

Conflicted Witnesses: Journalists and the Humanitarian Imaginary

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'Responsibility' sounds like I decided that I would side with the victims, whereas, I think if you are, like, a decent person, then you have, you, there's no other choice. You can't choose anything else.

Respondent 11

News of suffering in 'distant' wars and disasters offer some of the most paradigmatic cases of audiences being hailed as vicarious, cosmopolitan humanitarians. Insofar as disaster and conflict reporting serve to "[habituate] the West into dispositions of solidarity with distant others" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p.138), the imaginaries of these journalists is of interest for scholarship on humanitarian communication more broadly. Despite this, a focus on interrogating the humanitarian imaginary as it appears in texts (Stolic & Chouliaraki, 2019) and audience encounters with them (Kyriakidou, 2015; J. Ong, 2015; von Engelhardt, 2015) has left the examination of the producers of humanitarian reporting relatively underexplored. Do those who produce humanitarian accounts of suffering in fact understand themselves as being part of a structure of communication that resembles Chouliaraki's humanitarian imaginary? If so, what does this look like, and what kinds of normative commitments and tensions inflect the work of creating accounts of distant suffering?

Cottle (2013) has explored the reflections of foreign journalists reporting on an earthquake in Haiti in 2010 to make the point that cosmopolitan imaginaries of the kind described by Chouliaraki do occasionally inflect the practices of foreign journalists. Moreover, though journalists covering disaster may see themselves as bearing witness to suffering in a sense compatible with a humanitarian imaginary, such a position "sits uncomfortably alongside traditional notions of journalist objectivity, detachment and the established role of the journalist as invisible narrator and neutral conduit" [p. 234]. This chapter adds to this discussion, exploring the reflections of forty journalists from a wide range of backgrounds who were engaged in reporting South Sudan's civil war. These reflections are taken from interviews that formed part of a larger project investigating the norms and practices of journalists working in South Sudan (Stupart,

2020), with participants selected using a combination of theoretical (Warren, 2002) and snowball sampling (Cohen & Arieli, 2011).

Building on previous work on foreign TV news correspondents and reporters (Cottle, 2013), respondents were evenly divided between South Sudanese journalists and foreign journalists (19 to 21) and between those based both in the country and abroad (primarily in Uganda and Kenya). Interviewees represented a range of media, from writers to video, radio and photojournalists, and ranged from freelancers working for South Sudanese publications to those working permanently for major international news networks. Respondents' identities have been anonymised, due to the risks many journalists face working (and reflecting on) a highly repressive media environment (Stupart, 2020). One exception to this are quotes attributed to Jason Patinkin, who requested explicitly not to be anonymised.

In the case of journalists working in South Sudan, I argue that a humanitarian imaginary of the type Chouliaraki (2013) describes is ubiquitous – from the very infrastructure of 'Aidland' (Autesserre, 2014; Mosse, 2011) in which journalists live and work, to their own accounts of how they imagine their role in reporting a war and its effects. Moreover, tensions between a duty to bear witness and journalistic norms of objectivity and detachment are inescapably a consequence of work in which journalists risk being 'double interpellated' as both witnesses and spectators within a humanitarian paradigm.

The ubiquity of a humanitarian imaginary

Sections of professional life in conflict and disaster contexts are quite clearly organised with a humanitarian imaginary in mind. Where Chouliaraki considers the construction of the humanitarian imaginary as it appears in/to the West, the professional life of sections of 'Aidland' (Apthorpe, 2005; Autesserre, 2014; Mosse, 2011) is everywhere populated with the organisational machinery intended to produce (or facilitate the production of) texts that function according to a logic of bringing sufferers' accounts to potential spectators (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). For NGO-generated appeals, the videos, photographs and other material that make up appeals are often the designated professional function of NGO communications officers, who may either do this work directly or hire outside professionals to create it according to particular ideas of what kind of 'exposure' would be 'good' for the NGO concerned (Wright, 2018, 2019). Journalists' access to the safety of humanitarian transport infrastructure and accommodation is often provided in terms of a humanitarian logic in which media access to make suffering visible might develop support (financial and ideological) for

NGOs, as well as more indirectly securing the moral order that underwrites their status as legitimate proxy agents for Western humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013; DeChaine, 2002).

Chouliaraki's humanitarian imaginary is not the imaginary as it exists in the minds of humanitarian staff alone, though. It is, per Taylor (2002), a far more broadly shared sense of how people in a context fit together and the normative order that makes these relations sensible. The broadness of the humanitarian imaginary is such that its structure is readily apparent not only in the professional organisation of humanitarian field communications, but frequently emerges in journalists' own reflections on the purpose of their work. Interviews would include asking what they perceived the value of their work to be. In response, many articulated this value in terms of informing audiences and bringing about action of some kind through their reporting, with at least a dozen respondents articulating justifications of this sort.

In most cases, journalists would make reference to NGOs or other international (non-) government entities as capable of acting to change the course of the conflict, if only some broader public were aware of what was happening and took action to enable these proxy agents to act. Common to such justifications was an assumed (international) order in which NGOs, governments and the UN exist as the manifestation of a will to assist which might be mobilised to make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering. In such talk, the practice of journalism is justified in terms of the change it can bring about through enabling the actions of such actors. Examples of this form of justification included:

Well perhaps it helps in different ways. Of course it's awareness, or the international audience. It's awareness of, yeah, awareness makes things change sometimes. The international opinion, the public opinion can, would have had some episodes or some, some, some examples in the history, no, where the public opinion agrees on something, it can change the government[']s decisions. So when something, I mean in terms of international news, Western governments can do, or, I'm talking about my, my government, or the general European Union, or even the UN, no? When there is a big pressure from the general opinion, the public opinion, driven by, by the press, by the media, [that] is when things may change.

Respondent 2

Even UNICEF themselves, they use some of these quotes, some of these stories, the touching stories, to help them secure funds. You get the point? Because they are trying to get all of the donors. So by, for a donor to listen to some of these stories, what do you expect? They are going to inject their money into UNICEF.

Respondent 3

...I am not personally convinced that the, the war part is as important part as the why and the consequences and the ways to stem it and like long term effects and, to me, that's like the way to get people to engage. Because ultimately, like, if the international community is trying to change anything, it's through like public pressure that they'll be pushed to make certain decisions, right?

Respondent 7

These justifications all possess common assumptions about the value of news being its ability to bring accounts of sufferers before a spectator as an injunction to do something about it. The 'public' and (potential) donors are assigned the role of the spectator in these descriptions, capable of having their (moral) will enacted via NGOs, the UN and governments. The ideal outcome is imagined in various forms as one in which spectators might be moved to act through their agents.

While maintaining the overall communicative structure of the theatre characteristic of a humanitarian imaginary, a slightly different set of articulations by respondents assigned the role of spectator more directly to organisations, rather than making distinctions between NGOs/IOs/Governments and spectators in the form of a 'people' who encounter the news. One such description by Respondent 16 went as follows:

People are suffering. And some of the NGOs, they [are] used to mobilise resources... So what do we do? Sometimes you go and talk to those people who are suffering. Are they getting any food from NGOs, or getting any [support]. They can tell you the truth. You see the way we are, sometimes, because you can go, you can see children are suffering malnourishment and [so on]. People are, you know, dying. You talk to them. And then you come, you send that story out. So those NGOs, it's going to open their eyes. Immediately they will respond very fast.

Respondent 16

The implied visuality of the theatre is quite clearly invoked in the visual metaphor of “it’s going to open their eyes”, once sufferers have “[told] you the truth” and you have re-presented such accounts to the NGOs. Having seen (and, it is implied, believed) the suffering presented, “immediately, they will respond very fast.” This outcome both repeats the humanitarian logic of encountering suffering and responding to its imagined moral claims and – through the unquestioning assertion that NGOs will assist “immediately” – constructs “NGOs” as unproblematically benevolent in a practical (rather than denunciatory) sort of way.

Evidence of the presence of a humanitarian imaginary in the accounts of journalists lay not simply in the imagined arrangement of a sufferer–spectator pair, but extended to journalists’ understandings of the nature of that relationship – to what *ought* to happen when spectator encounters sufferer. When asked why they did the reporting they did, Respondent 11 replied:

It is about finding the sort of, you know the uniting aspects of human experience within the vast diversity in which we live. So, if you can draw a line somehow between, you know, a woman whose grass hut was burned down by government forces, who fled into the swamps and is now back in this miserable little village waiting for the next government offensive. If you can draw a line between her, and the guy who’s sitting on the tube in London in the morning reading a newspaper, if people still do that, and make them understand there is a commonality of experience you can, you can build this kind of you know, empathy bridge between them. That, for me, is like the main reason for doing this. To make someone in a far-off place feel like what it must be like to be that person in the other place.

In many respects, this is a clear articulation of a humanitarian imaginary and the structure of communication between sufferer and spectator that it proposes. Respondent 11’s search for “the uniting aspects of human experience within the vast diversity in which we live” is the language of a cosmopolitan project, but one whose members sit in two different worlds, calling to mind Chouliaraki’s observation that the humanitarian imaginary has become mapped onto existing global North-South divides (Chouliaraki, 2013, p.28). The spectator is presented as “the guy who’s sitting on the tube in London in the morning” in a relationship to the sufferer, “a woman whose grass hut was burned down [...] who fled into the swamps and is now back in this miserable little village”. In each case, both positions are drawn from discursive ideal-types of global northern- and southernness – the urban Londoner taking the tube to work vs the

destitute woman struggling back to a destroyed village (of burned-out grass huts). These stereotypes are themselves the result of long histories of colonial and other discourses that imagine life outside the West as savage (Banivanua-Mar, 2008) and life within it as a kind of urban modernity.

Articulations of this form were widely shared by respondents, who invoked metaphors of links, lines and bridges across which spectators might empathise with sufferers through 'understanding' something of what the sufferer's situation was like. In Respondent 19's words:

I think we do have a responsibility to bridge the empathy gap. And the way you do it is by providing as much detail about the survivors, to make people understand that these are people who had normal lives, just like you and me, and these are people who had families, they went to school, they farmed their fields, and, and this horrible thing happened to them.

So far, so straightforward, perhaps. Yet there is something else present in respondents' implied structure of communication which I have so far hinted at with pointing out the language of bridging: the self-ascribed position of the journalist in this schema.

The journalist as witness

Bridging metaphors in journalists' descriptions of their role were absolutely pervasive and refer to an imagined position in the communicative structure of the humanitarian imaginary that is claimed by journalists and which is neither that of spectator nor sufferer. Instead, journalists position themselves as the witness, distinct from both and with its own normative requirements that journalists routinely identified with. This section first makes the case that journalists do, in fact, imagine such a role for themselves. Moreover, that the role of witness is understood as distinct from that of the spectator in its obligations in ways that would be recognisable among the orthodox norms of professional journalism.

As mentioned earlier, metaphors of mediation in journalists' self-descriptions were frequent:

[...] so my job is kind of to mediate between the reader and the, and the subject, as best I can, and write as powerfully as I can.

Respondent 11

I mean, you tell what the people, the common South Sudanese who cannot say. I mean, there are people, there are stories, there are people having stories to tell. And they have, there is no platform, [for them to] use, I am there as a platform, to report and to tell, [that these] things happened. They don't have a voice to say that. They, they, so I act here as one way of sending this message to the government, be it to the government, be it to the whoever, you know, is concerned about it.

Respondent 8

But you just go like, some of the most remote areas, you find somebody who is not educated, but you can find him, even though where they are there's no network, you can see them carrying the phone like this one (shows basic phone). They listen to radio. Yeah? So it means that they need to get information, and to get that information is only through us.

Respondent 16

[...]people don't know what the issues on the ground [are], it's so, I mean, to bridge that gap between what's happening in Europe and here, I think I want to be able to bridge that gap somehow. So I want to bring the story, what's happening here on the ground, I want to share that with Europe and North America and, well, where my news agencies are, basically. With the world.

Respondent 15

In each case, journalists position themselves rhetorically as an intermediary between sufferers whose stories ought to be told, and audiences of potential spectators who ought to hear these accounts. That journalists might describe themselves as intermediaries of this sort would likely strike the reader as nothing more than common sense, and in a way, that is precisely the point. That it is uncontroversial that journalism of (at least) this type serves to mediate encounters between spectators and sufferers is itself a comment on how firmly it is part of the arrangement of how journalists 'fit' into the assumed roles and duties of a humanitarian imaginary. As witnesses, journalists are neither sufferers (as the pain they report is not their own) nor moralising spectators¹ in

¹ They are not spectators in their role as *journalists*, though they may simultaneously spectate during the course of doing their work - a double-interpellation discuss shortly.

their capacity as journalists. In their conception of their role, they self-position as the figure of the witness – the one who bears witness to the truth of others suffering, (re)presenting these accounts to audiences of potential spectators. Peters' (2001) description of the position of witness characterises this 'middle role' eloquently in his description of it having "two faces: the passive one of *seeing* and the active one of *saying*" [p. 709].

The normative obligations of the witness

The role of the witness, respondents consistently explained, was to connect those whose stories ought to be heard and those who ought to hear them. This role, it was understood, came with particular normative expectations. In particular, that the feelings and convictions of the journalist-witness were meant to appear as though absent from the sufferer-spectator encounter, so as to avoid the charge that audiences might be forming their moral convictions on the basis of an attached or 'unbalanced' account.² In addition, respondents described a perception that bearing witness was not simply a supererogatory duty (i.e. 'good' if they did, but not required), but in fact obligatory. Failing to bear witness when one was in a position to do so was considered ethically poor (in terms of the rationality of the humanitarian imaginary and journalists' roles as witnesses). It is to each of these discussions that I now turn.

The transparency of the journalist-witness

In the imagined structure of the humanitarian imaginary, the encounter between the spectator and the (mediated story of the) sufferer functions as a morally educational encounter through staging an (apparently) authentic appeal by the sufferer with which the spectator is invited to sympathetically identify.³ This encounter is imagined as presenting the spectator with the facts of another's suffering – often tied to the perceived authenticity of bodily pain – in response to which the conscience of the spectator can be moved to action. When we encounter (a visceral mediation of) another in pain, we find within ourselves the conviction to denounce what has happened and to try to assist, as it were. Authenticity is a precondition for the sympathetic identification on which the moralising outcome depends, given that the spectator ought to be able to assume that they are identifying with 'real' suffering as it is experienced by another.

² The strength of this norm is well illustrated historically in the debates around 'attached journalism' that took place after the war in Yugoslavia (McLaughlin, 2016, p. 33)

³ See Chouliaraki (2013) for a more complete description

Where the journalist-as-witness is involved in mediating this encounter between spectator and sufferer, they risk destabilising moralising potential of the encounter through leaving their own subjective 'fingerprints' on what the facts of the matter appear to be (which would undermine its authenticity)⁴ or being seen to suggest how the spectator ought to feel and reason (as this ought to arise from the spectator's own identification with the sufferer and the moral imperatives this generates). As a result, the journalist as witness is compelled to remain factually and affectively 'transparent' in the encounter they arrange between the spectator and sufferer if it is to retain its moralising potential.

Consequently, where journalists claim the role of witness, it is unsurprising that their accounts of how the journalist 'ought' to mediate these connections include precisely these kinds of norms. In reflecting on the role of emotion in their writing, for example, Respondent 19 explained the rules of their role as follows:

I think there is no place whatsoever for reporters' emotions in [reporting]. Because I think that's kind of presumptuous. I think that you come in there with a job to report on a situation. There is no place for your emotions there. And, to, I think, also pretend that in any way, you can emotionally relate to what they are going through, and bring in how this affects you, then I think you are completely missing the point here, as a journalist. I don't think that you, I think that your job is to stay objective, your job is to report the facts, to try to understand what happened, and report that. Like, I think if you are starting to get affected personally, and you start to, that's kind of like, [...] it's like Nick, what is his name, Nick Kristof kind of reporting, which I hate. Where this whole white saviour complex starts feeding in, which I can't stand. So, no, I think you, you need to kind of, you need to do your job, and I think if you. You know I don't, I don't, I mean sure, I get emotional sometimes when I listen to survivors. Especially survivors of sexual violence. That's something that affects me very personally. But, you know, if I start getting emotional about it, I'm not doing anybody a favour here. That's not my place.

⁴ This is an ideal aspiration, of course, as achieving 'authenticity/veracity' is communicatively impossible. See Peters (2001) and Frosh (2006) for two examples of this discussion

Respondent 19 makes a distinction between their own emotional responses and those of the people whose accounts they re-present. They explain that if you bring your own emotional relationship to what you have encountered, then “you are completely missing the point here, as a journalist.” which both rules out putting one’s own emotions in reporting, but crucially, caveats this with “as a journalist”, to locate the inadmissibility of emotion as being tied to the specific *role* that they professionally occupy (by implication, emotionality may have a place if one occupied some other role). The pointed description of Nick Kristof’s reporting as an example of a “white saviour complex” is given as a particularly public infringement of this separation, as they conclude that “no, I think you, you need to kind of, you need to do your job”.

This discussion of the emotionality (of the journalist) versus ‘objective’, ‘factual’ reporting is repeatedly invoked as being a norm linked to the role the journalist occupies, rather than as a universal proscription, via linking this norm to the ‘job’. Throughout their account, they repeatedly turn to phrasing about what is and is not a part of the job to make this point: “[...] you come in there with a job to report on a situation. There is no place for your emotions there”, “I think that your job is to stay objective, your job is to report the facts [...]” [unlike Kristof], I think you, you need to kind of, you need to do your job[...], “[...]if I start getting emotional about it, I’m not doing anybody a favour here. That’s not my place.”.

Elsewhere, Respondent 11 similarly condemns their own emotions as out-of-role, in contrast to the emotionality of subjects’ own accounts, which *ought* to be conveyed to their readers to provoke exactly the kind of empathetic identification that the spectator–sufferer encounter is assumed to make possible:

The whole, like, show don’t tell. It’s the, so let these people tell their stories in the way they told you, which, which means in the interview, you’ve kind of, I have a lot of, almost as dumb as question as like ‘so when your child was thrown into the flaming hut, how did you feel?’, you know, I can’t believe I have to ask this, but you do. Because when someone, because then the response won’t be like ‘I was sad’. There’ll always be something like, you know, they’ll say something, you know, ‘it was, it was like my heart had been ripped from my chest’. You know, like, someone will say this, and then like, yes, that’s what I need, that’s why I’m here. I’m here to get that from you, and give that to a reader, so that when they’re sitting on the train to work in the morning, they have to stop themselves crying. And it stays with them. And so that, you know, so, there, I want that emotion and the reader’s emotion. But my emotion is irrelevant. You know, like, if

I, if I am a weepy little fucker, that's got nothing to do with the story. If I'm like some stoic, you know, who can handle anything, that's got nothing to do with the story either. What's important is my ability to draw emotion out of the people I'm talking to, and transpose it for the readers.

“Show don't tell” is a cliché phrase that many who have attended journalism school have had beaten into them, and it's interesting in the context of this discussion for the point it makes that the journalist's role is to (appear to) direct attention to what is morally important (showing), rather than explaining what is important about it (telling). The visual metaphor also points to the privileged position of allowing audiences (as spectators) to 'see' for themselves, rather than relying on journalists' (re)interpretation of the facts of the matter. In Respondent 11's telling (and echoed by other respondents) emotion has a central place in the 'work' that a story does to produce a sympathetic emotional response in readers (who will have to “stop themselves crying”), but that this emotion is that of the subjects who suffer, not journalists.

This emphasis on separating out the emotions of the journalist from the emotions of subjects fits with Wahl-Jorgensen's (2013) observation that in the texts of Pulitzer prize-winning stories (of the type many respondents were professionally tasked with creating), none included discussions of the journalist's own emotions. What respondents' explanations reflect, I would suggest, is the normative reasoning underlying the patterns in news texts that Wahl-Jorgensen observes. The reasoning in these accounts, when read in terms of the communicative structure of the humanitarian imaginary, also gives us a reason *why* this should be a norm in such journalism. For the encounter of spectator and sufferer to do its moral work, it is important that the journalist-as-mediator not appear to interfere with or substitute for the factual or affective 'truth' of the sufferer's situation, so as not to undermine its authenticity or interfere with the spectator's process of sympathetic identification.⁵

The affective/emotional details of the sufferer's experience are absolutely required for the sympathetic identification that ought to (ideally) occur. Indeed, Wahl-Jorgensen describes the kind of storytelling in her corpus of Pulitzer-prize winning articles as “more accurately described as story-telling with a moral purpose, which mobilized

⁵ It lies beyond the scope of this argument, but \ cites{Seu2010} examination of how audiences of humanitarian appeals 'do denial' and reject their moral injunctions includes exactly this tactic of 'seeing' the NGO as the mediator and their interference, and using this in rebuttal of the appeal.

emotions – directly and indirectly – to engage audiences” – precisely the kind of communicative structure on which Chouliaraki’s humanitarian imaginary is founded. Respondent 11 made this point eloquently in proceeding from their earlier description to explain why reports of atrocities by groups like Human Rights Watch fail to have an effect:

[...] you know, if you just write a bloodless, factual thing, like, it has no, it doesn’t resonate with anyone. And if it doesn’t resonate, what was the point? You know? You might as well be writing those turgid, but incredibly detailed Human Rights Watch type [of] reports. Eight hundred pages of horror which documents stuff, but doesn’t make you feel anything.

Witnessing as obligation

Beyond a shared set of norms around maintaining invisibility in the authenticity of the encounter and its affective character, respondents also repeatedly described feeling the role of witness as an ‘obligation’ arising when they found themselves in a position where they had privileged knowledge of the conflict and could link sufferers and spectators communicatively. This language of obligation emerged repeatedly:

[...] I think, like, because I’ve become very invested in the people and in the place, and like, no matter what, when you’ve been a part of it and also when you see things and you know, hear hundreds and hundreds of horrible stories, like, you don’t want to just leave it behind. There is sort of an obligation I think, like that’s my journalism as well.

Respondent 7

after being there for some time, this is the catch. When you come to know a place, you can operate well in a place and perhaps you can get access to things that perhaps other people can’t get access to, I think you have a certain responsibility to use that... I think you, yeah, if you have that knowledge of a place, yeah, you have a responsibility to use it. Yeah. So I think that’s what’s continued. That’s why I continue to go back.

Respondent 1

This is our country. Because we cannot leave it. When you become away from the country, who will inform the people? So we, it’s a daily task, and

we are suffering, but we will not, particularly me, I will not give up to do that...

Respondent 3

I just think, when you're one of, you know, when you're one of a select few who can do something, then you sort of, when there's when there's a limited pool who can do it, then if no-one does, there is a certain element of responsibility that comes with that.

Respondent 4

[...] why I keep on doing journalism is, sometimes when I look at the environment that I am in, I say, OK, if all of us, we leave this job, we leave this journalism, who will talk about what is happening? Nobody. Because sometimes people like us, we can stay, you can see somebody calling you. Say hey, can you tell us what is happening. People hunger for information. They need to get the information. But they don't know where to get information. And they trust you. When they are calling to me, they trust you, whereby they can get the information they are looking for from you.

Respondent 16

I feel like, there's a bit ago where I was just talking to someone and I was just kind of, I dunno, I was having a moment, and I was just like, there's nobody here, there's nobody in the country, and I feel, and, it's, it's not rational, it's not my responsibility to report on the entire country. It's absolutely not. It's not, realistic. But nobody's here... But I genuinely do care about the country, and the longer you are here the more invested you get. And so you want these people to get coverage, and you want people to know what's happening. And I, I definitely feel there, at that point, I felt like I have this responsibility. And of course that doesn't mean that I'm bound to South Sudan for my life. Of course not. Because I'd go insane. Yeah, but there is something about, I do feel responsible.

Respondent 10

Common to these replies is a logic in which the journalist finds themselves in a privileged epistemic position, out of which an obligation to link sufferers' accounts to potential spectators arises. Each of the replies cited here offers a formulation of knowing about something that ought to be communicated, which is variously described as a position where "you've been a part of it [...] you see things and you know things", having "access to things that perhaps other people can't get access to", "you're one of

the select few who can do something”, and “there’s nobody here, there’s nobody in the country [besides us]”. These phrases gesture to journalists having privileged access to facts of suffering that they recognise themselves being in a position to mediate. The position of the journalist, here, is one of having a potential to bear witness by virtue of the knowledge they have accumulated of the conflict and its impact on the lives of those it has affected.

Why the language of obligation then? That is, why might this be understood as a duty, rather than a supererogatory kind of norm? In terms of the humanitarian imaginary, the (ideal) mediated encounter between sufferer and spectator is one in which the spectator is moved to act and this is a good (as in, morally praiseworthy) outcome. Given the (potential) moral goodness of this encounter, the witness who is positioned to bring it about would be morally praiseworthy for having facilitated it. That is to say, where I have (and recognise that I have) the capacity to make possible an encounter that could do good, I am good for making such an encounter possible. The converse of this logic, though, is that where I have (and recognise that I have) the capacity to make possible such an encounter and fail to do so, I may be blameworthy for the good that could have been but wasn’t. The ethics of witnessing includes the unsatisfying possibility of *failing* to bear witness. Walking away from the story knowing that there are no others who might tell it in my stead.

This reasoning is not simply an abstract logical possibility in terms of the rationality of journalism’s place in the humanitarian imaginary. Respondents themselves made exactly this inference about an obligation to bear witness or at least to not abdicate this role, knowing that there are (virtually) no others to take it up on their behalf. As Respondent 7 puts it, “you don’t want to just leave it behind, There is sort of an obligation”, or Respondent 16’s reflection that “if all of us, we leave this job, we leave this journalism, who will talk about what is happening?”.

What should be clear is not simply that journalists imagine for themselves a role of witness, but that this role is imagined by respondents to carry specific normative commitments. These commitments include both *how* the role of mediator ought to be performed (as ideally ‘invisible’ to the authenticity and affective nature of the encounter) and *that* it ought to be performed; that is to say, finding themselves in a privileged epistemic position, journalists felt obligated to bear witness.

Imaginary tensions as practical tensions

Despite a professional attachment to the role of witness and its norms, the work of journalism requires that journalists encounter suffering and its consequences as an unavoidable part of practice. One can't mediate without being a spectator first, as it were. And this encounter with suffering casts the journalist themselves as a spectator, even as they are simultaneously also a witness. This encounter with suffering as a spectator is (or can be) affecting. As Peters (2001, p. 714) describes it, "To witness always involves risk, potentially to have your life changed."

This encounter between suffering and the person of the journalist carries a risk of 'double-interpellation', where the journalist may find themselves in a position that is unresolved between spectator and witness. As spectator, the potential exists for sympathetic identification resulting in action of some kind – denunciation or assistance. As witness, there exists an obligation to (appear to) 'bracket out' this sympathetic identification in order to do the work of creating an account for others. The demands of these roles may, unsurprisingly, conflict in ways that must be resolved if the journalist is to be able to imagine themselves as both a 'good' witness and a 'good' spectator. One particular form of this kind of double-interpellation conflict are those between the journalist's role as witness and their role as a potentially denunciatory spectator.

Mediator and spectator-as-denouncer

While a sense of obligation to report was described in general terms by many respondents, a few elaborated more specifically on what it was that they felt this responsibility required them to do. Trying to make specific claims about what their obligation to report involved would often result in respondents having to negotiate between a role of a spectator who felt compelled to denounce what had been witnessed to others and the more invisible role of the journalist as mediator, for whom advocacy would be improper. This is a normative tension that many journalists encountered, and was illustrated especially clearly in Jason Patinkin's reflection on his relationship with the audience(s) he writes for:

So I'm not here to make you care, I'm here to get the facts out, the facts out as fast as possible. You know. Now, I've written some, like, longer stuff. Which is like whatever, especially lately. Which is fun to write and I would like to do more of it, but, but, no, I'm not here to make people care. Maybe I shouldn't say that? Am I? I dunno. I dunno. Like, I mean, I think people should care. I dunno if it's my job to somehow make people care? I, I, like, I want facts to be known. I want people to like have the right information. That's like my priority.

Though Jason makes an explicit judgement that “people should care” when confronted with the facts of the case, he pauses beforehand to equivocate over whether it is in fact “his job to somehow make people care” before settling on arguing that his role is limited to making sure the facts are known. This question of sharing facts that people “should care” about versus soliciting ‘caring’ as part of his role is something that Jason works through, thinking out loud, before settling on a decision that it is his role to “get the facts out” and not to *make* people care. This dilemma is developed in a different way by Respondent 9 as they reflected on the obligation they felt to report:

...it's our duty to try and convey it as much as possible, of what it is on the ground. I'm not saying get [the audience] to actually act, but get them, get them to care. Bottom line is to get them to care. Sometimes it happens, sometimes you get... I, I mean, and it really keeps us going sometimes when you get a message saying, you know, I really want to help, or I was really touched by that story.

Unlike Jason, for whom the question of making audiences care was not a part of their role, Respondent 9 states this conviction plainly (“Bottom line is to get them to care.”). For this respondent, their obligations include both conveying information (“it’s our duty to try and convey it as much as possible, of what it is on the ground”) and making audiences care, but does not extend beyond this, to getting them to act.

What might we make of these justifications, read together? Both have in common the communicative structure of the humanitarian imaginary, in which journalists stand between those to whom things are happening and those who are capable of responding. Both also share a common conception of the journalist’s position as mediator - providing the facts of the matter to those who (in Respondent 9’s words) “are not living this reality”. Despite this, there is a clear difference in respondents’ ethics of what duties their position entailed along an implied spectrum that ranged from knowledge to caring to action.

This spectrum, I would suggest, is precisely the discursive terrain on which a tension between the role of mediator and the role of spectator-as-denouncer is being worked out. The role of a professional journalist requires not agitating for action or caring in an explicit fashion, lest this undermine the sympathetic identification of (other) spectators with the authentic ‘facts’ of the story. This is in line with the manner in which conventional discourses of professional journalism push their subjects towards a

narrower, epistemological, rather than moral, duty of relaying ‘facts’⁶ rather than lobbying for action, evidenced in norms against directly making demands of audiences, lest one cross a line into becoming an ‘activist’. Elsewhere, Respondent 3 outlined a typical version of the danger of the mediator becoming attached:

I wanted people to understand [the situation] better. I always wanted [it] to be that if someone wants to know, they can know, I hope, more, by reading my reports. I think that’s kind of the most you can do at a certain level. I don’t think it’s my job to try to call to attention. Although there’s like obviously you want this story to be read, but like there’s a point there you can’t cross, and then it’s just like if someone wants to know this, I really hope, I really hope if they looked, you know that they can find this and that it’s there. And it’s in the public record, you know, and it’s, and there’s other people’s jobs to kind of do the rest of it, but you can’t do it all at once, and I think that if you do, you kind of mess up the entire thing. And I think we’ve all seen really bad versions of activist, of activist journalism and the sort of consequences it can have.

Here, the metaphor of “a point there you can’t cross” points to a discursive boundary around what marks a professional journalist as distinct from something else - something that in this case is, or is prefixed by, ‘activist’ (Calvert, 1999; Mills, 1993). To advocate for action is to shift from being the invisible mediator of a spectator–sufferer account, and stray into the role of the denunciatory spectator – something that is “other people’s jobs”.

Despite speaking in terms of a common humanitarian imaginary, the role respondents actually occupy in relation to the stories they encounter is doubled in a way that is more than incidental. In doing the practical work of seeking out newsworthy material - stories which they imagine can move a reader on a train in London (to paraphrase Respondent 11’s earlier account) – journalists must necessarily perform a kind of sympathetic imaginary work, finding material that an imagined spectator might recognise as cause for action and denunciation so that it might be mediated. At another level of abstraction, journalists who spend significant amounts of time living in South Sudan (which is to say, all South Sudanese journalists and a handful of foreign press) inevitably come to connect with the politics of the place. They make friends (and enemies) and come to experience the effects of the conflict more or less personally as

⁶ Whether interpreted as doing the work of relaying facts, or making what one relays understood as ‘fact’.

time goes on. Many respondents knew people who had been harmed by rebel or government agents – either during the course of the conflict itself or as part of broader intimidation of the press by the government.

It is unsurprising, then, that journalists find themselves occupying both a personal role of spectator to the injustices of the conflict and the professional role of mediator in how they approached reporting it. In practice, respondents ended up resolving these tensions in different ways. A handful risked professional criticism and charges of having become too attached to the story by writing in an openly condemnatory fashion about the government. Others kept personal criticisms aside until they inevitably left the country (or were deported), giving those denunciations voice at last in books, op-eds or other forms of writing in which it was appropriate for such attachment to appear. Yet others gave expression to the normative demands of being a spectator by privileging action over denunciation where they could.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the question of whether journalists, as first-authors of many humanitarian news texts, do in fact see themselves and ‘the situation’ in terms of a humanitarian imaginary. It would seem clear that this is the case in at least this context. It may likely be the case elsewhere too, to the extent that the sociological universes of other conflicts and disasters share many of the same material and discursive structures (Autesserre, 2014; Mosse, 2011) and – in the case of international interveners and foreign journalists – often the same actual individuals.

I have also made the case that a humanitarian imaginary produces unavoidable normative tensions for journalists. These tensions arise in moments where the questions of ‘who am I in this moment?’ and ‘what would a good person of this sort do?’ lead to different, contradictory norms that journalists must reconcile in order to proceed with coherent and recognisable-to-others practices that do not become destabilised into ‘illegitimate’ forms of attachment or activism.

Journalists in South Sudan claim for themselves a role of witness, mediating between the reality of the conflict and imagined audiences of spectators in ways that are familiar to the accounts of journalists in other disaster contexts (Cottle, 2013). From their reflections, this role is acutely felt as a form of obligation to speak what they know from a position of privileged knowledge about the conflict and carries particular norms that may direct journalists to conceal their own explicit judgements and emotions when acting in the capacity of a witness mediating accounts to others.

Yet the role of witness produces tensions in moments where journalists find themselves 'double-interpellated' as spectators themselves. As a result, journalists must find ways to resolve these role-tensions in practice if they are to be able to continue to be recognised as 'good' journalists and their practices are to remain coherent across moments.

At the same time as a shared humanitarian imaginary maintains a coherent schema of who journalists (and others) are and how they relate, it produces tensions that must be resolved in moments where these expectations differ. A humanitarian journalism that proceeds in such a context, then, is a creative practice. Each moment must be made to work with what material and discursive elements are available, to produce something new, but of a piece with what has been done before, in which the imperatives of being a 'good' journalist and a 'good' person can be temporarily reconciled.

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