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Building the agenda and news frames about countries facing humanitarian crises: news values and selection of information sources

Abstract

The media are important actors in humanitarian crisis management and resolution, not only in the countries where crises occur, but also in the rest of the world, as media are frequently the only source of information for the population of Northern countries. Through semi-structured interviews with the International section editors of four Spanish newspapers, we study the influence of news values and news routines on the information about countries facing crisis. The editors privilege what they consider to be human-impact stories, but also those involving Spanish economic or strategic interests or having closer emotional ties to their readers.

Keywords

Mass media, humanitarian crisis, conflicts, agenda-building, frame-building

1. Introduction

In 2009, 30 countries, 19 of them African, experienced a humanitarian crisis (Escola Cultura de Pau, 2010). Most of them were the result of armed conflict in contexts of prior fragility, where a weak or failed state cannot or does not want to deal with the situation or, in the worst case, is an accomplice in the situation. Hunger, violence and forced displacement of the civilian population are both causes and consequences of humanitarian crises. More than one billion people worldwide are undernourished, and a quarter of children under five – 165 million – suffer from stunted growth caused by nutritional deficiencies (Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, 2009). Armed conflict, spread all over the world, kills nearly 700,000

people every year¹, about 90% of whom are civilian². Violence and human rights violations often cause forced displacement of the population both within and across borders. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2009) warned that the number of refugees exceeded 15 million, while 27 million remained within their own countries as internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The media are important actors in humanitarian crisis management and resolution, not only in the countries where they take place, but also in the rest of the world, as they are frequently the only source of information for the populations of so-called 'developed countries'³. Empirical work based on the agenda setting theory has shown that media influence on the audience is greater for unobtrusive issues, in which the audience's experience is mainly vicarious, mediated, or second-hand (McCombs, 2006).

Media coverage of humanitarian crises used to be sporadic, as news used to be linked to emergencies and to those events of a spectacularly dramatic nature, especially when stunning images are available. Meanwhile, the chronic phase of poverty and an explanation of its root causes are forgotten. Crises are often reported in a predictable manner, usually forced to fit into a pre-existing mold that makes them all equal in the public gaze (Toledano & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2013). News media turn crises into 'good and bad' stories, without explaining the underlying causes, and then abandon their monitoring before crises conclude, thereby depriving the audience of information about crisis outcomes (ibid.). This news coverage goes all out for "hyper-emotion"—resulting in "emotional blackmail"—as claimed by Ramonet, where analysis (which is considered boring) is replaced by the "production of sensations" (1999: 19).

A humanitarian crisis that does not become news has a high chance of being ignored in terms of public opinion. The humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders (MSF, abbreviated in French) has released a report every year since 1998 that includes crises forgotten by media and by policy makers in Northern countries. In 2006, television news programs from the three major U.S. networks devoted little more than seven minutes out of their total broadcast time of 14,512 minutes that year to the forgotten humanitarian crises identified by MSF (Tyndall, quoted by MSF, 2009). The 'Top Ten' Most Underreported Humanitarian Stories (MSF, 2009) took place in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. AIDS, child malnutrition and certain diseases in impoverished countries were other crises that fell outside the media and political focus of attention.

This article aims to study the news values used in the selection of information on countries facing humanitarian crisis and their impact on the news frames that characterize them. Consistent with the notion of 'preventive journalism' the media can contribute to peace-building, conflict prevention and the development of a more just and equitable

¹ "Las armas causan 700.000 muertes al año" (2009, October 7). Radiotelevisión Española. Retrieved from <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20091007/las-armas-causan-700000-muertes-ano/295455.shtml>

² During the 2002-2011 decade there was little change in the rates of organized violence, both in terms of the number of actors involved in conflicts and the number of victims. In 2011, 34,530 people died because of armed conflicts, including state-based conflicts, non-state conflicts and one-sided violence against civilians (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI, 2013)

³ This article deliberately avoids the term 'development', and the consideration of countries as 'developed', 'underdeveloped' or 'developing'. Development has become a strategy of 'advanced' societies to continue to dominate, marginalize, exclude and colonize (Martínez Guzmán & Comins Mingol, 2010: 51-70). In the words of Esteva (1996: 53), "underdevelopment began [...] on January 20, 1949", the same day that President Truman used this word for the first time in this context, during his inaugural address. "That day, two billion people became underdeveloped. [...] Truman changed the meaning of development and created the symbol, a euphemism, used since then to discretely or in a careless manner allude to the era of American hegemony."

international order, with the overall objective of improving average levels of well-being for all, especially those living in impoverished countries.

2. Humanitarianism in the spotlight

The end of the Cold War began a paradigm shift in humanitarian action. The dissolution of the clear boundaries between the activities of states, companies and humanitarian organizations, which had been in place to that point, gave rise to a debate that is still unresolved around the concept of humanitarianism itself. Traditionally, humanitarian action has been characterized by humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality in providing care to victims of war and disaster. However, the emergence of individuals and organizations with no previous experience in this area, and the growing danger and complexity of the tasks that have to be undertaken have called into question the role that humanitarian organizations play and the role they should play (Barnett & Weiss, 2008).

The militarization of 'humanitarian' aid and its use at the service of political and economic interests of dominant powers have been some of the factors that explain the abovementioned changes. The militarized 'humanitarian' action, in its current form, began with the armed actions of the U.S. in Iraq in the early nineties (Hammond, 2008). For Hammond, the U.S.-led military campaign during the 'war on terror' has combined military aggression with 'humanitarian' interventions in areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Indonesia. Many governments have realized the effectiveness of this joint action, which allows them to win 'the hearts and minds' not only of people in countries where military operations are conducted, but of their own electorate.

The penetration of neoliberal doctrine in the field of humanitarianism is another cause of the modification of its old structure and functioning. Humanitarian organizations, with little historical connection with the business world, have been forced to employ marketing techniques and manage their brand image (Hopgood, 2008). Moreover, following the concept of 'social entrepreneurship,' some business initiatives do not try to collaborate with NGOs but, in a way, to compete with them in the field of humanitarianism, making money off the suffering and poverty. Given the need to obtain funding for projects and campaigns, humanitarian action is linked to the mass media, as even private funds depend on public opinion (Redfield, 2008). Thus, humanitarian organizations have a partial and limited ability to set their own agenda.

3. News agenda and news values

News values or news criteria allow journalists to select from the multitude of events happening every day in the world, making news of only a few of them and discarding the rest. There is broad consensus among journalists about these criteria (Hall et al., 1978) which allows journalists to systematize the work in the newsroom. The criteria are an effective guide for choosing and prioritizing events: some of these events will make the front page of the paper, with a page-wide headline, or will become the most important piece of news in the news broadcast; others will be published as a brief at the bottom of a newspaper page or as a few-second piece at the end of the TV news. News values are, therefore, practical rules that direct the work in the newsroom, 'attributes' of events whose absence or presence makes it more or less advisable to include them in the news agenda of the day (Golding-Elliot, quoted by Wolf, 2000). Wolf systematized news criteria, grouping them into five categories: substantive criteria, criteria relating to the product, criteria relating to the media outlet, criteria relating to government and criteria relating to competition (2000).

4. Sources set the agenda

Economic constraints and, sometimes, lack of interest in international news, mean that much of what is published comes from news agencies. As a result, three or four of these agencies—mostly Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Reuters and, to a lesser extent, Efe—have the control over the flow of international news. Most newspapers, at least in reference to their International section, use news agencies as a primary source, often without adapting or re-writing the pieces of news they receive (Galtung & Vincent, quoted by Rauch, 2003).

In Spanish newspapers, Gelado Marcos (2009) found the same trend: the international sections of *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Abc*, and *La Razón* repeat the same discourse as they use the same news agencies as sources. The phenomenon is especially serious for information on Southern countries, where correspondents are not always assigned (Antón Valero, 2002; Sande, 2011). Therefore, it is logical to assume that news agencies have an important role in how international news is framed. Without seeking to unravel the complexity of frame-building processes, it is reasonable to think of newspapers as reliant on news wires for coverage of countries facing humanitarian crises. Given the current economic difficulties facing the Spanish press, news agencies are used as the primary source for news about these countries.

5. News framing process: frame-building and frame setting

News is textual and visual constructions developed around a central axis of thought, a certain perspective (frame) that provides a framework for the public to understand and decode the message. Framing can be defined as a process in which some aspects of the perceived reality are selected in order to construct a story in which the links between these aspects are enhanced, promoting a particular interpretation of the issue or problem. For Entman (1993), frames have four main functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgment, and proposal for a solution or treatment of the issue. The frame is present both in the mind of the journalist writing the news story and in the piece of news he makes, reaching the receiver through the decoding process, which is necessary to understand the news story and its context. In its traditional definition, to frame is to select some aspects of reality, giving them later a greater emphasis or importance, so the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested and appropriate solutions and behaviors are proposed (Entman, 1993).

The concept of framing is closely associated with news values or news criteria, which strongly influence both the selection of events that become news (agenda building), and the decisions on the aspects of the event in which the story is going to be focused (frame building). Thus, the narrative conventions applied to news writing include answering the questions of who does what, and for what purpose. It is enough to remember the rules for writing the summary lead of a piece of news (the five Ws), which require answers to the questions starting with an interrogative word: what, who, where, when, why. The information provided in a piece of news is not an accumulation of raw data that could lead each one to his own thoughts: news stories constitute an interpretation of reality developed through the use of narrative techniques that emphasize the agents (actors) of information, the actions they perform, the contextual elements and the possible implications, among others (Rhee, 1997).

The review of the literature gives rise to the following research questions:

RQ1.- What are the criteria used by chief International editors of the Spanish press for reporting on some countries facing humanitarian crises but not on others? How do they

prioritize news stories? Do they use the same news values described in previous research or are there particularities?

RQ2.- What is the role played by news agencies in news coverage of humanitarian crises? And what is the role played by other sources of information (network of correspondents, relevant media outlets, local media, social networking sites, etc.)?

RQ3.- How do chief editors assess the news coverage of humanitarian crises? Are they critical or obliging? Do they offer suggestions or contributions for improvement?

6. Method

Open and semi-structured qualitative interviews⁴ with key informants were conducted. Interviews provide access to certain realities that are difficult to observe directly, but they have the disadvantage that the data obtained through them can be biased by the perspective of the interviewee. As Gaitán and Piñuel (1997) state, the open interview is usually carried out on 'informed individuals' who possess substantive knowledge of the field of study, so it is not necessary to select through random sampling techniques. In this study, interviews were used to inquire about the views and interpretations of the 'key informants,' which provides "a more authenticated, substantiated or far-reaching explanation of the issue" (Gaitán & Piñuel, 1997: 90).

To select the informants, the work they did in their newspaper during the second half of 2009 was taken into account. This timeframe was selected because of the absence of what literature calls mega-disasters⁵. Such events, by their number of victims and their exceptional nature, may dominate news coverage such that news frames are modified and other crises are excluded.

The chief editor performs the work of gatekeeper, besides establishing general and specific guidelines for the work of the editors reporting to him. For these reasons, he seems the most appropriate person to speak about the processes that determine the selection, prioritization and framing of a particular event that will become news. Under this criterion, the four chief International editors of the dailies *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Abc*, and *Público*⁶ were interviewed. The choice of these four newspapers was done according to the criteria of ideological diversity and social influence, the latter measured using circulation and distribution data. Interviewees were asked about the news criteria applied to events in countries in crisis, the importance of news agencies and other sources of information, the role that journalism should play in conflicts and humanitarian crises, and how to improve quality of news reporting in these areas.

Two of the four interviews (with Francisco Herranz, of *El Mundo* and Carlos Enrique Bayo, of *Público*) were conducted in person, in Madrid, at Unidad Editorial facilities and on the floor of the building occupied by Publico.es at Gran Vía (Madrid), respectively. The interview with Luis Prados (*El País*), who was in Mexico City, was conducted by videoconference. The choice of this method instead of the telephone interview or self-completed interview was made according to the need to assess the non-verbal signs issued by the respondents. Gaitán and Piñuel argue that these non-verbal aspects must be taken into account, as they can repeat or complement the message, making it more understandable; contradict it, denying it or placing it in an ironic tone; replace it, filling

⁴ Qualitative interviews are more intimate, flexible and open than questionnaires (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, & Baptista Lucio, 2006).

⁵ For example, Etkin (1999).

⁶ They held this position during the second semester of 2009, but all of them were doing another job at the time they were interviewed: Luis Prados was correspondent of *El País* in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean; Francisco Herranz held the post of editor-in-chief *El Mundo*; Carlos Enrique Bayo was the director of publico.es; and Borja Bergareche was correspondent of *Abc* in London.

gaps in the speech; or put an accent on it, emphasizing or minimizing its importance (1997). Despite the interest of face-to-face interaction, the interview with Borja Bergareche (*Abe*) was conducted by a conference via Internet, without video, as the former chief International editor did not have a webcam available at the time of the conversation. All interviews lasted approximately one hour, except the one with Luis Prados, which lasted just over two hours.

Information collected during the interviews was analyzed following the strategy of 'constant comparative method,' which allows developing concepts from qualitative data: "By continually comparing specific incidents of data, the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their interrelationships and integrates them into a coherent theory" (Glaser & Strauss, cited by Taylor & Bogdan, 1992: 155).

7. Results

7.1. News values

Below are shown the results of constant comparative analysis of the obtained data, which made it possible to create categories into which news values are grouped. These categories, in turn, are grouped into broader ones, based on Wolf's (2000) classification of news criteria:

7.1.1. Related to the event (substantive)

7.1.1.1. Human impact

The human impact is a prime criterion in newsrooms for selecting and prioritizing coverage of countries facing humanitarian crisis. It is related to what the gatekeepers think about their publics, on the assumption that news stories that show human suffering will be more interesting: while anyone can be touched, not everyone can understand a complex story. Rather than the number of people affected, what is considered is the way victims of famine, war and forced displacement die or suffer: the more atrocious, the more likely to make headlines. For this reason the term 'human impact' was preferred instead the more neutral 'human interest'.

That is, they are savagely killing civilians with machetes. One reason is therefore that the humanitarian crisis has a really intolerable escalation (Luis Prados. Emphasis added).

And in many cases [it is covered] because there is a very violent armed conflict causing [many deaths] in a day or in a week. For example, if an atrocious killing in Yemen takes place [...] it is likely to make headlines on the front page (Francisco Herranz. Emphasis added).

What really happens is that [some] stories move us. [...] What is happening in the Congo, where rape of women is been massive, I think it will touch people more. Then I prioritize: considering that I find all the crises interesting, I always highlight one or two that can be more heartbreaking, than can attract the reader and touch him and make him reflect. [...] It is essential to touch people (Francisco Herranz. Emphasis added).

Make no mistake: people are more interested in news stories with dramatic or tragic components [...]. Is there a morbid component in that interest? Probably yes, but it is not so extraordinary that our readers give preference to negative events when talking about remote countries in their minds. (Borja Bergareche. Emphasis added).

7.1.1.2. National interests

Crises are not taken in consideration because of their features or their impact on the local population, but because of their probable or real impact on 'our' national interests.

A newspaper is not an NGO or UN agency. [...] The countries that have received more attention [in the second half of 2009] satisfy the three or four criteria news criteria, and Guinea Conakry does not satisfy any of them. Neither Burundi, nor the Philippines or Nepal or Niger before we discovered that the French have uranium mines there. [...] The existence of a state of crisis does not make it news (Borja Bergareche).

‘National interests’ are often identified with the presence of companies with Spanish capital or Spanish troops in the country in crisis. The prices of raw materials that Western countries import also fall within the field of ‘national interests’.

Sometimes, amidst the noise of information, someone [...] says to you: “Look, the price of cocoa has increased five times since the crisis started.” Or: “The price of coffee has fallen.” It is important to be aware of the economic background of a crisis, and how it impacts the world market, it is an important thing [...] In Afghanistan the European Union had interests and there were also U.S. troops, in Somalia we had Spanish fishermen (Luis Prados).

Why Afghanistan makes front-page news more often? Because in that country there are Spanish troops. Where there is neither Spanish presence nor Spanish interests, actually that’s almost obvious [...]. Interests relate to the presence of troops or economic interests. Especially the first, the first claims our attention more than the second (Francisco Herranz).

They [*The New York Times*] do not have correspondents in many countries in Latin America where we do have. [...] Not only because of the ties of colonization and language, but also because of the number of immigrants we have here in Spain and the businesses we have there; because of the economic relations and because we act as a bridge between one and the other; because we are part of the trafficking of drugs coming from there to the rest of Europe (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

[...] A crisis in a country where either Europe or the West has interests, whether spurious or legitimate, is more likely to make headlines: whether they be colonial legacy interests, oil... or more honest interest, as the ones that Spain has in Latin America. [...]. The presence of Spanish companies or economic interests in the countries is an information engine (Borja Bergareche).

7.1.1.3. *Psychological proximity*

This criterion relates to national interests, but it has a broader character. In this case, proximity is more cultural and psychological than physical, and assumes that news affecting groups that are considered ‘ours’ are more likely to make headlines. The gap between ‘we’ and ‘they’ is explicitly present in the discourse of the chief International editor of *El País* and *El Mundo*, and more implicitly in the chief editor of *Abc*. Thus, ‘our’ group would be composed of the United States, the European Union and the West. Catholicism is also considered as ‘our,’ while Islamism is ‘their.’ Only the chief International editor of *Público* brings a critical perspective, although recognizing that this news value is important in other media.

[In Afghanistan] we did not have miserable interests... But we were swept along by the United States, the West, that after all is the region to which we belong, our culture. We became involved in a project for the reconstruction of an impossible country that has obviously failed. [...] We are doing this from the point of view of the West; I would be unable to make an International section from a Japanese point of view [...]. You like them or not, they are yours, it is like football teams: the more your team disappoints you, the more critical you are. But you have to know who yours are. [...] If we were Buddhists ... But we have had a [...] Catholic tradition until 15 days ago (Luis Prados. Emphasis added).

The 2004 tsunami [...] had between 200,000 and 340,000 casualties. And I do believe that in that case there was a clear racial bias [in the news coverage]. You put these 200,000 people in South Asia and, well ... But if you put them in this hemisphere, we would still be writing about it (Borja Bergareche. Emphasis added).

You have to present the viewpoint of the country where the newspaper is published, because you are not making a newspaper for the Arab community, because otherwise it would be

different. Then we have to be realistic: you are working for a culturally Catholic newspaper, whether we are practicing or not; for a Western newspaper; for a Spanish-language newspaper. [...] Empathy is necessary, but it must be handled carefully, because it could seem like you are doing a newspaper for Pashtuns, and that is not the case (Francisco Herranz. Emphasis added).

For *Abc*, [it is important to make good coverage of] the new routes of illegal immigration and the situation of Christian minorities in the Middle East [...] (Borja Bergareche).

Normally there will not be much information about remote places in the reader's mind if there is no serious conflict, if no Spanish soldier dies, even if there are Spanish soldiers in them. But there is not much information simply because people are not interested in it (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

7.1.1.4. *Significance/strategic importance*

Some crises can better explain the world than others, and some countries have a greater geopolitical importance than others. The journalists, according to their training and experience, choose those conflicts and crises that the reader 'needs to know,' holding the hands of the reader to help them understand the world.

[The ten crises that received more coverage] are those ten that better explain the world in which we live. [...] You cannot give the same importance to a coup in the Central African Republic as to a coup in Pakistan. [...] When I say that information on Pakistan is more important than information on the Central African Republic, because it affects the world order... it is not a whim or a point of view of mine (Luis Prados).

Things that happen in Washington are far more important for the life of a Spanish citizen than things that happen in Guatemala, Lake Atitlán, or Mindanao [...]. In order to help him understand his life, his environment and what happens around him, I think it is very important to inform a Spanish citizen about what is happening in Washington [...] (Borja Bergareche).

However, not all chief editors consider that the crises neglected by the media are always less important.

Nobody writes about the Caucasus, and I can tell you that the whole planet is involved there, even the Buddhists, and no one knows. The conflict in Burma, for example, has some very interesting aspects, as the role of China. [...] I could give you six or seven examples about this: there are many circumstances and many conflicts that are not represented by the media. [...] We have to be open-handed, because if not you can make the mistake of saying: "This is important because I think it is important" (Francisco Herranz).

7.1.2. *Related to the public*

7.1.2.1. *Interest of the public*

This news value relates to the image that journalists have of their audience and their idea about what is going to interest them or not. Much of the information on humanitarian crises is no longer offered because, in the view of the gatekeepers, it would bore the readers. They therefore allude to the logic of the market: the public is free to acquire whatever he believes appropriate, and the mass media have to adapt to these demands because they have to make revenues or at least avoid losses. Each newspaper has its own audience and the one that does not serve the public interests will not survive. This news value is at odds with the significance/strategic importance criterion. Should the media provide what the public demands or what they 'need to know'?

Personally, I am much more interested in news coverage [...] on the political and economic evolution of Latin American republics, and I think the Spanish public is much more interested in

this than in the [crisis] in Kenya or Tanzania. [...] A moment arrives when you get sick, you get bored, right? I am talking about the audience, not just about the editor (Luis Prados. Emphasis added).

You are working for a culturally Catholic newspaper, whether we are practicing or not, for a Western newspaper; for a Spanish-language newspaper. So it makes no sense to reflect on the history of England with regard to Afghanistan. That does not interest my readers (Francisco Herranz. Emphasis added).

Each media outlet is publishing what really matters to their readers. That is why readers are the ones that decide whether an issue is followed or not. [...] It does not depend on the intrinsic conditions of the country, but on the eye of the beholder, that is, it depends on readers and the place where your newspaper is and the interests it has (Carlos Enrique Bayo. Emphasis added).

I think some issues appeal to fears of societies, whether rational or irrational, that need to be explained. There are certain issues about identity, fear of Islam, fear of the alleged waves of illegal immigration—that statistics show that they are not really that. [...] I think that kind of issues interest to the moderate and more or less informed reader of *Abc* (Borja Bergareche. Emphasis added).

The journalist is then considered an interpreter of public interest. But how can they know exactly what does or does not interest their public? The former chief International editor of *Abc* considers that this criterion should be used carefully, as it has a relative validity: on the one hand, he questions the current capacity of the media to adequately know their readers' profile; by the other hand, Bergareche defends the possibility that each newspaper chooses its own 'information menu.'

I do not think that newspapers have to submit to the alleged interests of the reader. A newspaper must be very familiar with his readers, and a lot more marketing studies and focus groups must be done in order to determine what interests our readers, and how do they perceive our 'menu' (Borja Bergareche).

To Bayo, new technologies allow to know the readers of each newspaper in detail, especially in case of *Público*, which has only a web version at the moment:

Through the networks, not only social networks, but through the feedback you get from your own readers, etc., [you can know] what your readers read or not, because everything on the Internet is measurable second by second; you know perfectly what interests your readers, what moves them and what you need to inform about in your media outlet, for your readers, according to your editorial line and your ideology.

7.1.3. *Related to the information product*

7.1.3.1. *Novelty*

Heated or long-running crises, in which the living conditions of the population steadily become worse, hardly make headlines. 'Chronicity', therefore, is an exclusion criterion, while 'novelty' is an inclusion one.

Uganda, if no incident like this [an atrocious killing or an antiterrorist operation] takes place, is going to be excluded [from the news agenda], because Uganda is a chronic crisis (Francisco Herranz).

There comes a time when you say: "I'm [fed up] with this issue of famine wherever" (Luis Prados)

7.1.3.2. *Accessibility and cost of information material*

Most of the media does not have the resources to adequately cover all humanitarian crises. Furthermore, the presence in certain conflicts is not allowed for journalists, whether for safety reasons or because of press censorship. Accessibility and low cost become then news criteria.

There is also [...] a very important element, in my opinion, and it is to have the material resources to cover [the conflict]. Sometimes this is taken for granted, but it is obvious that newspapers cannot reach everywhere, for many reasons. At the moment we'd like to get to Mali, but it is not possible [...]. We could not access Gaza during the last invasion because the Israelis did not let us in. Other times the press does not have access because it is expensive or because it is very dangerous (Borja Bergareche).

7.1.4. *Related to competition*

7.1.4.1. *Own production and originality*

Information produced with the newspaper's own resources is more likely to be published than information from news agencies, press releases or that has already been published by other news media. In the words of Prados:

[...] We do not copy information. That is, the information has to be done by a guy from *El País*, or by a partner of *El País*, or by a guy recognized by *El País*. I will not copy what 'who knows what' radio says or what the daily *Morning Star* from Antananarivo writes.

7.1.5. *Related to the media outlet*

7.1.5.1. *Coherence with the personality and ideology of the newspaper*

The media have their own editorial lines and some identifying features that differentiate them from others. The consistency of the news stories (or their interpretation) with the ideology of the medium is a news value, although for some chief editors "the word ideology is too big for newspapers" (Prados).

If *La Razón* is writing about an international issue, they will always put 'God, country and king' in the forefront. Therefore, they will always be talking about the Spanish soldiers and the King [...] (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

[In] *La Vanguardia* [...] everything that has to do with the Catholic religion is out of proportion and taken to entirely enormous levels in relation to its real importance. [...] And we, as *Público*, are consistent with our ideology and our clear and proven secular and leftist line, and that is how we carry on the International section (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

[In *El País*] everything is driven by its ideology, which is absolutely right-wing and anti-Bolivarian, oozing through every pore of its body. And everything they write is influenced by that ideology (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

There is a [moment] when the newspaper has a chance to be itself. A newspaper, a centennial institution as *Abc*, can cover humanitarian crises in countries such as Eritrea, Burundi and Malawi, for its sensitivity or particular criterion (Borja Bergareche).

For a newspaper such as *Abc*, business and economic activity in a given country, as well as the perception and influence of the country abroad, are issues that are considered as important (Borja Bergareche).

For the former chief International editor of *El País*, however, the ideological orientation is not a criterion that operates on the selection or treatment of 'strictly' humanitarian crisis. In the same line of thought, the former head of International of *El Mundo* believes that the

news agenda, news values and information production routines annul ideological diversity in the selection and treatment of international information.

Honestly, I do not think that in the information about strictly humanitarian crisis, newspapers such as *El País*, *Abc*, *El Mundo*, or *Público* can be ideologically distinguished. Do you think that the information published by *El País*, *Abc*, *El Mundo* and *Público* about the earthquake in Haiti can be distinguished? (Luis Prados).

I would like us to be more heterogeneous, but we are very conditioned by the agenda [...]. So when the agenda is full, it is very difficult to get out of the lane. [...] Luis [Prados] and I have traveled and it seemed that we had copied [our news stories] from each other. It seemed that we worked together, and I can assure you there was nothing further from reality. And yet you get almost the same approach (Francisco Herranz).

7.1.5.2. Hidden agenda and spurious interests

Newspapers select or discard certain crisis–or aspects of them–according to interests that go beyond the editorial lines. This news value has only been mentioned by Bayo, especially to define the news coverage conducted by *El País* about the Colombian crisis and Venezuela.

[*El País*] is sometimes guided by ideology, but above all for their business interests. [...] Did you know you that *El País* hid information from WikiLeaks about the ‘false positives scandal,’ and that they had the exclusive? They said they would tell absolutely everything, but they hid the cables about Uribe’s false positives Uribe. They voluntarily and deliberately hid it. And we noticed their existence thanks to *Le Monde*, which also had the exclusive. And do you know that means cover up of crimes against humanity? [...] Why would Julian Assange intervene and take away the WikiLeaks exclusive? Among other things, because of that [...] They were covering up crimes against humanity, the media outlet that self-proclaims itself as the most ethical and deontologically perfect in the Spanish universe. [...] The objectivity of *El País* in Latin America, ask Latin Americans about it. Ask them about the way they have attacked all governments that were not serving the business interests of Prisa [Spanish media group] (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

Table 1 summarizes the news values that are taken into consideration in news coverage about humanitarian crises, and states who mentioned each one.

Table 1. News values and foreign affairs editors who mentioned them

	News value	Mentioned by
	Human impact	All
	National interests	All
Related to the event	Psychological proximity	All
	Significance/strategic importance	Prados, Bergareche
Related to the public	Interest of the public	All
Related to the information product	Novelty	Prados, Herranz, Bergareche
	Accessibility and cost of the information material	

Related to competition	Own production and originality	Prados
Related to the media outlet	Coherence with the personality and ideology of the newspaper	Bayo and Bergareche
	Hidden agenda and spurious interests	Bayo*

* He refers to these criteria as present in other newspapers, but he did not mention them for *Público*.

Results show a broad agreement between universal news criteria and those specifically applicable to humanitarian crises, although some differences are also observed. Thus, the news criteria ‘significance/strategic importance’ and ‘hidden agenda and spurious interests’ are not among the news values systematized by authors like Wolf (2000)–which does not mean they do not operate in other domains of information. ‘Classical’ approaches, conversely, include general news criteria that were not mentioned by the chief International editors, such as ‘hierarchical level of individuals involved,’ ‘importance and significance of the event regarding future evolution of the situation,’ ‘equilibrium (balance),’ or ‘frequency.’ Some of the specific news criteria were cited by all interviewees, so it is logical to assume that these are those who operate to a greater extent: ‘human impact,’ ‘national interests,’ ‘psychological proximity’ and ‘interest of the public.’

7.2. *The importance of sources*

In recent years, news agencies seem to have lost weight in relation to their ability to frame conflicts and international crises, while they still keep their influence to set the first level of the media agenda. News agencies, therefore, have the power to decide what crises are ‘relevant’ and what others are not, but they could hardly frame them. The chief International editor of *Público* takes a different view: he considers that news agencies do not even set the first level of the agenda (the news agenda) of the newspapers.

News wires have had a declining influence. First because they have a major crisis [...] as they have been superseded by the new digital media. [...] With 17 correspondents in 17 of the most important sites [...] I am not saying that news wires are not needed any more, but they are mere accessories (Luis Prados).

The agency sets the agenda for you: they are essential for that. In my day, when I was chief International editor, I worked more with correspondents and special correspondents in deciding specific priorities [...] Agencies have very good people on the ground, and they will also give you clues, tips to decide if an issue is worth or not, because it is not going to work. But they do set the agenda (Francisco Herranz).

News wires will serve to indicate issues that are occurring; they are like rising and show red dots on the map. Then you can complete this information reading the local press, the international press, or major newspapers [...] I think that that fact that news wires set the agenda is overvalued (Borja Bergareche).

News wires were critical 20 or 25 years ago. At the moment this role is played by much bigger communication media. For me, the BBC is much more important than any news agency [...]. Any news wire set any news agenda for me. First, as I used to say, the agenda is set by the readers themselves (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

The most important source in the coverage of humanitarian crises seems to be the network of correspondents, special correspondents, and those freelancers more closely linked to the newspaper. Despite the limitations that any media outlet faces to have a significant number of people working abroad, the chief editors are generally satisfied with the situation, and argue that they can move them to any location where the news story takes place. *El País* had 17 or 18 correspondents plus other permanent collaborators; *Público* had 27 correspondents available, most of them freelancers; *Abc* had 10 or 12 correspondents directly linked to newspaper and 20 or 22 freelancers; and *El Mundo* possessed, at some point in 2009, journalists in 10 of the 30 countries facing crises. Other important sources are the big news media—BBC, CNN, etc—, and the local media, the latter to a lesser extent.

Fundamentally, for *El País*, the source of that kind of information is our international network of correspondents. After all, and in the context of the current economic crisis, we are the only newspaper that maintains a network of correspondents worthy of the name (Luis Prados).

We [*El Mundo*] have an excellent distribution of special correspondents, and in two or three places, very good. We are the only media outlet in Spain which has permanently had someone in Afghanistan. I am talking about Monica Bernabé, who has been there since 2001, for intermittent periods, and since 2005/2006 [keeping a permanent presence] (Francisco Herranz).

I was much more interested in what my 27 correspondents sent me every day [than in information from the news wire]. Because these correspondents, many of them freelancers, [can offer us] better guidelines than news agencies, than television, than the Internet or whatever you want, because you have a personal relationship with them, because you know what he is made of [...]. (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

[I paid attention to] the foreign press, the Spanish competition itself, news agencies and, especially, the network of correspondents of our newspaper. They are [...] eight, 10 or 12 correspondents that send you every day, from their respective areas, what they believe may be interesting for the newspaper, or what they believe must be told (Borja Bergareche).

[...] You have also the major newspapers and major international media outlets, and at the moment, thanks to the Internet, you have access to lots of media across the globe. Now, if any single event happens, you can see what the local press in Kenya or Peru say, which 15 or 10 years ago was not so easy (Luis Prados).

Social media and other online information sources are becoming increasingly useful for journalists, although perhaps not so much when talking about humanitarian crises. Only Bayo provides a critical perspective on the phenomenon: thanks to the Internet and social networks, anyone can consider himself a journalist, and sometimes professional work is confused with “any witticism.”

We are in a world where a fifth power has emerged [...] which is Twitter. [...] I do not need to be aware of what Notimex [Mexican news wire] says. Because when Notimex posts something, I already know it by some other source (Luis Prados).

More in 2013 than in 2009, [...] breaking news are published on Twitter almost as much as on the news wire tickers (Borja Bergareche).

They have tried to make us believe that anyone with a mobile phone becomes a journalist when he tweets something. And that thing of ‘citizen journalism’ is a hoax that works for the established power; at the moment there is a lot of noise out there, and no distinction is made between contrasted journalisms [...] and anything which is said by anyone because he is connected to a social network (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

They seem to claim that this is not true [that journalism needs to be done by professionals]; [I am talking about] all those who defend the blogger as the bee’s knees and is really going to do the journalism of the future [...]. No, that’s not journalism (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

7.3. Evaluation of own work and proposals for improvement

Some of the proposals set out below were mentioned by all or most chief editors, while other ones were just suggested by only one or two of them. Based on the constant comparison of the data collected from the interviews, the recommendations were grouped into seven categories: ‘contextualize and explain the root causes;’ ‘avoid simplistic explanations;’ ‘provide new issues and new perspectives to avoid compassion fatigue;’ ‘reduce the psychological distance;’ ‘avoid any interruption in the coverage: report before, during and after the crisis;’ ‘be witness of the facts;’ and ‘tell stories of normality.’

7.3.1. Contextualize and explain root causes

Humanitarian crises are often reported in a predictable manner, usually forced to fit into a pre-existing mold that makes them all equal in the public gaze. News media turn crises into ‘good and bad’ stories, without explaining the underlying causes, thereby depriving the audience of information about their outcome. A loss of audience interest takes place as endless crises seem to have no origin or outcome, to become part of the natural order of things, while nothing can be done to change them.

The most important thing in an International section is to explain the news. You cannot deliver them without rhyme or reason, just because they are cool or very striking, or because there are many millions dead (Luis Prados).

You cannot only say [...] the situation turned into a bedlam with one million deaths. You have to explain some of the history of Rwanda [...]. You must explain how that country is, why it has a very high population density, who was before, whether Hutu or Tutsi, why and when they came [...]. The beautiful part is to try to avoid having too many prejudices and to explain things [...]. That is the most beautiful part and the hardest part (Luis Prados).

You have to explain the context and say that the conflict could have been avoided by doing this, or that it has not been avoided because of that, or the solutions are these [...]. But of course, you often do not have time to do it, and you have to do the analysis after (Francisco Herranz).

The ongoing crises are very complex, with different parameters and variables. While many speak of ethnic rivalries, there are always environmental, economic and ideological causes (Borja Bergareche).

7.3.2. Avoid simplistic explanations

This second recommendation relates to the above: if one wants to explain the root causes of a crisis, then dichotomous or Manichean explanations should be avoided. They are often used because of the idea that readers may get bored with details about ‘distant’ conflicts.

You cannot explain a humanitarian crisis by saying that some blacks are killing other blacks, and many of them are already dead, and there is no blood available in hospitals, and people are dying like flies in the streets. I’m talking about ‘good and bad’ stories [...] (Luis Prados).

It is very difficult to make people understand things when there are shades of grey; then you have to reduce, to do things black and white, and then [you do it wrong]. Things are neither black nor white, especially when dealing with an armed conflict. [...] You have to explain the different aspects, without boring or manipulating. It is very complex (Francisco Herranz).

[...] Of course one falls into oversimplified views, preconceptions, and prejudices, obviously (Borja Bergareche).

7.3.3. Provide new issues and new perspectives to avoid “compassion fatigue”

The news media stop reporting on some conflicts or humanitarian crises when they consider that the situation is stagnant and nothing new happens. The crisis thus becomes chronic, and chronic situations fail to adapt to news criteria. In the long-term crises, however, many stories take place. In the hands of a skilled journalist, they could be told

from a new perspective. An original approach, a single piece of news, would allow the media outlet to differentiate itself from the competition. Sometimes what is stagnant is not the crisis, but the ability of journalists to find new ways to tell it.

I would like the media outlets, especially the audiovisual ones, not to focus international information on the monsoon and massacres. I am somewhat weary of news programs. There are great people working on television, but the only international information we watch is a typhoon in Taiwan or the killing of Nigeria or Afghanistan. There are no social reports, even outside Spain, which entertain or move you (Francisco Herranz).

That journalism of “we’ve done well because we have done the same coverage as everyone else,” “we have done very well because we have entitled the piece of news like everyone else,” and “we have done very well because we have highlighted the same as all others” is a certificate of failure (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

[...] When you cover an unusual issue and you draw attention, for example, to the deaths of women in Ciudad Juárez, people suddenly get a shock, because that issue does not make headlines every day, even though it is an everyday event. Everything that repeats itself bores you in the end, and it will be less considered than what suddenly surprises you (Carlos Enrique Bayo).

Journalists are too attached to the route of military troops, humanitarian aid, peace conferences, official diplomacy, etc. But newspapers are facing the challenge of shaking off the most tedious part of the news agenda, to remain relevant in the lives of people, to remain interesting to citizens who are increasingly informed, thanks to the abundance of information sources (Borja Bergareche).

What needs to be done is to change the ‘menu’ from top to bottom, everything. In selecting the topics, the approach... Therein lies the solution. It is as simple and as broad as this (Borja Bergareche).

7.3.4. Reduce the psychological distance

One of the news criteria most repeated by the chief editors was ‘psychological proximity.’ The news events that are perceived as ‘ours’ are more likely to make headlines and spark more interest among readers. But in the interconnected world of today, the psychological distance of a particular news event is more a question of approach than the nature of the event itself: it is relatively easy to find a connection between any humanitarian crisis and ‘our’ country or ‘our’ cultural references.

Philippines is [...] a curious case: they were a Spanish colony and there is [social, cultural] closeness and a considerable number of people from that country living in Spain; but otherwise it is in Asia, the farthest continent for the Spanish people. [...] It is strange, in a way, how little is reported about a country where so many things happen like the Philippines (Borja Bergareche. Emphasis added).

Philippines is very different because there, after all, we had something to do, and on the other side, it is far away from us. It is a country out of our way, unfortunately (Luis Prados. Emphasis added).

There are no social reports, even outside Spain. [We must] help people know something more than neighbor countries: in this case France, Portugal, Morocco ... I’m talking about other countries like Nepal (Francisco Herranz).

7.3.5. Avoid any interruption in the coverage: report before, during and after the crisis

In many cases, crises reach the media agenda because they meet some of the news criteria, but their coverage is quickly abandoned and the news media no longer report their development. A number of fragmented news stories are thus created, and incomplete news events are provided to the audience, which makes it difficult or impossible to understand them:

Sometimes information disappears from the pages of the newspapers. And then readers never know what [...] happened to that issue that was so important. That is a question which shames us. [...] We drove the audience mad by telling them that issue was the most of the most and, two weeks later, it disappeared from the headlines and we heard of it no more (Luis Prados).

7.3.6. *Be witness of the facts*

For telling stories about crisis with a proper perspective it is essential to be in the place where the events are taking place. Although producing information is expensive, and even more so when it involves international information, media outlets that can afford a wide network of correspondents and special correspondents have to strive to have a field presence in humanitarian crises, in order to assure the public of the veracity of their information and to stand out from other media. Information from new wires and major media outlets should be a complement, not the basis of the information.

Fundamentally, for *El País*, the source of information is our international network of correspondents. That is the main source of information for the chief International editor of *El País*, his own correspondents (Luis Prados).

The journalist has to be witness of the facts, not an indirect collector of things people said to have occurred. [...] Any newspaper that boasts of offering international information needs to have a field presence. But sometimes it is very expensive or very dangerous to be there, but a newspaper cannot give up the duty to tell firsthand reality: that is the only valid seal of warranty for readers (Borja Bergareche).

7.3.7. *Tell stories of normality*

In countries in crisis it is not only natural disasters, massacres and coups that take place. If committed to making in-depth information available, the day-to-day stories of people must also be told, including happy stories and positive developments. This strategy will reduce the psychological distance between readers and countries facing humanitarian crisis, catching their interest.

We should tell more happy stories about countries like Guatemala, with similar frequency with which we tell negative stories. [...] And I am sure that in Guatemala things that can be highlighted happen. Besides today mental distances have been greatly shortened. [...] It is easy to find a connection element with most countries (Borja Bergareche).

8. Discussion and conclusions

According to news values highlighted by the International section editors, events with a high 'human impact' have a better chance of reaching the pages of the newspapers. However, in many cases, refugee and Internally Displaced Person (IDP) crises, declarations of famine, or devastating wars which cause the deaths of thousands of people do not clear the filter of the gatekeeper and do not become news. Why? Prados summed up the reason why many countries are excluded from the media agenda: from his perspective, the public and the editors get fed up and bored with chronic hunger and interminable conflicts. It therefore seems that one of the traditional functions of the journalism, 'to entertain', 'trumps' the other two: 'to inform' and 'to educate.' Entertainment, turned into the dominant value, contaminates attitudes and production routines of the professionals (journalists), who focus on developing a leisure product. Journalism based on the immediate satisfaction of the interests of the public can easily end up replacing the analysis for the production of sensations. It is what Ramonet (1999) calls 'hyper-emotion': it is easier and cheaper to thrill audiences than to appeal to reason. In this way there is a risk that audiences become uniform and conditioned, so that it will be more difficult for them to demand anything

different from what they know. What has happened to the ethical consideration of informing and educating the citizenry?

Stories with dramatic or gruesome components are more likely to be placed in a leading position in some of the pages of the International section. The gatekeepers used locutions such as 'kill by machete', 'appalling slaughter' or 'mass rape of women' to refer to the stories they would prioritize, so it can be concluded that there is a heavy predominance of the emotional burden of a news event over its rational components. When it comes to frame these countries, emotional elements are preferred over intellectual ones.

Other selection criteria mentioned by the editors lead to the conclusion that the impact of the crisis on the impoverished countries is not as important as the actual or potential consequences on Spain, Europe or Western countries. National interests prevail over all other considerations. But what is understood by 'national interest'? For the interviewees, the mere presence of Spanish troops or multinational corporations based on Spanish-private-capital are sufficient reasons to justify increased news coverage of a humanitarian crisis. But to what extent is it important for Spanish readers to be informed about of the business of Union Fenosa in Colombia, if media do not report events like the murder of 27 trade unionists at the hands of paramilitaries during the process of privatization of the electricity sector? (Escola Cultura de Pau, 2005). Is it of public interest to know about investments of Spanish electricity companies, if newspapers conceal a denunciation concerning the assassination of a community leader opposing one of their infrastructure projects?⁷ National interests and the interests of the institutional individual—the transmitter of information—get tangled up. However, there is no mention to the legitimate interests of the populations in the countries facing crises, not even as an accessory or supplementary criterion.

Antón Valero (2002) points out that the three major news agencies and a few news media with global influence build the social representation of the Southern countries for the North, even for the South itself, thus imposing an uniform vision and marginalizing any alternative consideration. The study shows that news agencies play an important, but not determinant role. International section editors at *El Mundo* and *Abc* both highlighted that agencies fulfill an indication function, setting much of the news agenda of crises and conflicts. In other words, news agencies have a key role in building the first level of the agenda (what crisis are covered and what others are forgotten), but not in the second level (how crises are covered). Adapting Cohen's (1963) oft quoted statement, one could say that news agencies may not be successful much of the time in telling media how to report an humanitarian crisis, but they are stunningly successful in telling its media what crisis they have to report about.

Building the first level of the agenda and deciding what crises reach the international media and what others remain unnoticed is no small deal. If agencies can decide in which places and at what moments a humanitarian crisis should be covered, they actually have a considerable influence. Furthermore, to what extent can one separate the influence on news selection from the influence on the type of news coverage? If, for example, a news agency highlights a famine in a refugee camp in northwestern Kenya and the media flock to cover that information, besides influencing news selection and setting the first level of the agenda, the news agency also plays a role in the news framing. What kind of news framing can one expect when the journalist and the photographer arrive at a refugee camp filled with people

⁷ Amaiur denuncia a empresas transnacionales españolas por violar derechos humanos en Guatemala y apoya querrela argentina contra crímenes del franquismo (2013, April 23). Kaos en la Red. Retrieved from <http://www.kaosenlared.net/component/k2/item/54598-amaiur-denuncia-a-empresas-transnacionales-espa%C3%B1olas-por-violar-derechos-humanos-en-guatemala-y-apoya-querrela-argentina-contra-cr%C3%ADmenes-del-franquismo.html>

dying of starvation and diseases? Humanitarian crises are complex, long-term processes, and when an agency highlights certain places and specific points in time, it exerts an influence, at the same time, on the agenda of attributes and the news framing.

For the four interviewees, the most important sources of information are their own correspondents, special envoys and freelancers. An average of 30 journalists, with dissimilar labor relationships with the newspaper, must perform the difficult task of portraying a version of the world for their readers. Other important sources are the major media, including the BBC and CNN, and local media, accessible from just about anywhere thanks to the Internet. Social media, especially Twitter, are gaining importance as sources of international information. However, attention is drawn to the danger of confusing quality journalism with any “crazy idea” that anyone places on the Internet.

Given the growing quantity of information available on the Web, future research should determine whether the so-called ‘digital divide’ is silencing even more the voice of those countries suffering humanitarian crisis. If social networks are becoming a source of international information, the most developed nations will remain the most represented in the media. A significant gap exists in terms of Internet penetration in different countries, and the nations facing crisis are virtually absent from the World Wide Web. To get an idea of this heterogeneous distribution suffice it to say that in countries like Iceland or Denmark, 95% of citizens used the Internet regularly in 2011, while the figures for the same period for countries such as Niger or Burundi were 1.3% and 1.11% respectively (International Telecommunication Union, 2012).

News stories about countries facing humanitarian crises do not allow us to know all about the countries facing crises, just the crises which these countries are undergoing. The needs of the affected population are not even mentioned as a news value, so they can hardly be reflected in the news stories. The old metaphor of the “information iceberg” is also suitable for explaining the news coverage of humanitarian crises: a significant portion of the reality remains hidden, and we can only know the small part that emerges.

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