will look after its victims, whereas a developing country such as Somalia cannot, and we are left with no choice but to use images of helpless children as our marketing strategy to the international aid sector? The problem is that this “modern humanitarianism” and its reliance on images of death have added to media’s perpetration of the “victim” perception.¹³

The same form of culpability for adult failure to protect the innocence of children and childhood has been argued to be an extension and perpetuation of “colonial paternalism and corresponding infantilisation” of aid-receiving African countries by the global North. Within this global polarization, children in the North are encouraged to “develop” while in the South “they merely survive, if they are lucky.” Media feed into this construct by communicating Africa’s children’s sole goal as survival through constant pleas for nutrition as the single deciding factor between life and death.¹⁴ Analyses of photographs taken by colonialists in Africa have found that behind the “sentimentality” of the images of children, these images display embedded agendas, one of which is the crucial role that the provision of medical aid and health services plays in establishing and maintaining colonial authority.¹⁵

The use of the northern model and definition of childhood and development as a barometer for the development of the southern child ignores Africa’s historical efforts to depart from the colonial past and for its people - especially children - to be understood within their “cultural, political and geographical contexts.”¹⁶ There needs to be a fundamental acknowledgment and shift in the media’s portrayal and perpetuation of these inherent definitions and understanding of the North-South paradigm.

¹² Ibid. p. 98

¹³ Gorin, V. (2009): An Iconography of Pity and a Rhetoric of Compassion: War and Humanitarian Crises in the Prism of American and French Newsmagazines (1967-1995). Presented at ‘War, Media and the Public Sphere’ International Symposium of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the University of Klagenfurt

¹⁴ Burman, E. (1994) ‘Poor children: charity appeals and ideologies of childhood, *Changes: An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 12, (1), pp. 29-36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

WHEN DOES FAMINE BECOME NEWS?

The Somali famine and conflict has been a humanitarian issue that has captured global attention for decades, is ongoing, and obliges the media to continually recast the story in such a way that the world pays attention, again. These efforts by news media to ensure continued and renewed shock at the images they publish is analogous to drug addiction. In pursuit of the same 'high' experienced the first time an addict uses drugs, they will continue to increase the drug dosage. Similarly, overexposure to images of malnourished children will eventually numb us to the initial reactions, and we begin to build immunity and resistance to their effect. This leads to media projecting a distorted perception of newsworthiness, and to relentless and desperate efforts to reignite an audience's interest and compassion towards the Somali crisis, by upping the severity and shock-factor of the images and stories it publishes.

One line of thinking is that publishing such an image without a means for its viewer to act on their reaction (such as offering resources for donation) the photograph remains just that; an image that has stirred up an emotional or moral reaction, without the possibility of absolution. This leads to a feeling of helplessness and progressive resentment towards the image, the story and the cause, with the child in the image left to become another poster child. Similar sentiments are experienced if the media fails to raise the bar and surprise its audience; if there is no difference between the images published during the last and the current famine crises, this creates a sentiment that we, as the public, have failed to make the crisis go away. The reaction to such a feeling usually ends at: What point is there paying attention now, again?

Another argument is that it is the media's responsibility to report on events and not to coddle or shield the public from the very real horror of the Somali crisis, and those suffering because of it. This argument, however, is marred by complex patterns of news construction. Deciding on the newsworthiness of a story, especially one taking place in Africa, is dependent on many factors, one of which is the "no corpses, no attention" factor.¹⁷

Media coverage of disasters or famines requires that it fits into a "standard formula" or "template" which relies on stereotyped phrases, adjectives and images. Establishment of newsworthiness means that although there is ongoing conflict between rebels and governments occurring all over Africa, including Somalia, it will not become news until people are "starving to death"¹⁸ as a new facet to the recurring conflict story arc. The need for "death" to prominently feature in news coverage is exemplified in this case of a journalist reporting on the Somalia famine crisis in 1992 who placed a microphone "next to the mouth of a child who had crawled off to die" and when asked why he'd done this, responded: "My editor wants us to get the sounds of death." The editor justified these actions as necessary in order to break

¹⁷ Moeller, S. D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. Routledge, New York, p. 104

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

through the wall of the audience's compassion fatigue by telling them that "this story was out of the ordinary, that this story was, quite literally, about life and death."¹⁹

Once this factor has been established, potential causes and solutions to the famine also have to be simplified, so that causes can be attributed to natural disasters and therefore out of people's control, and solutions boiled down to financial donation. Next, reporting must rely on the "language of morality" by creating a dichotomy between good and evil through the employment of characters playing the "victim, rescuer and villain," whom in Somalia's case are the women and children, humanitarian aid sector, and Somali militia rebels. Finally, the story must have images.²⁰

The challenge with images that accompany such stories is that they are an extension of already defined parameters and patterns of reporting. These images are often simplified close-ups of starving children and women visibly hungry and in need of aid. They are oftentimes, if not always, portrayed outside of the larger, historic context of the violence and conflict that has brought them to this point, and falsely create the perception that the straightforward solution to the problem is food or urgent medical care. This is a dangerous and counterproductive outlook for a crisis that is far more complex in its origin and requires not only "humanitarian relief, but also social, political and even military attention."²¹

While images can have a profound effect on an audience, without contextual embedding and text that can give audiences insight into the complex meaning behind these images, they remain a temporary tactic that eventually pushes the audience further into developing compassion fatigue. They remain stories about the victims rather than by them; their privacy invaded to be photographed but rarely be given a voice. This is often due to the "perceived lack of articulateness" by journalists who seldom give a voice to the common person and "with no voice of their own, they can be made to represent or reflect whatever sentiment is desired."²² For real insight, stories should feature the voices of those it photographs.

AFRICA ISN'T HELL ON EARTH

Research has argued that Africa, like Western media, is equally responsible for the continent's attention on conflict and crime in media coverage and therefore perpetration of negative perceptions. This is said to be due to Western media's dominance of the news order and that for this to be changed Africa's values need to be re-examined to increase reporting on the continent's advancements in policies and human rights.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 102

²⁰ Ibid., p. 105

²¹ Moeller, S. D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. Routledge, New York, p. 110

²² Ibid., pp. 99-108

²³ Emenyeonu, N. B. (1995) Africa's Image in the Local Press: An Analysis of African News in Some Nigerian Newspapers. In *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2. Pp. 82-104

As a recent report by Nicole Johnston highlighted, “while those terrible pictures of death and suffering – the “famine pornography” as it has come to be known – are undeniably part of the



picture, they are not the whole picture.” Her article, accompanied by alternative images to those we usually see of the Somali famine, adds: “What those images do not show is the incredible resilience of the refugees, their ability to envision a better life for themselves and their fierce dignity in the face of experiences that would leave most of us crushed.”²⁴

Solutions to these dilemmas aren’t straightforward and will certainly not be achieved overnight, due to complex patterns that have existed for hundreds of years and continue to exist not only in the news-making sphere but also those within which the media itself operates – historical, political, social, economic realities etc. What is apparent is that the patterns that are in place now need to be challenged in order to shift the paradigm and global perception of Africa, in various domains and especially as portrayed in news media.

Children have no books, or blackboards or pencils so they practice writing on wooden boards using homemade ink. Photograph: Nicole Johnston/Oxfam.²⁵

For the media this means a balanced departure from the standard temptation to simplify stories that are complex, and resisting the urge to selectively report and photograph only one extreme and often negative side of the African reality. While it’s easy to focus only on Western media’s representation of Africa, journalists and policy makers have agreed that above suggestions equally extend to African media, and will likely only be realized if African countries themselves begin to look within and alter their own media output and the self-image created in the process.



Children play at the reception centre at Ifo camp. Photograph: Nicole Johnston/Oxfam²⁶

One of the major catalysts of this awareness will be Africa’s establishment and safeguarding of press freedom and its accessibility to international media.²⁷ In South Africa’s case specifically, the current threat of a Media Appeals Tribunal and the Protection of Information Bill being

²⁴ Johnston, N. (2011) A Crack in the Sky. Retrieved on 15/09/2011 at <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/southernafrica/?p=2723#more-2723>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Retrieved from: <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/southernafrica/?p=2723#more-2723>

²⁷ Lone, S. Africa’s Road to a Better Media Image: Western stereotypes, Africa’s own weaknesses tackled in lively debate. In Africa Recovery. Retrieved on 19/09/2011 from: <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol112no3/media.htm>

passed would severely undermine media freedom and the quality of reporting, which in turn would further feed into the stereotypically negative perception of Africa by the international audience and Africa itself.

Another suggested solution to tackling “imbalanced” reporting of Africa by Western media has been to recruit locally-based correspondents. However, even when this has been done for international press agencies, those reporters and their contributions are frequently edited to fit the pre-determined foreign media construct of Africa.²⁸ Perhaps the solution, although seemingly implausible, lies in the establishment of an African-based press agency with a focus on diverse news reflecting the cultural, traditional, linguistic, geographical, political, economic etc. complexity of the continent. This possibility is served to a degree by organizations like Inter Press Services. Other attempts in more mainstream media have been made to varying degrees by the Mail and Guardian, SABC and City Press with the intended goal of telling African stories through African voices. While positive such initiatives appear to have had relatively limited success and the reasons why need to be analysed in order to understand what prevents them from thriving, and dominating continental coverage.

If we are to challenge and do more than simply repeat our failures, it is crucial that not only our governments do things differently, but that the media learns to do so as well. All of this is dependent on an active and engaged civil society, to ensure our governments act in the public interest and for us as audiences to demand continual improvement from our media.

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²⁸ Kromah, A. G. V. (2002) Africa in the Western Media: Cycle of Contra-Positives and Selective Perceptions. Presented at University of Indiana, Bloomington. Retrieved on 19/09/2011 from: http://www.theperspective.org/africa_westernmedia.html