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The Unknown Famine: Television and the politics of British humanitarianism

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The mass media is a critical actor in the global humanitarian system. New communication technologies have publicised and drawn attention to disasters and faraway suffering, collapsing the distance between global North and South, mobilising public empathy and accelerating the growth of international NGOs.¹ The linkages between humanitarianism and the media have been analysed from a range of perspectives, with many scholars focusing on the nexus between media representations of human suffering, international NGOs, donor publics and policymakers. While this literature has advanced our understanding of the dynamics of humanitarian action, it has predominantly focused on the contemporary epoch. There is still much we do not fully understand about how interactions between specific humanitarian actors and media institutions originated and developed over a sustained length of time, despite an ongoing boom in historical studies of humanitarianism and NGOs.² There is a pressing need for sustained historical research into the humanitarianism–media relationship to shed new light on familiar debates and set out more rigorously how the contemporary aid industry evolved.

This chapter undertakes such an analysis, focusing on how television coverage of major disasters in the global South shaped the historical and political trajectory of humanitarian aid in Britain. The chapter does so through a case study of British television coverage of a deadly famine in Ethiopia in 1973, which despite causing a huge number of fatalities had gone unreported in the Western media. The famine was suddenly exposed in October 1973 by a single British television documentary, aired as part of ITV's current affairs series *This Week* under the title *The Unknown Famine: A Report on Famine in Ethiopia*. Presented by popular journalist Jonathan Dimbleby, the film captured graphic scenes of masses of starving Ethiopian peasants at a relief camp in the north of the country. The shocking images were overlaid with Dimbleby's sparse yet poignant narration, which emphasised the sheer magnitude of the disaster and the need for immediate assistance.

Aired at a time when British viewers were limited to a choice of only three television channels, *The Unknown Famine* was watched by an audience of over ten million

people and triggered an immediate outpouring of mass emotion.³ The film was repeated on ITV and the BBC, screened at the House of Commons, and shown by television stations across Europe and the Commonwealth. The documentary's massive impact spurred donations to the largest humanitarian NGOs, while galvanising government officials into taking action. Dimbleby's film also had significant political consequences inside Ethiopia, as opposition movements utilised its shocking images of starvation to mobilise against and overthrow Emperor Haile Selassie's imperial government.⁴ Yet despite its importance, *The Unknown Famine* and the mobilisations that followed it have been largely neglected in studies of humanitarianism and media culture, being overshadowed by the larger-scale Ethiopian famine of 1984–5, which sparked the iconic Band Aid/Live Aid phenomenon.⁵

This case study draws on a range of British media, NGO and governmental archival sources. The central argument is that *The Unknown Famine* shaped the trajectory of British humanitarianism in three important ways, which are discussed in three corresponding analytical sections. First, the film provided an empathic demonstration of the power of televised images of human suffering to mobilise the public, at a time when television coverage of overseas events was coming into its own and supplanting the popular press as a leading medium. As the first section discusses, this generated substantial funds in donations for the largest NGOs while consolidating their links with television broadcasters. Second, *The Unknown Famine* and its aftermath was an important signpost for wider critiques of media representation and disaster fundraising imagery emerging within the aid community. As the second section sets out, Dimbleby and ITV framed the crisis in a specific way, focusing on simplistic messages of disaster and obscuring the more complex causes and political dimensions of African famine. In doing so, the film helped consolidate the use of 'negative' images of suffering at the very moment that several prominent NGOs were growing uncomfortable with the effects of such images on public perceptions of the global South.

Third, the film's popular impact contributed towards significant changes in the British government's approach to disaster relief policy. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Britain had struggled to adequately respond to a succession of major emergencies in Africa and Asia. Media coverage of Ethiopia brought further pressure to bear on policymakers, as the government was widely criticised for failing to react to the famine until it was too late. This criticism accelerated longer-running trends and helped bring about an overhaul of the British state's capacity for humanitarian aid, permanently raising the significance of disaster relief within policymaking. It is ultimately concluded that, despite the many profound changes that have reshaped both the global mass media and the humanitarian aid field since the early 1970s, several of the dilemmas and issues raised by this case study remain pertinent to our understanding of the relationship between NGOs and television, the popular appeal of 'negative' images of African suffering, and the enduring tensions between fundraising and education within the international aid sector.

The power of television

There is a long history of famine in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian famine of 1973–5 was protracted and severe, affecting millions of people and causing an estimated 250,000 deaths.⁶ The famine was primarily the result of long-term drought, which caused desertification and crop failure across the Sahelian region of Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Livestock was decimated, and millions were exposed to hunger, thirst and disease. The impact of the drought inside Ethiopia was aggravated by chronic poverty and inadequate infrastructure. Crucially, the famine was also exacerbated by the ineffective political response of Haile Selassie's government, which failed to acknowledge the true extent of the crisis or competently respond to the growing number of victims. International donors failed in their obligations by refusing to intervene or speak out against the Ethiopian monarchy, which was an important Western Cold War ally.⁷

Western publics knew little of Ethiopia, a remote nation in the Horn of Africa which had largely avoided formal European colonialism. Humanitarian organisations also lacked a presence in the region, and international NGOs were unaware of the true situation inside Ethiopia for most of 1973. One notable actor on the ground was the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA), an umbrella body of Ethiopian churches and missionaries. The CRDA was set up in May 1973 by Father Kevin Doheny, a veteran Irish Catholic missionary and relief worker.⁸ The CRDA publicised the famine and appealed for funds from European churches, and it was through the CRDA that some European NGOs (including Oxfam) came to learn of the unfolding disaster. However, it was not until UNICEF conducted a survey inside the country in August that the true extent of the suffering became known.⁹ Oxfam (one of the first donors to CRDA) subsequently despatched Tony Hall, its 'publicity man in Africa', to the famine zones. Hall reported back on 'towns along Ethiopia's main road where people have been dying in tens and twenties every day for months'.¹⁰ Hall also sent a series of articles and photographs to the British press in the hopes of generating media interest at home, with little success. Hall later commented that 'the news gatekeepers on this occasion could not give the story prominence ... the crisis quota had been filled ... We had failed to catch the wave'.¹¹

During the same period, British journalist Jonathan Dimbleby (son of famous broadcaster Richard Dimbleby) received rumours of a great famine from Ethiopian students via an intermediary. Dimbleby had recently joined ITV's flagship current affairs series *This Week* as a reporter and presenter. *This Week* had been running since 1956, and by the 1970s the programme had developed a distinct journalistic ethos grounded in social democratic values, committed to objectivity, with a reputation for professionalism.¹² Dimbleby started with *This Week* in 1972, and became interested in African development issues after presenting a documentary on the Sahelian drought in June 1973.¹³ Dimbleby and a small crew travelled to Ethiopia in September to film a programme on the famine, receiving permission from the Ethiopian authorities

to film on the condition that they referred to 'the problem of drought' rather than an outright 'disaster'. Dibleby and his colleagues stayed for fourteen days, during which time they met with Father Kevin Doherty and other aid workers, and filmed footage at a relief camp in Dessie in northern Ethiopia.¹⁴

All of the *This Week* crew were profoundly affected by the horrific scenes of mass starvation they encountered. Dibleby later described the famine as an 'unspeakable horror' which 'fundamentally marked' his life. The team were accompanied by an official minder from the Ethiopian government, who was also so shocked by the tragedy that he permitted them to film without restrictions.¹⁵ Having captured the necessary footage Dibleby and his staff then returned to Britain, clandestinely smuggling the raw film out of the country due to fears of it being confiscated.¹⁶ The footage was subsequently edited and produced into a half-hour documentary, broadcast by ITV on 8 October to a primetime audience.

The film is an exceptionally powerful piece of broadcast journalism, skilfully shot and produced for maximum impact. The documentary opens with a wide angle tracking shot, which gradually moves along rows of stationary Ethiopian peasants. The scene is dominated by large numbers of visibly malnourished men and women of all ages, sat listlessly and quietly on the dusty ground of the Dessie relief camp. At over two minutes in length the sequence is deliberately slow, conveying to the viewer the sense of an unending mass of suffering people. The shot itself was achieved by simply having cameraman Ray Siemann walk slowly between the long lines of exhausted Ethiopians with his camera held low.¹⁷ Dibleby's narration accompanying the shot is sparse yet captivating, his voice subtly cracking with emotion as he states: 'this is a queue for food. These people are Ethiopian peasants. Once they had cattle, land and houses. They sold them all to buy food. Now they have only their rags; they're destitute'. Dibleby goes on to describe in drawn-out detail the hardships of daily life at the camp, observing 'two handfuls of boiled wheat in the morning, and a piece of bread in the afternoon keeps them from death, no more ... these men, women and children have been like this now surviving, not living, for six months'. This narration methodically constructs for the audience the impression of a land where destitution and death are not only widespread, but have become a normal part of everyday life. As Dibleby states, 'these people are now without hope. They've seen mothers and fathers and sons and daughters, weaken and die. Now family by family they await the same end'.

The powerful opening shot is followed by an extended discussion between Dibleby and one of the few medical professionals at Dessie, concerning the weakened condition of children at the camp. At one point during the interview, the medic highlights visually and describes for the camera the different conditions of specific infants in turn, stating: 'this infant is skinny and dry, mildly dehydrated ... [pointing to a young girl] she is suffering from protein calorie malnutrition ... [moving to a young boy] if he doesn't get the necessary feeding, of course he will die ... [highlighting a different young boy] he is almost a skeleton, he hasn't got the



Figure 6.1 *This Week: The Unknown Famine* TX 1973

necessary muscles and flesh ... he is almost skin and bones' (see figures 6.1 and 6.2). The focus on these children roots the depersonalised opening sequence in specific individuals, and heightens the fatalistic tone underpinning the film.

As the film progresses Dimbleby's narration continues to describe life at Dessie in excruciating detail, focusing more and more on the plight of the children. As he remarks to the audience, 'babies are born here, to mothers too malnourished to feed them. Without the protein they need, their chances of survival is remote.' This commentary is accompanied by graphic and unyielding shots of starving children crying out in visible pain. In one scene the camera lingers on a huddle of sick children receiving rudimentary medical care, as Dimbleby bluntly states 'these seventeen children will die.' Towards the end of the programme a stockpile of motionless bodies is shown, most of whom appear to be young infants. A Catholic monk working at the camp informs Dimbleby that they all perished from starvation 'between twelve o'clock last night and six o'clock this morning.' The film finally concludes with a direct plea by Dimbleby to the audience for immediate international assistance:

This is the first time that the government of Ethiopia has allowed the outside world to witness this catastrophe. For six months now it has remained a secret. The delay was fatal for thousands of people. The situation was out of control. But the government does now desperately seek the help of the outside world. Relief is now under way, but much more is needed. These people need medicine, doctors and nurses, supplies, blankets and clothes, and above all, they need protein and milk and corn, and they need these right now.¹⁸



Figure 6.2 *This Week: The Unknown Famine* TX 1973

The Unknown Famine was watched at the time of broadcast by an estimated twelve million viewers, and the shocking scenes it depicted had an immediate impact upon many of those who tuned in. The I V phone switchboards were jammed as soon as the programme ended with callers wishing to help.¹⁹ The popular press picked up and ran with the story, carrying articles and photographs and launching fundraising appeals. The documentary was screened at the House of Commons, which the Shadow Minister for Overseas Development (Judith Hart) used to criticise the government and call for greater official aid. The film was also disseminated across Europe and the Commonwealth, having similar effects upon audiences wherever it was aired. Oxfam summarised that the documentary aroused popular concern 'first in Britain, and later in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Italy'.²⁰ Concerned viewers in Britain naturally looked towards the largest humanitarian NGOs to take action on their behalf. Oxfam's phone switchboards were jammed after *The Unknown Famine* aired, with many callers reported as being 'near tears' and reacting with 'uncontrolled emotion'.²¹ Seemingly overnight, the Ethiopian famine had been transformed from an unreported African disaster into a major domestic issue, and the public expected an immediate response.

British NGOs had little involvement in the making of *The Unknown Famine*, and had not anticipated the media frenzy that followed. The leading agencies responded

by hastily opening a public appeal for donations through the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC). The DEC had been created a decade earlier as an umbrella body for what were then the five largest and most influential organisations in the humanitarian sector: the British Red Cross, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children and War on Want. The DEC was founded to co-ordinate its members' responses to major disasters, to share information and avoid competition or duplication. Crucially, the DEC was also granted exclusive arrangements with the two British television broadcasters (BBC and ITV) to make emergency appeals to the public on primetime television after major disasters. These appeals were produced by BBC specialists working from scripts and material provided by the Committee. Any donations generated from these appeals were then allocated amongst its members, to spend on relief programmes in the affected regions. The DEC was thus a unique and important actor in the British humanitarian world, with a level of access to television that was unprecedented for the entire voluntary sector.²²

Within a week of *The Unknown Famine* being aired, the DEC had requested and been granted a primetime television slot to appeal to the general public. The appeal was presented by Jonathan Dimbleby, and consisted of powerful scenes and clips recycled from the documentary. The broadcast was also accompanied by an advertising campaign in the popular press. The appeal quickly set a new British fundraising record of £1.5 million (£16.4 million in 2015 prices). This funding was allocated amongst the DEC membership, which had grown from five to six shortly before the appeal following the admission of the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD).²³ The individual organisations used these funds to support relief and development programmes not only inside Ethiopia, but across the Sahelian belt of Africa. This was a deliberate decision on the part of the member agencies, who worded the appeal to be for 'victims of the droughts in Ethiopia and the countries in the Sahelian zone'.²⁴

Jonathan Dimbleby and *This Week* went on to receive multiple awards and accolades for the documentary, including the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Richard Dimbleby Award for Outstanding Presenter in the Factual Arena in 1974.²⁵ *The Unknown Famine* was undoubtedly one of the most influential British television programmes of the 1970s. The film was also a compelling demonstration of the unrivalled power of television images of distant human suffering to provoke an emotional response from the general public. The film and its accompanying publicity generated an estimated £1.5 million in total donations from publics in Britain, Ireland and Western Europe, amounting to over £160 million in 2015 prices.²⁶ This was not an unprecedented phenomenon – indeed, one of the factors behind the creation of the DEC a decade earlier was the realisation amongst mainline NGOs that televised emergency appeals could reach massive potential audiences.²⁷ Television news reports had also played an increasingly important role in publicising major disasters in the immediate years prior to 1973, including the Nigerian Civil War in 1968 and the East Pakistan crisis of 1970–1 (the latter of which led to the independence of Bangladesh).

Yet for many observers, *The Unknown Famine* was an exceptional illustration of how a single piece of television reporting could transform an invisible 'third world' emergency into an international *cause célèbre* with significant domestic political consequences. ITV interpreted the film as a new phenomenon in broadcasting, where 'a disaster fails to make the news headlines and instead hits the public through a single documentary'. Stunned by the huge public response to Dimbleby's film, the broadcaster called for new production procedures which would ensure they were in 'a better position to respond' to such outcomes in future. One proposed method was 'relaxing the controls' on broadcast appeals, to explicitly link programmes such as *The Unknown Famine* with a DEC appeal at the time of broadcast (and thus provide an immediate outlet for public compassion). To do so required closer collaboration between the broadcasters and the DEC, and television companies and journalists were subsequently required to consult with both bodies in advance if they were producing current affairs programmes or reports on overseas disasters.²⁸ This resulted in a closer symbiosis between the television broadcasters and the NGOs represented on the DEC, which consolidated the latter as the most influential actors in their sector. The perception of the film as a new phenomenon in broadcasting also foreshadowed what would become a familiar trend in global humanitarianism, of single television news bulletins or programmes galvanising massive international public responses. This reality was not lost on the largest aid agencies, and it soon became accepted wisdom within the sector that emergency fundraising was 'next to impossible' without television coverage.²⁹

Representing famine

The Unknown Famine was a profoundly moving documentary for many who viewed it. Indeed, it is unlikely that many of the film's more shocking scenes of children would be approved for broadcast today.³⁰ Dimbleby and his colleagues wanted to capture the attention of the public, and communicate the full scale of the disaster through uncompromising footage of the relief camps. However, the documentary also omitted any discussion of the politics of famine, with Dimbleby's narration providing no explanation or underlying causes for how the disaster had happened beyond vague references to drought. The political failures of both the Ethiopian government and the international community were also not acknowledged, beyond Dimbleby's veiled remarks at the conclusion of the programme. This was a deliberate decision by Dimbleby and the film's producer John Edwards, who felt that to adopt an 'accusatory' tone would lead to 'the impact of the horror' being 'diminished'.³¹ In a recent interview, Dimbleby commented that he 'didn't do politics, didn't say [the famine] was being suppressed ... I was only concerned that people should know what has happened'. He added that he 'was sure that was the right decision ... otherwise it would have turned the film into my judgement on Ethiopia, rather than reporting on a terrible situation'.³²

The DEC organisations adopted a similar frame for their subsequent broadcast appeal. This was perhaps inevitable, given that the appeal re-used clips from *The Unknown Famine* and was presented by Dimbleby. The voiceover narration accompanying the appeal emphasised the magnitude of the disaster, stating that 'in one area alone, 150,000 are thought to have died since the drought first took effect back in April'. The appeal also emphasised that the simple act of donating money could directly alleviate this suffering, declaring 'this is what you can do to help: give money. That's the quickest, kindest way you can help over two million people in Ethiopia and the Sahel now on the verge of starvation'.³³

Like the original film, the DEC appeal made no reference to the man-made causes of famine, or the political complexities of providing aid in the region. The latter were particularly acute, as there were serious logistical obstacles and transport bottlenecks to co-ordinating aid across the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia these challenges were compounded by the lack of adequate administrative machinery or transport infrastructure, and all of the DEC members struggled to effectively spend their shares of the appeal funds. In early 1974 Oxfam acknowledged that the agencies were 'open to severe criticism ... the international media and general public are not going to be impressed by the apparent lack of concrete action to relieve effectively the drought situation'.³⁴ This lack of 'concrete action' was in stark contrast to the simplistic messages of philanthropy and salvation being communicated to the general public.

Simplifying disasters in this way was the established norm for the DEC. The Committee had made thirteen televised emergency appeals during the decade prior to 1973, all of which conformed to similar aesthetic conventions: foregrounding powerful images of human suffering (usually children), accompanied with guilt-laden narratives designed to tug on the heartstrings of those who viewed them and prompt a monetary donation. None of the appeals provided any information of substance concerning the political causes underlying such disasters, and many actively sought to prevent such discussion. As a DEC appeal for Vietnam in 1967 stated: 'No politics. No boundaries. Send us money now'.³⁵ This method of representation was typical for humanitarian actors during this period, who gravitated towards using hard-hitting visual images of vulnerable children in their communications as the most effective way to raise money. A significant body of scholarship has since implicated this form of representation in reproducing colonial discourses and stereotypes of the global South as helpless, passive, infantile and dependent upon the civilised North for assistance.³⁶ Such images thus fit into a longer lineage of child-centric charitable appeals dating back to missionaries and philanthropists in the colonial era, who used suffering children as symbolic objects of universal concern.³⁷

This depiction of the global South became ubiquitous in the Western media during the 1960s. Decolonisation drew new attention to hunger and poverty in the emerging 'third world', and images of starving children were widely disseminated in NGO appeals and television news reports of overseas disasters.³⁸ In 1968, media images of starving children affected by the ongoing Nigerian Civil War gave rise to

huge public demands for intervention across the Western world. Tony Vaux refers to Nigeria as the 'first humanitarian disaster to be seen by millions of people'.³⁹ The stereotypical image of the starving African child was thus elevated into a 'universal icon of human suffering' during this period.⁴⁰ The Ethiopian famine may have been 'unknown', but its depiction on British television and reception by the general public fitted into a broader framework for viewing and encountering the global South.

Crucially, simplistic media images and messages about the famine concealed growing divisions within the sector about the value of disaster relief. The DEC members had already met months earlier in 1973 to discuss Ethiopia and the Sahel, revealingly deciding *not* to request a broadcast appeal due to disagreements over the appropriate course of action. Christian Aid and War on Want wanted any appeal to be made in support of long-term development, rather than short-term relief. The British Red Cross and Save the Children opposed this position, on the basis that the situation 'demanded long-term attention by international agencies and governments rather than DEC member charities', and therefore they should stick to humanitarian assistance only. Oxfam supported long-term development in principle, but argued that in this case short-term relief was preferable.⁴¹

These discussions were a microcosm for broader trends crystallising within the aid community, as several (but not all) NGOs were engaging with confrontational theories of alternative development and exploring new avenues to publicise and tackle the root causes of global poverty, rather than solely ameliorating its visible effects. From the DEC this included CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam and War on Want, who all took up the cause of long-term development in the global South over the course of the 1960s.⁴² As these organisations matured in their expertise and programming, a critique of disaster relief began to be articulated from within. An early example was the publication of *The Haslemere Declaration* in 1968 by radical elements from Christian Aid and Oxfam, which likened charitable relief to 'tossing sixpence in a beggar's cap: money given by those who have no intention of changing the system that produces beggars, and no understanding that they are part of it'.⁴³ War on Want's staff were particularly radical, commenting in 1973 that they were 'not a disaster organisation' and no longer wished to have an 'ambulance function'.⁴⁴

Disillusionment with disaster relief inspired a critique of the aesthetics of emergency fundraising. This critique denounced the ubiquitous images of suffering children as unethical, and counter-productive to new goals of raising the awareness and engagement of the British public in development issues and tackling global poverty. This thinking was apparent when Oxfam announced in 1973 (only a month before *The Unknown Famine* aired) that it would cease using such imagery altogether, and instead 'educate rather than incite pity'. The agency added that 'people have become blunted by disaster, so we now intend to concentrate on the constructive aspect of our work in advertisements'. War on Want commented at the same time that 'the starving child has really been flung to death, and we must now make the assumption that the energy we used to give to advertising for funds must be spent on

education of the public here'.⁴⁵ The implication was clear – these organisations (or at least, certain sections of these organisations) were growing uncomfortable with the simplistic and misleading messages being promoted in their fundraising appeals, which appeared to be contradictory to an emerging and more sophisticated public education and advocacy agenda.

The Unknown Famine therefore helped consolidate a colonial discourse of Africa and the 'third world' as a helpless region of disasters and suffering, at the very historical moment that several prominent NGOs were seeking to challenge and undo it. Development-oriented NGOs could not turn away from the intense publicity whipped up by Dimbleby's documentary, despite their own misgivings. Oxfam and other agencies were thus compelled to endorse and perpetuate problematic messages which they knew were misleading and over-simplistic, but appealed to a wider public. War on Want would later call for a way to ensure that fundraising communications would 'consider the long-term needs' and 'not react solely on the basis of ... Dimbleby's emotive programmes that tell only a fraction of the truth'.⁴⁶ While laudable, this critique failed to acknowledge how aid agencies were frequently not setting the terms on which they operated. As the sudden reversal of the DEC's earlier decision not to make an appeal for Ethiopia had shown, NGOs were regularly pulled and pushed between the structural pressures of television coverage and public opinion.

The British government and disaster relief

The tremendous strength of public feeling whipped up by *The Unknown Famine* not only brought pressure to bear on the leading humanitarian NGOs – it also made an important contribution to wider shifts in how the British government approached disaster relief. Britain had little involvement in either Ethiopia or the Sahel in the early 1970s, with no significant historical or diplomatic ties to the region. The British state had also been preoccupied during the late 1960s and early 1970s with major disasters in two of its former colonies (the Nigerian Civil War and the East Pakistan crisis). Both of these emergencies had significant political repercussions, and both had required significant diversions of funds from the official development aid budget to pay for emergency relief operations. Doing so had stimulated heated debate within government over the correct response to major disasters, as the established policy was that disaster relief was of minimal political importance and any expenditure on it should be tightly restricted.⁴⁷

The sudden exposure of the Ethiopian famine in 1973 caught the Conservative government by surprise. At this time the overseas aid budget was managed by the Overseas Development Administration (ODA), a department within the Foreign Office and the predecessor to today's Department for International Development (DFID).⁴⁸ The sudden outcry which followed *The Unknown Famine's* broadcast had an immediate effect on official donors – as one ODA official commented, the documentary had 'stirred consciences in many countries and provoked an

enormous response ... it even galvanised government machines'.⁴⁹ The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) launched an appeal for 500,000 tonnes of food aid and \$30 million for emergency relief in November 1973, which the British government contributed towards. At the same time, Britain (along with other donor governments) agreed to participate in an international programme of long-term development programmes throughout the Sahel. Britain also rolled out a major rural development programme inside Ethiopia.⁵⁰ As Peter Woodward summarises, after *The Unknown Famine* the 'wheels of the relief juggernaut rolled a little faster'.⁵¹ The DEC member organisations also participated in these initiatives, benefiting from official funding for transporting equipment and supplies.⁵²

Despite these efforts, the film's shocking images of mass starvation raised difficult questions about how the famine had occurred. The British government received widespread public and parliamentary criticism for its perceived lack of response, which was presented in the media as bureaucratic failure and indifference to human suffering. Christian Aid's Deputy Director denounced the government for its 'lack of vigour, lack of imagination, and a lack of ground representation that goes beyond red tape or bureaucracy'.⁵³ The Minister for Overseas Development (Richard Wood) recognised the 'considerable concern in the House of Commons, reflecting the concern in the country as a whole, that the British Government had repeatedly found itself reacting to crisis situations which might perhaps have been foreseen earlier'.⁵⁴ The perceived inability of the British state apparatus to competently respond to third world disasters was publicly contrasted with the leading NGOs, who were depicted by many journalists as efficient, flexible and non-bureaucratic.⁵⁵

The public feeling unleashed by Dumbleby's film accelerated and culminated a trend that had been developing since the late 1960s. Decolonisation increased public awareness of hunger and poverty in the newly christened 'third world', while the simultaneous spread of television, along with concurrent advances in communications technology, brought a new immediacy and emotional impact to images of distant suffering. News reports of overseas disasters helped stimulate humanitarian empathy amongst the viewing public, evoking an impulse to act immediately to 'save' newly post-colonial states.⁵⁶ The ODA conceded in early 1974 that 'the quick access of news media to disasters and their presentation, especially by television, has created a Ministerial and public demand for a more immediate and fuller response'.⁵⁷ Wood acknowledged a 'change in public opinion over the last few years', with governments now 'expected to do more in distant countries than they had been'.⁵⁸ This acceptance that the government had 'to do more in distant countries' was an important turning point for the British state's involvement in humanitarian aid, marking a new significance for disaster relief in foreign policy. As one ODA official summarised, 'public and parliamentary opinion ... will not permit [the government] to do nothing'.⁵⁹

The immediate consequence of this shift was an internal review of the government's administrative machinery for emergency relief. A policy paper

in early 1974 opened with the revealing statement that 'the problem of disaster relief in developing countries is one of which governments are becoming increasingly aware'.⁶⁰ This reform process took on a more radical character following the election of a Labour government in March 1974. The new administration altered the ODA to become a separate entity from the Foreign Office as the Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM), and Judith Hart replaced Wood as the Minister for Overseas Development. Hart had briefly served as Minister in 1970, and had been Labour's Shadow Minister in the years since. Hart and her advisors were highly critical of the previous administration's inefficient capacity for emergency relief, commenting that 'the only people who have emerged with credit from these disasters are the media' – referring specifically to ITV and Jonathan Dimbleby.⁶¹ Hart's overhaul resulted in the creation of a Disaster Unit within the ODM in June 1974. A specialist body staffed with experts, the Disaster Unit was a 'focal point' for responding to major disasters in the global South, which would regard emergency relief as a primary consideration rather than a distraction from long-term development. Other donor governments established similar bodies during the 1970s, institutionalising the distribution of humanitarian assistance and constructing the framework for a global relief network.⁶²

The Disaster Unit also aspired for a closer relationship with the leading NGOs, to improve its capacity and effectiveness. Government officials stressed the need to 'make sure our efforts were integrated with [voluntary organisations] ... we wish to plan and work in collaboration with these bodies at all stages, since their role will continue to be an essential one'.⁶³ This prioritisation of NGOs reflected how aid agencies were being increasingly feted for their perceived efficiency, expertise, lack of bureaucracy, and capacity to reach the poorest communities. Television was an integral aspect of this process, as it was through the mass media that NGOs publicised their ideals, acquired popular recognition, and thus stimulated their own expansion. The emphasis placed by the ODM on co-ordination also represented a broader increase of state support for the voluntary sector in the 1970s, as a number of governmental departments looked for ways to liaise with NGOs and draw upon their distinctive capacities and methods.⁶⁴

The Disaster Unit designated the DEC as its preferred vehicle for co-ordination, and in the following years the Unit frequently co-ordinated with the DEC members in responding to humanitarian crises of varying magnitudes. In practice, collaboration usually involved the Disaster Unit taking up a co-ordinating role, overseeing and directing NGO relief efforts, for which it provided considerable financial and logistical support. The 1970s thus witnessed the building up of connections and channels between humanitarian NGOs and the state, which would make possible the funneling of substantial official funds through the sector which has now become a routine norm.⁶⁵ *The Unknown Famine* made an important contribution to this process, as it accelerated an overturning of governmental assumptions and helped permanently raise the prominence of humanitarian aid in policymaking.

Conclusion

There have been many profound changes within the mass media and global humanitarianism since the 1973 Ethiopian famine. Radical improvements in communications and information technology have constructed a global media ecology on a scale unimaginable in the 1970s. Successive innovations such as electronic news-gathering, satellites, 24/7 news channels, the internet, mobile telephones and social media have been important spurs for globalisation, collapsing time and space and reducing the distance between people all over the globe.⁶⁶ Live news reporting from war zones and disasters has now become routine, and it seems inconceivable that an African famine could remain 'unknown' today as Ethiopia's once did. Technological advances in the media have been analogous with a sustained growth of global humanitarianism, as evident in the phenomenal expansion and proliferation of international NGOs in recent decades.⁶⁷ British humanitarianism is now a vibrant and imposing field of activity, with substantial funds flowing into the sector from both the public and official donors. These trends are all evident in the recent history of the DEC, which underwent internal reform during the mid-1990s before being relaunched with an expanded membership and more professional governance mechanisms. The DEC has thrived in the years since (despite operating in a more commercially competitive broadcast environment), regularly raising massive funds from the public for disaster relief. This includes a remarkable record sum of £392 million for the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004.⁶⁸

The representational practices of humanitarian NGOs have come under significant scrutiny since the 1970s. Critiques of emergency fundraising imagery (quite radical in 1973) permeated through the sector over the following decade, before exploding in the aftermath of the 1984–5 Ethiopian famine. The widespread dissemination of images of starving Ethiopian children in the media, NGO appeals and the Band Aid fundraising events generated heated debate within the sector over their potentially harmful impact on public engagement and education.⁶⁹ These debates resulted in the formulation of internal guidelines and shared Codes of Conduct amongst aid agencies, including the well-known 1992 Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Virtually all mainstream NGOs are signatories to the 1992 code, which binds them to 'recognise disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects' in their information, publicity and advertising.⁷⁰ Since the late 1980s, many NGOs have also aspired to utilise 'positive' imagery in their communications, which depict their subjects as self-sufficient, dignified, active, and even heroic. The motive behind this was that 'positive' representations could convey a more complex story of justice and equality, rather than simplistic paternalistic charity.⁷¹

However, despite these developments, many of the issues highlighted in this case study of the 1973 Ethiopian famine remain pertinent today. For all their growth and increased influence, NGOs are still dependent upon the mass media to

set agendas and galvanise public responses. Furthermore, they do so within a highly crowded and competitive humanitarian sector, and a more fragmented commercial broadcast environment. Thus, despite a more nuanced awareness of the politics of representation, many NGOs are still driven by institutional imperatives to use problematic images and messages in their communications. Simon Cottle and David Nolan argue that humanitarian NGOs have now internalised a form of 'media logic', deliberately packaging their work in ways which conform to known media needs – which tends to mean simplistic narratives, shocking images and regular use of celebrities.⁷² Some observers have spoken of a return to 'poverty porn' reminiscent of the 1970s, due to the pressures of raising funds in a marketing-driven environment.⁷³ *The Unknown Famine* may have marked the high point of these negative representations of Africa and the global South, but these images and stereotypes clearly still hold sway over the popular imagination today.

The education and advocacy campaigns of development NGOs were still in their infancy in 1973, and there were genuine hopes within the aid community that paternalistic discourses of charity and disaster could be overturned. Four decades later, 'development education' appears to have largely failed as a project. This failure is borne out in successive opinion polls and surveys, which indicate that the British public's support for overseas aid is motivated by humanitarian and moral concerns only. There are low levels of popular engagement in issues relating to global poverty and inequality, of which the public is uninterested and knows little.⁷⁴ The media, and especially television, has been critical to this process. Graphic images of suffering children such as those aired in *The Unknown Famine* have consistently sparked an emotional response from viewers. This may be fundamental to the visual nature of television, and the news values which underpin its production – privileging the dramatic and shocking, while discouraging more complex verbal efforts to explain why.⁷⁵

Recent research findings suggest that the constant repetition of negative images and simplistic messages in NGO appeals is fostering growing cynicism, as many citizens feel such communications are cynically designed with the sole objective of making money. This disconnection further limits the potential for these agencies to challenge the charitable frame through which so many people view and understand the wider world.⁷⁶ Reversing these trends will be exceptionally difficult in the years to come, and may not be possible within the structural constraints of the commercialised aid industry. At the very least, there is a pressing need to revisit and strengthen agency Codes of Conduct on imagery and representation, and for all actors connected to the sphere of humanitarianism and international aid to acknowledge and evaluate the long-term impacts of their messages upon supporters and the general public. A case study of *The Unknown Famine* reminds us just how challenging this task can be. As one Oxfam official remarked in 1973 following the film's explosive impact, 'after two and a half years of our efforts to publicise the causes of underdevelopment, 15 minutes of publicising the effects through the film seemed to do it.'⁷⁷

Notes

- 1 See E. Balabanova, *The Media and Human Rights: The Cosmopolitan Promise* (London: Routledge, 2014); S. Cottle and G. Cooper, 'Introduction: Humanitarianism, Communications, and Change', in S. Cottle and G. Cooper (eds), *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 1–18; S. Cottle and C. M. Hughes, 'The United Nations' "Responsibility to Protect" and the World's Press: Establishing a New Humanitarian Norm?', in J. Hoffman and V. Hawkins (eds), *Communication and Peace: Mapping an Emerging Field* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 76–91.
- 2 The historiography of humanitarianism in particular has been flourishing in recent years. Michael Barnett's historical overview remains a seminal publication: *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). See also Kevin O'Sullivan et al.'s recent journal introduction for an overview of major themes in the literature: K. O'Sullivan, M. Hilton and J. Fiori, 'Humanitarianisms in Context: Histories of Non-State Actors, from the Local to the Global', *European Review of History*, 23:1–2 (2016), pp. 1–15.
- 3 The landscape of British television in 1973 was radically different to the competitive and fragmented environment of the twenty-first century. There were only two television broadcasters – the publicly funded BBC, and the commercial Independent Television network (ITV). These broadcast three channels in total – BBC1, BBC2 and ITV. For more on the historical development of British television, see J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 7th edn, 2009), pp. 101–232.
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- 14 Interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, conducted by the author (Andrew Jones), 12 June 2015.
- 15 Interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, conducted by the author (Andrew Jones), 12 June 2015.
- 16 The full story of how *The Unknown Famine* was filmed and smuggled out of Ethiopia is recounted at length in Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, pp. 40–66.
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