

THE EAST AFRICAN FAMINE

DID THE MEDIA GET IT RIGHT?

HELEN MAGEE



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International Broadcasting Trust,
CAN Mezzanine, 32-6 Loman Street London SE1 0EH
www.ibt.org.uk
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FOREWORD

The East African famine generated a huge amount of media coverage and the DEC raised a significant sum of money. But how effective was the coverage? Did it simply replicate the way in which famines have been reported in the past or was there a marked improvement?

In this report, based on interviews with a wide range of media and NGO representatives, we consider the lessons that have been learnt from coverage of the East African famine and make recommendations for the future.

We also consider the important role of NGO messaging. Concern about the sustainability of support for the work of the development sector has led to a debate about changing the way in which aid agencies communicate with the public – away from the simplistic, negative images that successfully evoke a one-off emotional response, but do little to engage people on a more lasting basis. This research also considers media coverage in the light of this debate.

We hope that this report stimulates a wider discussion about media coverage. IBT always welcomes feedback, so once you have read the report please let me know what you think.

Mark Galloway

Director, International Broadcasting Trust
mark@ibt.org.uk

INTERVIEWEES

Steven Barnett Professor of Communications,
University of Westminster

Charlie Beckett Director of Polis, LSE

Louis Belanger Humanitarian Media Officer, Oxfam International

Claudia Blume Press Officer, MSF Toronto

Ian Bray Senior Press Officer, Oxfam GB

Stuart Coles Global Senior Press Officer, Plan International

Martin Cottingham Media Relations Manager, Islamic Relief

Laura Crowley Communications and Media Officer, WaterAid

Ben De Pear Head of Foreign News, Channel 4 News

Kylie Harrison Media Officer, Merlin

Mary Hockaday Head of the BBC Newsroom

Firoze Manji Editor in Chief, Pambazuka News

Polly Markandya Head of Communications, MSF London

Katie Martin Media Director, Europe, ONE

Sarah Molloy Head of Communications, Concern Worldwide (UK)

Wangui Muchiri Africa Communications Manager, ONE

Dominic Nutt Associate Director of Communications and Campaigns,
World Vision

Brendan Paddy Communications Manager, DEC

Tom Parry Senior News and Feature Writer, Daily Mirror

Lilly Peel Editor, Panos

Laurent Sauveur Director of Communications and Fundraising,
MSF Switzerland

Andy Shipley News Editor, Plan International UK

Tim Singleton Assistant Editor (Newsgathering) ITV News

Adrian Thomas Head of Media and Public Relations, British Red Cross

Kate Turner Head of Communications and Campaigns, Merlin

Andrew Wander Media Manager, Humanitarian Emergencies,
Save the Children

Mustakim Waid Consultant

Jon Williams World News Editor, BBC

Sarah Wilson Senior International Journalist, Christian Aid

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Media coverage of the crisis in East Africa was sometimes criticised for its slow response, tabloid press imagery reminiscent of the mid 1980s, parachute journalism and a tendency to focus on the Dadaab refugee camp and ignore the wider context.
- But criticism was almost always qualified. NGO press and media officers understood the difficulties of covering a crisis in the making and acknowledged that powerful images were sometimes necessary to reflect the intensity of the emergency. They recognised that across the media there were opportunities to explore some of the broader issues despite competition from other strong news stories.
- Both NGOs and media respondents highlighted structural, technical and cultural changes in the representation of aid emergencies since Ethiopia and Live Aid. There may not have been a major paradigm shift, but there was a general consensus that coverage was not the same.
- There were some conflicting views and considerable self-criticism regarding the NGO sector's own messaging at the height of media coverage. Some argued that simple, direct calls to action were most effective in raising funds to alleviate immediate suffering. The huge success of the DEC appeal surprised many and seemed to confirm this.
- Other NGO interviewees felt that it was difficult to criticise the media for superficial coverage when their own messages were often too simplistic and failed to address the limitations of humanitarian aid in the face of the violence and political chaos in Somalia. Differences of opinion relating to the intervention of MSF's International President illustrated this dilemma.
- Views on the public's appetite for more nuanced coverage were also mixed, but the importance of creating an appetite was raised by one interviewee.
- The use of images by aid agencies is now increasingly prescribed by national and international guidelines and broadcasters are sensitive to what their viewers will find acceptable. But concerns were expressed that some NGOs appeared to have reverted to the use of harrowing and graphic images in their advertising. For NGO interviewees concerns tended to centre on the dignity of the beneficiary. Broadcasters spoke of the delicate balance between images that might offend and those that could be seen as sanitising the situation.
- The East Africa crisis provided aid agencies with an opportunity to present longer-term messages about disaster mitigation to a wider audience. NGOs reported mixed success in gaining interest from the mainstream media in such stories, but the greater variety of communication tools now available through new and social media offer increasingly effective alternatives.
- NGOs generally seemed to work well with the media during aid emergencies, but it was seen on both sides as a relationship that had to be managed carefully. Media respondents stressed their commitment to foreign stories despite pressures on budgets. Some NGO interviewees felt budget restrictions could mean a greater dependence upon them for access to these stories.
- Comparisons with media coverage of the crisis outside the UK generally indicated the extent to which the UK led the field. Coverage in the US was particularly criticised for seeing the story through the lens of its relations with Somalia rather than as a humanitarian disaster.
- A number of interviewees suggested ways in which media coverage of aid stories might be improved including earlier investment on the part of aid agencies, shared NGO messaging on a more sustained basis, greater use of new and social media and the further development of mutual understanding between the NGO sector and the media.

FINDINGS

GENERAL IMPRESSIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Quantity and timeliness

Although early warning signals had been forecasting a major drought since the end of 2010, NGOs struggled to engage media interest in the crisis in East Africa until early July 2011. They sensed that some parts of the media simply saw the same story repeating itself. Moreover, the summer news agenda was particularly full with phone-hacking scandals dominating the news at home, and the Middle East and the Euro crisis dominating the foreign news. Save the Children put out a press release at the end of June about the number of children arriving at Dadaab refugee camp every day which they believe gave a different dimension to the story and led to an article in *The Independent* on Sunday July 3rd. This coincided with Baroness Amos's interview on Radio 4's *The World This Weekend* and was followed by Ben Brown's first report from Dadaab on the 4th. DFID's announcement of a UK aid package followed by the UN's declaration of famine in Somalia later in the month added to the momentum.

Despite this perceived delay, most NGOs seemed to acknowledge that a crisis in the making is difficult to cover and in the words of Dominic Nutt (World Vision), *man may bite dog is definitely not a story*. Media interviewees argued that there are dangers in responding too early. Tom Parry of *The Daily Mirror* felt that *not many media would have gone if agencies had focused on the situation earlier*. There were a few exceptions. *Channel 4 News*, for example, reported on malnutrition in Somalia in 2010 and there were occasional references to the situation on BBC online and radio. Ben Brown's report preceded the official declaration of famine and itself helped to create the news environment for the DEC appeal. Once media interest had been aroused, most NGOs thought that the response was good and in the face of strong competing stories and a slow moving chronic situation, relatively well sustained.

We were concerned that because of other major news stories...interest would be short-lived..... However, what actually happened was that the interest was sustained and I was surprised. I think there were a number of journalists who were looking for ways to continue the coverage, maybe out of a sense of moral obligation. (Brendan Paddy, DEC)

Oxfam's Ian Bray commended ITV News, Sky and Channel 4 for their commitment and thought that without *the kind ofumph the BBC gave to the story, we wouldn't have been able to raise the money we did*. Tim Singleton, Assistant Editor (Newsgathering) could not *remember a greater commitment from ITV News on a long running story of this kind at a time when*

many broadcasters were investing all their resources in the war in Libya. The DEC thanked ITV for their coverage and noted the increase in donations whenever they highlighted the crisis.

Tone and context

Several aid agencies found echoes of the 1980s in the East Africa coverage which they felt had set the benchmark for aid stories. One NGO was fearful of talking up the crisis for fear of reinforcing stereotypes, whilst others felt that unless the images matched up to those of the 1980s, the story would not be seen as worthy of coverage. But whilst the media were sometimes accused of treating this crisis in the context of previous famines and reverting to a template set in Ethiopia, many interviewees considered that differences in terms of causation and changes in both the NGO sector and the media meant direct comparisons were difficult. Overall, they suggested an evolutionary change in tone since the 1980s. Mary Hockaday, Head of the BBC Newsroom, listed a number of differences in the way they now cover such crises – there is a greater awareness of the complexities, they are far more likely to try to return to stories and update the initial reports, and correspondents interact with local people as individuals and understand the importance of naming them in their reports. Aid agencies still felt that the media neglected the partnership involved in working in emergencies like this and tended to portray the western aid workers as heroes.

Many NGO criticisms centred on the tendency to focus attention on the refugee camp in Dadaab, which dominated most coverage until stories about the difficulties of access in Somalia provided another angle to an ongoing situation. Although logistical and security considerations played a large part in the media's decision to concentrate on Dadaab, from a news point of view, it was also believed to provide the strongest stories and images. Whilst aid agencies recognised the practical difficulties of covering such a widespread disaster and the limited amount of air time or column inches available, some regretted the sparse coverage of the broader context which did not always reflect the achievements of development work in other parts of the area and failed to provide the history of the camp itself.

The story so quickly became focused on Dadaab. Journalists were reluctant to move outside that. The Red Cross arranged a trip for a journalist to compare life in the camp with areas where there has been some successful long term mitigation. But shortly before she was due to fly out, her editor said he only wanted the camp story.I wouldn't want to point the finger at the media. They have a

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Adrian Thomas, British Red Cross

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Andrew Wander of Save the Children thought that the failure of the international community to heed the early warning systems was well covered, but the vulnerability of certain communities and the longer term systemic problems could not easily be addressed in a three minute news piece when journalists are expected to cover *a hunger story, not a poverty story*. Martin Cottingham (Islamic Relief) thought the media response was linked to the endemic inadequacy of the aid system itself which too often offers *a last minute sticking plaster*. Firoze Manji, Editor in Chief of Pambazuka News, argued that both media and NGOs were responsible for the lack of context – *pulling the lens back is not what the media does. It zooms in and removes the context and that’s what NGOs do*.

However, some interviewees felt that whilst initial coverage inevitably centred on the immediate crisis, subsequent reporting did provide greater context and opportunities for aid agencies to respond to debates on the underlying causes. Ian Bray (Oxfam) highlighted interviews on *Today* and ITV News reports on Turkana and Wajir, Sarah Molloy (Concern) referred to a number of interviews their Chief Executive did with BBC News 24. Media interviewees emphasised the number of times they had returned to East Africa, for example, George Alagiah’s reports for the BBC which did provide a historical context for Dadaab, and Martin Geissler’s week of reporting from a field hospital for ITV News. Moreover, during the completion of this report, *ITV’s Tonight* took Eddie Izzard to the Kenya/Somali border to ask *Didn’t We Fix Famine?* and Fergal Keane reported from Turkana on the impact of government corruption on famine relief for *Newsnight* and *The World at One*.

The tone of the coverage, which initially presented the crisis in terms of the worst drought for 60 years, changed when attention shifted to the problems of access in Somalia. For interviewees from both the media and NGO sectors, this issue highlighted the dilemma facing aid agencies who criticise simplistic and stereotyped coverage, but who are themselves reluctant to address some of the more difficult problems of operating in conflict zones. Similarly, Ethiopia remained largely unreported because of government restrictions.

More generally, concerns that coverage of East Africa merely reinforced negative stereotypes of Africa were set against the realities of both the news agenda and the crisis itself. Whilst one interviewee reflected on the lack of good news stories about Europe, others

commented on the impossibility of portraying famine in a positive light. The BBC’s World Editor, Jon Williams, argued that coverage of the crisis should be seen within the context of all programmes about Africa which represent both good and bad aspects of the continent.

Interviewees were asked if changes in the mainstream media had impacted on the way this crisis was covered compared to Ethiopia in the mid 1980s. Technological developments mean that situations can be reported live making the coverage more immediate and bringing the viewer closer to the story. However, there was concern that it led to a greater tendency to parachute journalism. Whilst the increased volume offered by 24 hour news potentially enables a wider variety of stories, it was also viewed as very demanding from an aid agency’s point of view and the constant repetition was thought to increase the risk of fatigue.

Media images

There was some criticism of a return to stereotyped images in the media, which it was felt would not have been out of place in the 1980s, particularly in the tabloid press. But this has to be viewed alongside the rather mixed messages conveyed by the aid agencies themselves on this issue and an acknowledgment that agencies benefited from a fundraising point of view.

A lot of the coverage was rather clichéd – images of starving children, victims. But as a former print journalist I know it’s difficult to cover a story about starving children without showing starving children. It’s unpalatable at times, but it’s an effective fundraising tool. (Andy Shipley, Plan International)

Media interviewees felt that, although stark images were needed to stop viewers in their tracks, they had also moved on since the 1980s. The BBC carries out its own research on this subject and has a good idea of what its viewers find acceptable. Editors think carefully about the pictures they use and are aware of the fine balancing act between images that are truthful and those that may offend. Ben De Pear, the Head of Foreign News at Channel 4, suggested that they had been more sensitive than the NGOs on occasion.

The DEC asked us for pictures for their appeal and showed nothing but starving children staring into the camera for much longer than we would do. We don’t hold the shot and put in slo-mo like the NGOs do..... you have to have a report that’s watchable, you can’t have one that focuses purely on starving children. There are Ofcom rules too. There is an argument that as many people

will be put off or turn over as will be moved to give money.

Tom Parry of *The Daily Mirror* acknowledged the difficulties of breaking away from the clichés, but talked about the efforts his photographer made to resist them when working in Dadaab.

My colleague tried not to get sucked in by that – it becomes a thinnest child contest – so he did a lot of portraits of mother and child – the two tied together and suffering equally rather than the abandoned child.

Media images of the crisis in East Africa are outside the control of aid agencies in most cases – although Sarah Molloy thought they had more control over print than broadcast, and NGOs increasingly have the capacity to offer VNRs (video news releases) to broadcasters. Islamic Relief have had some success with these in other emergencies, such as the Pakistani floods. But as Martin Cottingham emphasised, they cannot be advertisements for the aid agency and they have no editorial control over how they are used.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD AND POOR COVERAGE

Many NGO interviewees found it easier to talk generally about media coverage than to single out particular examples of good and bad coverage. Media interviewees were reluctant to comment on their fellow journalists and broadcasters. But the following items were mentioned.

Good coverage

Andrew Wander, Save the Children: *Clive Myrie for the BBC. He went back to a little girl's village with her father to find out why they'd left. Ben Brown did good stuff from Dadaab. He joined families walking to the camp and listened to what they'd been through. Also Tristan McConnell at The Times.*

Ian Bray, Oxfam: *Channel 4 News sent a Somali journalist out to the Kenya/Somali border to retrace the journey to the camp in a video diary.*

Martin Cottingham, Islamic Relief: *Channel 4 News: Jamal Osman's report from the Al-Shabaab area. He got good access but was not an apologist. It's lazy journalism to completely demonise Al-Shabaab without reporting on the complex reality on the ground as Jamal did.*

Laura Crowley, WaterAid: *The Guardian development website and IRIN, an online humanitarian news service, offered more discussion on long term issues – sustainability as opposed to emergency aid which is what WaterAid is about.*

Poor coverage

Adrian Thomas, British Red Cross: *One national broadsheet cartoon early on in the coverage: a thin African child's profile with head lifted and mouth wide open in the shape of a map of Africa.*

Brendan Paddy, DEC: *What made me most angry was political rather than visual. Jonathan Rugman's piece for Channel 4 News gave the impression that this was a Somali crisis and the rest of East Africa was fine. We'd had a long conversation with him, but this was not reflected in the final piece. It was a confused piece and didn't have much impact.*

Ian Bray, Oxfam: *Jonathan Clayton (South African correspondent) wrote a piece in The Times saying the aid agencies were crying wolf. Rob Crilly (Daily Telegraph) said "pastoralism was over".*

Sarah Molloy, Concern: *Liz Jones in the Daily Mail. She managed to make it all about her.*

NGO MESSAGING

Immediate messages

The large aid agencies now operate highly sophisticated media and marketing operations yet several interviewees agreed that the messages conveyed remain overly simplistic.

The implication is that Save can solve the problem, but it can't. Many of them accept this, but all their messaging says the opposite. It's difficult to say that there should be more sophisticated media coverage when the NGO sector itself is not prepared to have a mature conversation. (Charlie Beckett, Polis)

Brendan Paddy encapsulated the dilemma for aid agencies, when confronted by the intensity and urgency of the East Africa crisis, suggesting that the public respond better to a simple statement of need than to more complex issues. But he also argued that the message has changed since the 1980s.

The message we want to get across is that we are helping people affected by these issues, not coming in on a white horse and saving them. They need support to help themselves. Most of the work is done through local partners and staff. There's a tendency to portray the western aid workers as heroes. That's not the reality and most feel uncomfortable with that or even angry.

Donors are thought to respond better to natural disasters than to those driven by conflict. NGO messages relating to the famine in East Africa generally focused on the drought rather than the

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Brendan Paddy, DEC

deep-seated political problems in Somalia. But the intervention of the International President of MSF gave the media a new angle. Dr Karunakara criticised aid agencies for their failure to address the man-made causes of the crisis and for glossing over the difficulties and limitations of humanitarian aid in this part of the region. Polly Markandya, from MSF in London, believes that their funders are more able to respond to these complex messages than the typical *Daily Mail* reader and they received a lot of positive feedback from the Somali diaspora to Dr Karunakara's comments. Whilst other aid agencies accepted that challenges should be communicated, they were wary of messages that suggested the impossibility of famine relief in certain areas and appeared to criticise fundraising for exaggerating what could be achieved.

You need to communicate the challenges, but also the progress..... If you go out with the MSF message, it can be quite dangerous. It's a new angle to the story so the media will leap on it so it needs to be carefully crafted so it's not misrepresented. The media polarises everything into black and white. (Adrian Thomas, British Red Cross)

Longer term messaging

High profile appeals like that for the crisis in East Africa offer aid agencies publicity and an opportunity to present their work to a wider audience. One of Plan International's key messages is helping young girls because they are adversely affected in times of crisis. To try and communicate concepts like this when a story is breaking is not easy, but Andy Shipley referred to *The Sun's* online launch of the DEC appeal. Although the piece was illustrated with an image of a starving child which raised concerns of obtrusive coverage, the words successfully communicated the message about the appeal and even Plan's campaign message focussing on the plight of girls.

The anti-poverty campaign group ONE are trying to move beyond the immediate crisis and show how it can be prevented in the future. They launched a campaign in October 2011 focussing on both the need to fully fund the UN appeal for the Horn of Africa and invest more in agriculture. The message in their "F" word advertisement is simple, but it links to more nuanced information on their website. Katie Martin, from ONE, felt they needed to take a slightly different approach as they are not a fundraising body and don't deliver programmes on the ground. The campaign used a number of well-known celebrities, a technique widely adopted by NGOs in their efforts to gain media interest. Islamic Relief responded to the media's narrow focus on Dadaab by taking actor Hugh Quarshie to a hospital in Wajir to convey the importance of providing food and water in people's own

communities so they do not have to travel to a refugee camp. He gave 22 interviews on his return to BBC Breakfast, ITV News at lunchtime, Sky News, Five Live, local radio and *Hello* magazine.

Use of images

There has been considerable debate within the NGO community about the portrayal of aid beneficiaries. Most agencies now have guidelines governing the way they use images and are concerned to respect the dignity of individuals in even the most dire of circumstances. The British Red Cross forbids the depiction of clients as passive victims, discourages the focus on white aid workers when local volunteers can be found and, in common with most aid agencies, does not crop a mother out of a picture in order to make a point about a starving child. Oxfam requires malnourished individuals to be shown being supported by friends, family or Oxfam staff or partners. Photographers are encouraged to balance desperation with resilience. Powerful individual testimonies used in conjunction with these images are considered to be an important tool in appealing to potential donors. Concern provided the images used in the DEC East Africa appeal. They have signed up to the Irish NGO network's (DOCHAS) code of conduct which aims to depict the situation truthfully while respecting the dignity of the people involved. Thus the pictures used by the DEC showed a child with its mother not looking directly into camera.

The basic rules: disasters are about people so you have to have people in the frame. But you also need the signs of devastation, the visual context. You want to be able to look that person in the eye with a real sense that this is my equal, needing my help but not tantamount to being helpless. (Brendan Paddy, DEC)

Nevertheless, some interviewees were concerned that in their East Africa appeals a few agencies appeared to have reverted back to the stereotypical imagery of the 1980s. Sarah Molloy of Concern acknowledged that subsequent to the DEC appeal, their press advertisements did become more graphic and suggested that there was tension between fundraising and communication departments in many aid agencies over the use of images. Save the Children, who are currently carrying out research on the use of photographs in an emergency, were particularly singled out for criticism. But their media manager for humanitarian emergencies felt they had to reflect reality. Oxfam's Ian Bray thought that Save could justify the use of certain images more easily than agencies whose work did not primarily involve giving direct help to malnourished children.

We have used some hard-hitting images. My criterion in the

field is to represent reality. If you're having to look hard to find the graphic image, it's dishonest to use them. But if the wards in Dadaab are full of sick children, then it's equally dishonest to show a healthier child to avoid offence. (Andrew Wander, Save)

We can draw the line at starving babies a bit thicker because it's not our role. We're not directly helping that baby. You may disagree with Save, but they probably have more justification because that's what they doit's a different moral context. Our support is more indirect. (Ian Bray, Oxfam)

The interviews demonstrated a range of opinion about the use of images and criticism was often qualified. NGOs recognised that graphic images work in conveying the enormity of the situation without the need for too many words. Furthermore, shocking images were seen as an effective fundraising tool provided they were not so harrowing that they left people feeling a sense of helplessness. Research conducted for World Vision suggests that there has to be a positive message at some point in their dialogue with the public, but the problem for aid agencies is how to convey that in an image.

MSF have adopted a different position on the use of images by choosing not to sign up to any of the NGO guidelines. Polly Markandya explained that they make decisions on a case by case basis and use pictures that illustrate their work on the ground rather than a general need.

We take a different position on "disaster porn". We reject the idea that we should never use an image of a starving child – there are some occasions when it's right to do so.I'm in opposition to the grand NGO narrative on this. I sign everything off for fundraising here and with very rare exceptions, we illustrate our fundraising with our patients and our work because that illustrates what people who donate are supporting.

The Oxfam press office always aims to present the agency in the best possible light in any emergency, but the problem for Ian Bray is the nature of the work they do which does not naturally lend itself to powerful images. However, because the Oxfam brand is sufficiently strong and the images already in the public domain, they can rely primarily on text.

Our biggest problem is we're not Save or MSF. We dig latrines. That's very important but it's not sexy so it gets very little coverage. The way we present ourselves in an emergency is not through images. The Oxfam brand is so strong and the images are there already.

Public appetite for more nuanced coverage

The DEC East Africa appeal raised £72 million and is the most successful food crisis appeal to date. Fears of compassion fatigue would seem to be unwarranted and criticism of overly simplistic messages in the media unjustified in the face of such an overwhelming response. Ian Bray believes that people respond to a humanitarian disaster on an emotional level without engaging in a great deal of intellectualisation about its causes – *it is not a long term purchase*. Others referred to responses to online news reports and radio programmes which seem to suggest that cynicism and fatigue are real.

In contrast, there was a positive response to some of Channel 4's more distinctive approaches to this crisis, perhaps illustrating Dominic Nutt's belief that people will always respond to a good story even if they are not looking for it.

It can't be the white man turning up to tell the world the black man is starving any more. There is an appetite for more nuanced coverage. The reaction to the starving children stories is money donated to the DEC. But there has also been a lot of reaction to some of Jamal's stories about his native Somalia, for example, the Somali guys training for the Olympics. People were writing in offering to buy kit for them and the online coverage got lots of hits for these stories. People said the challenges of living in Somalia were humanised in ways they hadn't seen before. (Ben De Pear, Channel 4 News)

But generally, NGOs were divided about the extent of the public's appetite for more sophisticated coverage and debate. Many believed there was only a limited interest for more analytical approaches and this tended to be amongst a minority of the potential audience. Ian Bray felt they would be better advised to read a lengthy analytical article in *The New York Times* or *The Observer* or visit the Oxfam website than look to a short news piece in the mainstream media. Steve Barnett, Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster, argued that to ask whether there is an appetite for more context is the wrong question.

News appetites are moveable feasts. Those with no appetite for information about aid won't be interested in the simple or the sophisticated message. If you start from the point of public appetite you will never move the agenda on. The real question is how do we create an appetite? How do we get Brits interested in Johnny Foreigner? Then, how do we tell more nuanced stories about him?

“It can’t be the white man turning up to tell the world the black man is starving any more. There is an appetite for more nuanced coverage.”

Ben De Pear, Channel 4 News

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

There was some discussion about the implications of cuts in foreign news budgets and whether these might offer more opportunities for aid agencies as media organisations become more dependent upon them for access to the stories in an emergency. Where NGOs source the interviewees, Lilly Peel of Panos thought this could contribute to more hopeless narratives as the fundraising imperative might mean they would choose the most tragic cases. Media respondents were keen to emphasise their commitment to overseas coverage despite the financial pressures and stressed their independence. Jon Williams, BBC World Editor, acknowledged the reliance on aid agencies with regard to security issues, but felt they worked alongside rather than with NGOs.

Frustrations were expressed on both sides of the relationship. Tom Parry of *The Daily Mirror* described the DEC as running a very streamlined media operation and thought that NGOs were generally much swifter to respond and were more alert to media needs than in the past. Nevertheless, he felt that because politics and conflict were as important as drought in causing this particular crisis, aid agencies should have been more ready to address the Al-Shabaab issue. There were several examples of attempts to pitch stories by both NGOs and journalists that failed because of timing (too early/strong competing news stories); fatigue (“we’ve done enough aid”); practical difficulties (interviews with Somali staff); and lack of interest (“where’s the story?”). The urgency of the situation meant that NGOs felt they sometimes had to sacrifice nuance. Tim Singleton at ITV News criticised NGOs for sending the same general press release to all media outlets and there was some acceptance of this amongst the aid agencies. But others pointed to limited resources and time pressures during a humanitarian emergency.

USE OF NEW MEDIA

One of the major changes since the mid 1980s is the explosion of media sources and platforms. This provides new opportunities for NGOs and social media are now as much a part of their toolkit as press releases. Andrew Wander commented that a *YouTube* video can reach as many people as *The X Factor*. Jon Williams compared the 10 million people who clicked onto the BBC website’s coverage of Gaddafi’s death with the five million who watched the *10 O’clock News*.

A wider variety of media sources enables more diverse and complex messaging and allows NGOs to engage more directly with their beneficiaries and aid workers on the ground.

Plan was able to do a live web chat on The Guardian development website. This is an exciting initiative for NGOs. We can run stories that the mainstream media wouldn’t. We did a live discussion with our country director in Ethiopia and someone in Dadaab camp. (Andy Shipley, Plan)

Martin Cottingham felt that NGOs are still learning how best to utilise new and social media. He argued that there are things they should be doing differently and things they are missing altogether. Some of the problem is structural as social media are usually an off-shoot of marketing and therefore primarily fundraising-led. But others expressed more ambivalence about the value of new media. Whilst it opened up more direct channels with the public enabling a dialogue with supporters and critics, Brendan Paddy felt aid agencies were still faced with similar editorial challenges and to reach a mass audience it was essential to go through the mainstream media. Sarah Molloy at Concern singled out *The Guardian* website which had picked up stories on the urban nutrition crisis in the Kenyan slums and *The Huffington Post* in the US which had featured items on mitigation programmes in North East Kenya, but she was unsure how much attention such sites attracted.

Ian Bray commented that the majority of people visiting the Oxfam website are shopping online or looking for a job. Although they can control the message when they communicate directly with the public in this way, their hits on *YouTube* are tiny compared to *News at Ten* which also provides an independent validity to the story. Steve Barnett argued that whilst social media act as a *good echo chamber*, they don’t break the news and traditional media are still much more powerful in conveying images to a large audience.

COMPARISONS WITH NON UK MEDIA

NGO interviewees from Canada, the USA, Switzerland, Somalia and South Africa contributed to this report.

Most had struggled to attract media attention in their countries, in the early days of the crisis, and felt that in general, coverage in the UK led the field.

Louis Belanger, based in Oxfam’s New York office, felt that in the United States the crisis was primarily seen against the history of the US’s relationship with Somalia and consequently the media placed a huge emphasis on the political and security aspect of the emergency. He felt this made it difficult from an NGO point of view and contrasted US coverage with the UK media’s humanitarian angle. Moreover, the DEC enabled a shared NGO message in the UK which was not so evident in the US, where the government and

media were far more preoccupied with their own economic crisis. He contrasted coverage of this disaster with coverage of the Haiti earthquake – a dramatic one-off event and much closer to the US. However, there was good coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and unusually, CNN brainstormed with him about how to keep it alive. He felt there was more appetite for the story in Europe than in the US. He did several interviews with France 24 and Al-Jazeera whilst Fox was completely absent. Journalists at France 24 were thorough, asking good questions about African leadership, African aid, and the African role in dealing with the crisis.

Claudia Blume of MSF's Toronto office also talked about a slow start with simplified messages reminiscent of Ethiopia in the 1980s. Toronto has a large Somali community and MSF was able to utilise their media outlets. But the MSF Canadian director seemed to capture the prevailing zeitgeist when she sent an open letter to one of the big national newspapers criticising the simplicity of the messages and images used in coverage of the famine. This led to a debate amongst other aid agencies and donors and the director was invited onto a prominent radio culture show, *Q* – not an obvious outlet for development stories. Although there was some concern that the debate might alienate the public, these fears proved unfounded.

Working in Somalia, Mustakim Waid saw a desire in the African media to understand the root cause of the crisis. Regional papers tried to portray it as yet another problem of Africa, but as the focus was mostly on Dadaab and other locations outside of Somalia, the big question being asked initially by local reporters within Mogadishu was “where is the international community?”

Wangui Muchiri of the campaign group, ONE, is based in South Africa and felt that NGOs and the international press often neglect the African media.

The African media are not usually amongst the first people international NGOs speak to. Ninety per cent of invitees to press conferences are international media, unless there is a national agenda....By the time a story gets picked up by the international media, it's done the rounds in the African media. It gets the attention of the world then, but it doesn't mean the African media haven't been on the case....the international media must recognise that the African media are reliable and have an expertise and cultural understanding. You cannot just do parachute journalism – you have to balance both views.

One of the major news stories in Kenya centred on the Kenyans for Kenya campaign which raised \$7.6m for Turkana, and was widely covered on all the top shows and in every form of media.

According to Laurent Sauveur of MSF, media coverage in Switzerland mirrored many of the shortcomings of coverage elsewhere with an over-emphasis on stark images and a lack of appetite by both the mainstream media and the audience to look into the underlying causes of the crisis, although MSF Switzerland tried hard to push this angle from mid-August onwards.

LESSONS LEARNT

Interviewees were asked if it was possible to learn from their experience of covering and responding to the crisis in East Africa. A few aid agencies are already carrying out research related to the issues raised in this report. The British Red Cross is using this emergency as a hook to explore attitudes amongst the development sector, the media and the public. Save the Children is looking at its use of images and World Vision is talking to supporters about its own messaging.

Earlier investment

Whilst recognising that persuading the media to cover an unfolding situation is difficult, a few NGO interviewees considered ways in which they could have generated media interest earlier on in the crisis. Andrew Wander thought that Save should have invested resources earlier. He went out to Kenya in June, but speculated about the stories he may have found if he had been there in April. Martin Cottingham suggested that if cuts in foreign news budgets mean the main correspondents are less likely to be deployed on the ground, NGOs should identify local bureau correspondents and offer to share costs. The problem then centres on whether they have the required influence in London.

Shared messaging

The huge success of the DEC appeal for a chronic emergency where conflict is a key contributory factor was a surprise to many NGOs. Some interviewees attributed much of the success to the professionalism of the DEC and the respect with which it is viewed by the media. They felt aid agencies should offer more sustained support rather than simply reverting to their own different and competing agendas once the immediate crisis is over. Dominic Nutt believed a few agencies still held back on their best stories until after an appeal, but he and Martin Cottingham felt that there were benefits from a co-ordinated response that pooled resources and facilitated shared messages.

Greater transparency

The complexity of the multiple political and humanitarian narratives in East Africa makes it a very challenging story to tell. Some interviewees

“East Africa is not an easy story to report. . . The 10 O’clock News is not a current affairs programme and there’s limited scope to do illuminative stories. But the audience’s frame of reference is not limited to the 10 O’clock News.”

Jon Williams, BBC World Editor

felt that the conflict in Somalia and government restrictions in Ethiopia led to a form of self-censorship and were critical of the NGO sector’s reluctance to confront these issues. Andrew Wander did not believe that the public blamed them for the difficulties in distributing aid in Somalia and wondered if they worried too much about their reaction to a more honest and open discussion. Dominic Nutt suggested that aid agencies need to challenge themselves first, before having a conversation with the media and the public. In her article for *The Globe and Mail*, Marilyn McHarg, executive director of MSF in Canada, described the crisis in Somalia as one of the most complex situations she had worked in. However, she argued strongly that the fundraising discourse too often relied on guilt and superficial messages, and that by sharing the difficulties more openly some donors may be lost, but those who continue to support aid agencies would do so from a stronger foundation.

Communication tools

Like several other interviewees, Martin Cottingham felt that aid agencies needed to increase their communication tools. He suggested celebrity trips, partnering with other organisations to put together video news releases, getting the pictures earlier in the process. New and social media should also be part of the tool box. Although other interviewees questioned their impact and reach, Martin felt that Twitter has gone from trend following to trend setting and recommended that NGO press officers follow individual journalists and respond where appropriate. Islamic Relief has recognised the importance of the free press and has been developing contacts with *Metro* which now has a higher circulation than *The Sun*. Tim Singleton at ITV News also encouraged NGOs to develop a more sophisticated range of communication tools, accepting that different media tell the story in different ways and tailoring the narrative accordingly instead of sending a one size fits all press release to everyone. Many NGOs would argue that this is what they do already, but Andrew Wander at Save accepted that it was fair criticism. The slow-burn of the East Africa famine meant they should have been able to do this.

Structure and process

Dominic Nutt and Sarah Molloy touched on structural issues within NGOs that impacted upon the delivery of messages during an emergency. Dominic was keen to publicise issues around child protection but could not obtain the information he needed from their Nairobi office because of problems with internal processes inside World Vision. He has recently appointed a new head of news, an ex ITV News journalist, who will be talking directly to all staff to raise awareness of media needs. Sarah felt that most

messaging about the developing world comes from the fundraising departments of NGOs and the change needed to start there.

Media contacts

Emergencies like the famine in East Africa can provide opportunities for NGOs to build up useful media contacts and develop a greater understanding of how the media works. Tom Parry referred to a call he had recently received from ActionAid. Eight paragraphs were given to a story about tax havens depriving the developing world of millions of pounds because the press officer contacted him directly rather than emailing *The Mirror* news desk as many others do. He also felt that, given the number of major foreign news stories this summer, NGOs needed to look for a lull and bring in other elements to move the story on. The recent spate of Somali kidnappings, for example, could have been linked to the situation in East Africa but it was not taken up.

Diaspora links

Charlie Beckett, from Polis, suggested that more could have been done to exploit the diaspora links between the UK and East Africa. Islamic Relief has had some success with this in previous disaster coverage. Three regional TV programmes used its video news releases on the Pakistani community in Bradford raising money for the floods. Tim Singleton recognised the increasing scope for this kind of story.

Moving beyond the news

Martin Cottingham felt that stereotypes about Africa will dominate as long as the main focus of the aid agencies’ media work continues to be the coverage of emergencies. He suggested that NGOs needed to think in terms of longer lead times, consumer and life style media and become less fixated on news. Lilly Peel of Panos also referred to a growing demand from foreign editors who are sick of misery. They want to be able to print stories on different aspects of life in Africa yet they continue to focus on disaster. She speculated whether this was because disaster was all the NGOs provided. Jon Williams argued that broadening the frame through which the public view crises like that in East Africa is very much what the BBC is doing and that the NGO community should open its eyes to the breadth of coverage now available.

East Africa is not an easy story to report. . . The 10 O’clock News is not a current affairs programme and there’s limited scope to do illuminative stories. But the audience’s frame of reference is not limited to the 10 O’clock News. You need to view coverage in the round in the way the audience does. There’s a much broader portfolio of services and programmes now than there was 25 years ago.

CONCLUSION

The East Africa emergency highlights the dilemma that many NGOs face. The simple direct messages of drought and famine touched the public on an emotional level and were highly successful in generating income. There have been gradual changes in the ways these messages are conveyed since the 1980s – a greater sensitivity to certain images and a wider variety of media platforms. But the complexities of this particular crisis with its long history of political chaos and violence suggest that NGOs can no longer respond on the basis that humanitarian aid can solve all the problems. Interviewees acknowledged the tensions between the need to raise funds in the short term with a responsibility to address the difficulties more openly in order to avoid the risk of greater public cynicism in the future. Although the media has a role to play, many interviewees recognised that this responsibility rested first and foremost with the NGO community.