'In/visible Conflicts: NGOs and the Visual Politics
of Humanitarian Photography

Lina Dencik and Stuart Allan
Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

This article examines the diverse factors shaping NGO involvement with humanitarian photography, paying particular attention to co-operative relationships with photojournalists intended to facilitate the generation of visual coverage of crises otherwise marginalised, or ignored altogether, in mainstream news media. The analysis is primarily based on a case study drawing upon 26 semi-structured interviews with NGO personnel (International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Oxfam and Save the Children) and photojournalists conducted over 2014 to 2016, securing original insights into the epistemic terms upon which NGOs have sought to produce, frame and distribute imagery from recurrently disregarded crisis zones. In this way, the article pinpoints how the uses of digital imagery being negotiated by NGOs elucidate the changing, stratified geo-politics of visibility demarcating the visual boundaries of newsworthiness.

Keywords: NGOs, photojournalism, humanitarian photography, conflict, crisis, digital imagery, visual politics, distant suffering

Photojournalism's longstanding norms, values and protocols are being decisively recast in the digital era, with many practitioners expressing apprehension regarding its future viability (Caple, 2014; Pantti and Sirén, 2015; Sheller, 2014; Thomson, 2016). Despite what appears to be an ever-growing demand for visual documentation of distant conflicts – sometimes characterised as a 'pix or it didn't happen' regimen – photo editors find themselves compelled to refashion their commissioning practices, keeping a near-constant eye on pressures to make the most of limited resources. Where previously major photo agencies, in Gürsel's (2016) words, 'mythologized photojournalism as a means of informing the public and bearing witness to injustices and atrocities,' their recent corporatisation into global 'visual content providers' has signalled a marked shift in priorities. For photojournalists struggling 'to balance their personal desire to create meaningful photographs with the need to earn a living,' Grayson (2014) contends, it is increasingly difficult to negotiate 'editorial changes from hard news to more of an entertainment focus for the global advertising-directed media outlets' (2014: 632). She is one of several researchers who have highlighted the extent to which not-for-profit, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been responding to these challenges over recent years (see Kurasawa, 2015; McLagan and McKee, 2012; McPherson, 2015; Powers, 2016; Wells, 2008; Zarzycka, 2016). For the more proactive NGOs involved, strategies include electing to contract

photojournalists to document crisis events that would otherwise elude news organisations' purview, while others encourage ordinary individuals and groups in afflicted areas to contribute alternative, eyewitness visual reportage (see also Allan, 2013, 2017; Baker and Blaagaard, 2016; Mortensen, 2015; Pantti et al., 2012).

This article examines the diverse factors shaping NGO involvement in photojournalism, paying particular attention to co-operative relationships intended to facilitate the generation of visual coverage of crises otherwise marginalised, or ignored altogether, in mainstream news media. Such initiatives potentially serve to render visible the hitherto invisible, albeit in a climate of uncertainty. 'Shrinking editorial budgets have translated into fewer assignments where photographers can shoot in-depth essays on issues like the effects of war or famine or disease,' photo editor James Estrin (2012) of *The New York Times* observes, leading some to pursue alternative sources of funding (e.g., through Kickstarter, foundations or private aid groups) in order to secure 'access to stories that might otherwise go untold.' At the same time, however, pressing ethical questions pose troubling complications, not least with regard to perceptions of undue influence, or disputes over the evidentiary value of the ensuing imagery's 'objective' truth-claims (see also Kozol, 2014; Moon, 2017; Pruce, 2016). Here we explore these and related issues via a case study examining three NGOs – International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Oxfam and Save the Children – and their engagement with visible evidence-gathering (primarily still photo-reportage), focusing on the opportunities and constraints of visualising ostensibly 'invisible' conflicts and their immediate aftermath in different contexts. Its principal findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with NGO personnel and photojournalists, securing original insights into the epistemic terms upon which NGOs have sought to produce, frame and distribute imagery from hidden corners to shed light on humanitarian crises otherwise under-reported in mainstream media. In this way, the article pinpoints how the uses of digital imagery being negotiated by NGOs elucidate the changing, stratified geo-politics of visibility demarcating the visual boundaries of newsworthiness.

Accordingly, this article identifies for purposes of analysis and critique the imperatives underpinning NGOs' normative investment in the visualisation of exigent humanitarian crises, including through the proactive forging of creative forms of collaboration with photographers and news outlets, to advance their organisational aims and objectives. Of particular concern are the ways these actors work to project their institutional cultures of truth-telling in the course of representing the harrowing realities of human misery to distant audiences, recognising how and why – in Pruce's (2016) words – 'appearance and image are as politically relevant as action and impact' for NGO strategies (2016: 51). Before turning to our interview findings, we begin the work of discerning several conceptual issues guiding our mode of enquiry into the emergent genre of what is increasingly being labelled 'humanitarian photography' by current practitioners.

NGOs and Humanitarian Photography

In providing a concise overview of pertinent themes across research literatures concerned with humanitarian interventions and imagery, the importance of attending to the historical evolution of relevant genealogies needs to be signalled from the

outset. While use of the term 'humanitarian photography' is gradually being taken-up by photographers and NGOs alike, it speaks to longstanding schemas for visual representation consistent with a documentary ethos of engaged, purposeful and concerned witnessing. Even its most elementary definition, namely in Fehrenbach and Rodogno's (2015) words 'the mobilization of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries' (2015: 1), may seem deceptively straightforward. Careful inspection makes apparent the extent to which competing inflections of humanitarian imagery imply differing epistemological commitments, each claiming its purchase in varied, uneven circumstances. When questioning how this genre of photography depicts the painful plight of others, Fehrenbach and Rodogno underscore the value of scholarly enquiries striving to understand how it works to 'address viewers, incite voyeurism, touch emotion, convey knowledge, fix memories, or position privileged spectators in relation to human misery' while, at the same time, recognising the extent to which it is 'implicated in structures of power, particularly the modern visual economy in which "we," in the industrial West, watch as "others," elsewhere, suffer' (2015: 2; see also Azoulay, 2012; Batchen et al., 2012; Kennedy and Patrick, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2014; Linfield, 2010; Sliwinski, 2011).

Emergent models of co-operation, and in some cases close partnership, between NGOs and photojournalists (many of the latter being prepared to put themselves in harm's way in their service), typically find a shared social purpose in what Fehrenbach and Rodogno (2016) call the 'moral rhetoric' of humanitarian photography. Such models bring to bear certain pragmatic protocols revolving around envisioned synergies, intertwining advocacy with reporting to craft pragmatic ways forward. Strategic commitments to raise the visibility of certain issues will likely draw upon discourses of action and engagement while, at the same time, laying claim to the rhetorical authority of visual truth-telling by eschewing explicit ideological commitments. Even when relatively straightforward to express in promotional terms, however, this intersection of reciprocal interests will be provisional at best, and always open to contestation. Indeed, these tensions continue to reverberate throughout ongoing debates over humanitarian photography's moral obligations for what Linfield (2010) aptly characterises as an 'ethics of showing,' just as 'we are responsible for the ethics of seeing' (2010: 60). The visual representation of distant suffering needs to be 'tolerably shocking,' to borrow Grant's (2015) phrase, which is to say sufficiently revealing to mobilise protest while respectful of evolving normative limits. 'The desired visceral effect,' he continues, 'must be balanced with an analytical, even clinical explanation that affords the audience safe emotional distance from an image of chaos brought to light' (2015: 64).

In the current climate, when major news organisations are increasingly hard pressed to commit sufficient resources to pursue international stories in crisis areas with 'boots on the ground' or 'eyewitness journalism', this challenge to establish relations of reciprocity often proves especially acute (Cooper, 2011; Murrell, 2015; Sambrook, 2010). 'Producing original content from far-flung places of the earth is expensive,' Heba Aly (2016) of IRIN points out, leaving organisations committed to humanitarian reporting scrambling to make their work viable in commercial terms. Typically non-profits in the African context are 'too "political" for the private sector,' she argues, 'too mainstream for the traditional aid donors; not flashy enough for the digital media donors, and not upbeat enough for the activist campaigns that inspire

you' (2016: 144). Acutely aware that efforts to generate, or at least facilitate, news coverage may well translate into enhanced fundraising prospects, NGOs typically feel compelled to realign advocacy strategy in accordance with journalistic expectations, as well as the pragmatic demands of resource-stretched newsrooms under intense deadline pressure (Cottle and Cooper, 2015; Powers, 2016; Eskjær, 2016; Waisbord 2012). In striving to reaffirm the normative limits of impartial reporting, NGOs will consider a wide array of bespoke newsmaking tactics, including providing newsrooms with 'information subsidies' in the form of visual intelligence (photographs and video as well as infographics, maps, satellite imagery, drone surveillance, and so forth). While such institutional affinities – indicative of what Wright (2015) calls, after one of her interviewees, 'grey areas' of media practice – can sustain longstanding commitments, more typically they are short-term, even ad hoc in duration. Moreover, research shows how swiftly these points of overlap, however symbiotic, may turn into sites of inter-role conflict at both individual and institutional levels. 'If journalism is about both the provision of information *and* the holding of power to account,' Powers (2016) observes, 'then the rise of NGO information work raises questions about who will hold NGOs accountable' (2016: 413-414). Here it goes almost without saying that the facts of a given situation may look markedly different from the respective vantage points of advocacy and journalism. Still, notwithstanding potential risks, trade-offs and compromises, NGO promotional norms and reportorial values are frequently presumed to reinforce one another in a manner that is mutually beneficial.

Recent years have seen many NGOs expend considerable resources developing schemes to professionalise their uses of photography within media publicity-seeking initiatives. In attempting to make the most of opportunities afforded by new media ecologies, earlier forms of documentary engagement are being actively reconfigured, with implications for the ethical tenets associated with more traditional genres. Grayson's (2014) research into the embedding of photographers with NGO campaigns in Africa suggests to her that a new genre is emerging, namely what she calls 'NGO Reportage.' She writes, 'it has a mix of visual similarities and content with what one might define as *press photography* but with certain patterns of practice and image genre that follow a mix of *documentary photography* and *photojournalism*' (Grayson, 2014: 634). This interweaving of varied genres of photography from one multimedia platform to the next, and thereby blurring 'hard' with 'soft' or 'human interest' news values and priorities, underlines the extent to which imagery can be re-inflected to speak to a multiplicity of highly diversified audiences. Of upmost import, as Fehrenbach and Rodogno (2016) point out, is the capacity of 'humanitarian imagery' to effectively 'forge temporary communities of emotion and political action of like-minded viewers around specific causes' (2016: 6). Research into the uses of photojournalism by NGOs for promotional purposes is limited but growing, with studies focusing on humanitarian images deployed in fundraising materials, advertising and campaigning posters (Chouliaraki, 2012; Dogra, 2007; Vasavada, 2016; Wells, 2008; Zarzycka, 2016), as well as annual reports (Davison, 2007) and codes of conduct (Manzo, 2008), amongst other outputs. 'The images NGOs choose to project are not based on unmediated or "free" choice,' as Dogra (2007) maintains, hence the import of attending to the 'limitations of charity laws, tug of multiple stakeholders, [and] specific "organisational subjectivity,"' amongst other factors (2007: 170).

Perceived ideological interests and motivations frequently prove controversial from these varied perspectives, of course. 'Often the use made of photography by NGOs, courts and tribunals is highly ideological,' Joyce's (2010) interview-based study leads him to contend (2010: 230). To the extent professional photographers collaborate in such forms of advocacy, it is likely to represent a departure from professional codes of conduct – at the risk of compromising humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence necessary for public trust – they otherwise feel obligated to espouse. More typically, his study suggests, photographers 'speak of their role as to prick our consciences, to record for history, and increasingly to provide some momentum for either a response in human rights, international criminal or transitional justice terms' (2010: 235). Photojournalists accepting invitations from NGOs to participate in new projects stand to gain not only financial support, which may amount to a fully paid commission, but also may be provided with vital access to the field and assistance with security. Many of them, as Hallas (2012) work shows, 'highly value the deep knowledge that NGOs have of the environments and events they are interested in shooting,' while NGOs, in turn, benefit from high quality photography, as well as 'from the cultural capital accrued from the authorial or brand-name recognition of the photographer or [photo] agency' (2012: 101). Even in such win-win scenarios, however, where photo-centred appeals succeed in mobilising like-minded viewers around a given cause, there is no guarantee, of course, they will necessarily proceed to 'convince targeted publics of their duty to act' (Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2016: 6).

This line of critique is readily apparent to those NGOs all too aware of how difficult it is to realise normative ideals in the day-to-day labour of setting campaigns into motion. Humanitarian appeals, as Chouliaraki (2012) observes, 'have always struggled to settle the questions of how to visualize suffering, and how to inspire our feelings and actions on it, in ways that safeguard the legitimacy of their agencies in an increasingly competitive market' (2012: 54). What amounts to a near-constant threat of delegitimisation can be warded off, in part, by accentuating what she terms the 'affective performativity' of appeals; that is, the humanitarian agency's self-reflexive mediation of imagery to generate emotion by authenticating certain 'dispositions to action towards suffering others' (2012: 56; see also Cottle and Cooper, 2015; Kyriakidou, 2014). To the extent a 'politics of pity' is displaced by a 'logic of corporate branding,' Chouliaraki's research suggests it is all the more likely post-humanitarian styles of appealing will gain traction; the latter, in her words, being an 'ambivalent logic that seduces us into a "cool" activism whilst keeping us in a comfort zone that offers neither justifications as to why we should act on the suffering of others nor the opportunity to confront the humanity of those others" (2012: 77). The capacity of photography to summon forth moral publics is thereby called into question, with other scholars, such as Hariman and Lucaites (2016), contending that its 'radical plurality' is too often contained within aesthetically-appropriate moralisation strategies (see also Hesford, 2011; Madianou, 2012). Orgad's (2015) research suggests the 'contemporary market-driven, competitive, mediated environment, and the immense pressure on and scrutiny of NGOs internally' and externally, impels them to 'stress in their communications reassurance, comfort, and sustenance rather than disruption of the existing social order.' More often than not, she argues,

'[r]epresentations of oppression and exploitation that potentially might be disturbing to spectators are consequently being obscured' (2015: 130).

Visualising the invisible

In order to further elaborate this conceptual agenda on the basis of empirical evidence, this section turns to examining photojournalists' and NGOs' respective deliberations over imagery, particularly with regard to documenting conflicts recurrently falling outside the purview of the media lens. Specifically, our study reports on findings from 26 interviews conducted between 2014-2016 with international photojournalists as well as staff from prominent NGOs, most notably International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, Oxfam and Save the Children. These organisations were chosen for their extensive activity in working with crises and, pragmatically, their willingness to respond positively to requests for contacts and access. Fifteen of the interviews were carried out via Skype or in person and lasted on average 30-45 minutes, while eleven of the participants answered our questions via email. In this article, we are particularly concerned with the role of NGOs as key actors in the generation and distribution of imagery, especially in relation to conflict. We therefore evaluate NGO practices, including their uses, sourcing and guidelines concerning imagery, their relationship with photojournalists and news organisations, and challenges they face in getting their message out through media-driven networks. Whilst the emphasis was placed on exploring the NGO-photographer interface, we situate it within the broader NGO-news organisation nexus. The use of semi-structured interviews provided us with important insights into the practices of NGOs in generating, sourcing and distributing imagery from conflicts. Our analysis assesses how participants themselves – from NGOs' and photojournalists' respective vantage points - described and reflected upon the ethical and political dimensions of their potentially shifting roles in visualising narratives of in/visible human suffering. It assesses and critiques the ways in which NGOs mediate the politics of humanitarian photography to advance their position as visual storytellers of conflicts otherwise eluding adequate media coverage. In so doing, the analysis highlights continuous tensions with respect to the internalisation of news values, norms and conventions, the demands of a digital attention economy, and the navigation of an ethics of care in relation to the 'tolerably shocking'.

Our study's interviews illustrated the extent to which NGOs perceive their engagement with photojournalists in relation to a wider media ecology and as a core dimension of sustaining viable emergency responses and humanitarian work during conflicts. NGOs depend on media attention and human interest, frequently advanced through different uses of imagery. Oxfam, for example, an anti-poverty organisation closely involved in the on-going crisis in Yemen, hired a press officer photographer with the specific goal 'to help put Yemen on the map' (media lead Yemen, Oxfam). The decision to dedicate resources to generate images from Yemen stems from an explicit recognition that 'the reason [Yemen] is not getting any attention is because the cameras aren't there.' (senior press officer, Oxfam) In that sense, any footage from Yemen has 'a great deal of media potential' (senior press officer, Oxfam) as news organisations have struggled with navigating the terrain and accessing the site of conflict. This speaks to the important role for NGOs (partly come about through the

changing structures and strictures of digital photojournalism) as access points and content providers. As explained by an interviewee from Save the Children, sometimes NGOs 'are in situations that media can't get to' and they can provide imagery from local staff or provide wholesale stories to media outlets that include entire packages of content and context (global director of creative content, Save the Children). Whilst NGOs continuously generate imagery for their own internal use or for funders, this position of providing access to imagery creates strategic opportunities for pushing conflicts onto wider news agendas. This extends also to common practices of encouraging photographers to come along on trips, pitching stories that draw attention to particular aspects of a conflict. One such example provided by an interviewee from Save the Children involved inviting photojournalists along to shoot the release of child soldiers in South Sudan in order to highlight the situation there. As the Save the Children interviewee went on to note, 'the beast that is the media content machine needs stories and we are a useful tool for stories.' At the same time, making themselves 'necessarily useful' (global director of creative content, Save the Children) to media outlets provides NGOs with opportunities to focus public and media attention on their work.

Whilst building good relationships with photojournalists and news organisations is crucial in this regard, being a critical friend to expose journalistic neglect can be an important part of this relationship. This involves an acquired in-depth understanding of the logics underpinning news forms and practices as well as the dynamics of media attention whilst, simultaneously, continuing to cope with the limitations of such practices and dynamics. NGOs can exercise considerable leverage as arbiters of moral authority concerning ignored suffering, including by pointing out how the uneven distribution of news coverage can amount not only to indifference, but complicity in perpetuating injustice. A strategic priority for Oxfam in engaging reporters (as well as the wider public) in Yemen, for example, has been through direct comparisons to neighbouring conflicts, such as the attention given to Syria. One interviewee described how headlining a press release 'Yemen is like Syria but without the cameras' was a move to make explicit the role of imagery (or lack thereof) in dictating media interest in one context over another (senior press officer, Oxfam). Similarly, one of the biggest campaigns carried out by Red Cross was a media literacy campaign called 'Silent Disasters' in 2013 dedicated to 'cutting through the indifference' (senior communications officer, Red Cross) with regards to the numerous disasters happening around the world receiving little, if any, media attention. Again, the campaign was framed around a comparison to stories dominating news agendas, in this case the destruction of Hurricane Sandy in the United States. The campaign visualised the uneven news coverage with data derived from a global content analysis. In pursuing such campaigns, NGOs render explicit their engagement with the politics of media attention, and in so doing directly interrogate the demarcations of newsworthiness in the visibility of crises.

In this way, our study suggests, the uneven flow of imagery becomes a point of intervention for NGOs intent on highlighting unspoken hierarchies of human distress and suffering. Such critical recastings of the protocols of visual reporting demand continuous negotiation, including where an understanding of news values (and an in-depth awareness of these twists and turns of media attention) proves

integral to achieving the promotional aims of the organisation. As a photo editor at the International Committee of the Red Cross explained:

> I think we have to know what's trending in the news, we have to know what people are looking at and join the conversation on those topics in a way that makes sense to us. We are absolutely interested in what is happening in the global news, what the US or France cares about for example, or domestically what's happening and how we can become part of that conversation. (photo editor, International Committee of Red Cross)

In recognising the fluidity of such demarcations of newsworthiness, NGOs gain a better awareness of discursive openings to advance their agenda, even when they may prove contentious. The question becomes one of how far journalistic conventions should drive NGO's symbolic practices in image generation. Our analysis of the interviews showed that engagement with newsworthiness becomes, in strategic terms, an 'unfortunate' necessity (to use the phrase of an interviewee). More often than not this means having to secure innovative ways to visualise distant crises in accordance with domestic concerns, namely by heightening a sense of news value that may otherwise prove elusive: '[we have to] show [the media] how their own market has an interest in it.' (media lead Yemen, Oxfam) In the case of British media coverage of Yemen, drawing attention to the conflict is easier if the story can be related to UK governmental involvement in the weapons or arms sales to Saudi Arabia: 'Yemen sometimes gets more coverage when it is about sales of arms than when it is about people dying of starvation.' (media lead Yemen, Oxfam) Yet at the same time, this type of politicisation may not be consistent with the NGO's remit. For Oxfam, the challenge becomes one of engaging the media through imagery that pushes beyond the immediate news angle to speak to its principal mission, namely as an anti-poverty organisation rather than an anti-arms one. When the overarching objective is to engage interested constituencies in the NGO's work, it follows, how a given crisis is characterised will govern the selection of visualisation strategies. For example, an interviewee from Save the Children spoke of the difference in approach in handling communicative resources when dealing with 'rapid onsets' or emergencies *versus* 'slow onset' contexts, such as on-going conflicts:

> With rapid onset (…) people already care so all you are doing is illustrating the situation (…) It's very simple in terms of the communication going out (…) In a long-term or invisible conflict or a long-term situation like a drought (…) people get tired of that situation so it's harder to communicate to them how important it is and persuade them to care. So what we do in those types of situations is to be much more creative and innovative in terms of the types of content that we go out with. (global director of creative content, Save the Children)

In this sense, humanitarian photography's tacit promise to reaffirm short-term news values (customarily associated with photojournalism) risks frustrating the long-

term mission of NGOs, possibly exacerbating tensions in a relationship routinely upheld as 'mutually beneficial.' To the extent mobilising news organisations' co-operation is perceived to be an essential component of humanitarian initiatives, the mediation of competing, even contradictory, priorities becomes a pressing concern. In what can easily transform into a struggle over credibility, NGOs' capacity to bring public pressure to bear on institutions of power is vital:

> We don't reach a great deal of people through our own channels. Whereas with what is perceived as an independent media, they have this extra quality (…) they have this amazing reach. They can reach millions of people whereas we can reach thousands. (senior press officer, Oxfam)

Our study suggests there appears to be a shared, albeit internalised understanding amongst these NGOs that the differing epistemic commitments of humanitarian photography rest precariously on the validation from 'objective' photojournalists to be most effective. Or put differently, these commitments are effectively shored-up – that is to say, visually anchored – in normative terms to the extent emotional expression is contained within certain narrative conventions intended to engender sympathy for distant others.

Despite the predominance of mainstream news organisations shaping public perceptions, the myriad digital media spaces for distributing multifaceted types of visual content creates alternative conditions of possibility to circulate subjunctive claims on viewers to bear witness. Changing profile pictures on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, for example, invites a reframing of interactivity in a manner suited to such platforms' affordances. A case in point is Red Cross' 'Red for Syria' campaign to symbolise the deaths of volunteers in conflicts, where users are encouraged to change their profile picture to a red square every time a volunteer is killed, thereby focusing attention on a conflict despite 'the absence of images' (senior communications officer, Red Cross). In a culture of experimentation, social media platforms are being tested to find new possibilities for the visualisation of crises, often privileging creative and unconventional types of truth-telling to advance human-centred narratives otherwise difficult to align with news agendas. It is precisely on these terms that photography mobilised for NGO initiatives can be especially evocative, endeavouring to humanise and dignify 'the other' as a way to instil affective connectivity:

> [T]he more interesting and human and authentic the story is usually it will get across (…) Even really intimate moments between for example one of our staff and a patient, are overwhelmingly the highest in engagement on our platforms for us. (photo editor, International Committee of the Red Cross)

Similarly, in finding ways to 're-engage people' in an on-going conflict such as the one in Syria, Save the Children highlighted different initiatives that they described as 'innovative' and 'creative' ways of generating provident imagery via alternative platforms (global director of creative content, Save the Children). This has included, for example, giving teenagers at a Zaatari refugee camp an iPhone and photography

training to document their daily experiences, and then sharing ensuing images via Tumblr (a micro-blogging platform). Other multiplatform initiatives have included producing a short film to illustrate a bombed-out classroom in Syria, superimposing names of children who should have been in attendance that day. The imagery proved even more poignant when used in conjunction with a physical stunt outside the British parliament, which saw refugee children from Aleppo, together with Save the Children staff, recreate the destroyed school in an attempt to put the educational implications of the conflict on the agenda (film producer, Save the Children UK). Both campaigns were picked up by international news organisations, advancing a method of communication that is 'less (…) just telling people what [is] happening and much more trying to give them a much deeper, and greater, empathetic understanding of what the reality is for people living there.' (global director of creative content, Save the Children) Whilst such campaigns push the boundaries of how to foster empathy and engagement, they simultaneously position NGOs as tactically attractive to photojournalists seeking the types of 'creative' long-form content previously confined to news magazines, now – as several freelance photojournalists interviewed pointed out - a relative rarity in the contemporary media ecology.

Securing evermore compelling yet appropriately affective forms of imagery consistent with a social media ethos poses significant questions regarding selection, re-inflection and curation, arguably heightened by what one interviewee described as the new 'public consciousness of photography' (press officer, Save the Children UK). The diverse array of images produced in, by and through embodied, first-hand witnessing – encompassing a repertoire of documentary typifications from precipitous, spur-of-the-moment recordings to purposeful, activist or campaigning photography – is suggestive of what can be a visually-saturated environment in some situational contexts. Even in those characterised by image scarcity, however, contending claims to truthfulness and authenticity (and thereby verification) in visual narratives may be similarly internalised, ostensibly 'common sensical' negotiations amongst producers and audiences alike. To the extent the rapid, real-time documentation of human crises is a normalised feature of mediascapes, ordinary, everyday deprivation risks being discounted in favour of the extraordinary exception. The prospect of crossing visual thresholds can be daunting as a result. In the words of one interviewee:

> in terms of what that means for NGOs is that we have to be a bit more innovative and smart about the content we are producing. Because at the end of the day our remit is to try and raise as much funds as possible so we can do our essential life-saving work around the world (…) And in order to do that we have to be clever about what content we produce and how we do it so that it stands out. (press officer, Save the Children UK)

Navigating the attention economy of digital media therefore lends itself to certain preferred types of imagery and associated kinds of communication campaigns (see also Dencik, 2015; Eskjær, 2016). 'Standing out' extends to the conventions and values embedded in the technology of platforms that dictate what content is likely to be more 'spreadable' (Jenkins, 2013). This includes an in-depth understanding of

algorithmic filtering and newsfeed design, as well as a sense of the sentiments that lend themselves to being shared, preserved and archived on different platforms. One interviewee described Instagram as a more 'positive' platform in comparison to Twitter or Facebook, suggesting images posted by the NGO are chosen partly on this basis (photo editor, International Committee of the Red Cross). More generally, the concern is with an incipient politics of visibility on social media, its inchoate rules of inclusion (and therefore exclusion) guided by the imperative to catch the flickering eye of mainstream news organisations.

Ethics of visibility

In engaging with this ethics of visibility for representational mediations of distant suffering, NGOs necessarily enter into a contentious realm of evolving normative limits often expressed as the 'tolerably shocking.' Not only do epistemological commitments help demarcate humanitarian photography's priorities for NGOs in relation to news organisations, but a perceived 'stringent' editorial process based on pertinent ethical guidelines can further advance as well as complicate relationships – both ad hoc and formalised – with photojournalists. As an interviewee from Oxfam noted, 'Some things we know would work media-wise but don't really fit with our agenda or in the way we use images.' This may also extend to what some photojournalists believe amounts to a 'restricted vision,' rather than one defined by 'reacting to the scene that unfolds before them.' (consulting researcher for Save the Children, UK). More specifically, our interviewees frequently stressed a particular concern with dignity and consent as the cornerstone of their ethical practice. On this basis, images that showcase notable 'distress' or 'gratuitous shock value' will be excluded from purview: 'we want to show people not as helpless victims but as active dignified people.' (senior press officer, Oxfam)

In line with such emphases, a further prevalent theme amongst our interviewees' responses was the importance of ensuring proper informed consent, recognising the ability for someone to give permission in a given context is situationally-bound: 'We (…) sit down with a potential interviewee, we explain our jobs, tell them how their story is going to be published and ask them if they would consider sharing their story.' (commissioning editor, Oxfam) As interviewees from Save the Children pointed out, this often includes a translator who can explain the consent form and convey the meaning, for example, of posting a photo to a website: 'Our consent process would take at least 20 minutes to half an hour which is sometimes quite difficult.' This is a contrasting temporality to the news cycle of a news agency that will seek to go in, '[shoot] a situation and [come] out again'; an important distinction noted by the same interviewee:

> We need things quickly but we are not a news agency. What we are
> interested in is showing the public what the need is in a certain
> situation and then later on how we are helping. So the urgency of that
> is slightly less. So we don't need to turn things around in 2 or 3 hours
> (…) which gives us that time to make sure the consent process is in
> place. (press officer, Save the Children UK)

This responsibility to the 'beneficiaries' and the need to sustain long-term trust with the communities NGOs are working with creates a unique framework within which imagery is produced. Indeed, as one interviewee pointed out, this can also come to frustrate the relationship between NGO and photographer, revealing a certain 'paradox' as 'collaboration is desired but at the same time the rigid brief and ethical standards presented to photographers can cause hostility and a resignation to switch off creative input and merely deliver as requested.' (consulting researcher for Save the Children UK).

Moreover, whilst upholding such standards is consistent with good practice, there is simultaneous acknowledgement this will be difficult to achieve in moments of crises: 'the first 24 hours are absolutely critical in terms of fundraising because the public will be very engaged at that point because there will be a lot of media alerts.' (global director of creative content, Save the Children) This will likely involve using local staff to source imagery, or commissioning photojournalists on the ground, who will then also need to consider, in the words of one interviewee, 'how the local people feel about it and how they know what I'm doing' (freelance photojournalist). The relative size and established nature of the three NGOs we have focused on in this study makes such uncertainties easier to manage with set procedures, but photojournalists noted in our interviews that the pressure to generate images for fundraising can sometimes risk jeopardizing considerations for the communities in question, even threatening to undermine customary ethical commitments. As one photojournalist noted, 'NGOs are desperate for money and they need your photographs to bring back evidence of their "life changing" work. You don't have a lot of time to get the shot,' before adding: 'There's a lot of pressure and a lot of quick, moral decisions.' (freelance photojournalist).

Still, endeavouring to respect notions of informed consent means that some NGO-secured imagery will remain internal to the organisation. By not sharing it with news outlets, what might otherwise amount to a 'loss of control' is protected, even at the price of lost publicity. Our study highlighted how the pursuit of accuracy and truthfulness underwrites the relationship between NGOs and photographers, in part due to their shared investment in upholding a moral order of visual legitimacy. Despite the proliferation of images produced by individuals on the ground, many of whom blur the boundaries between citizen and professional witnesses, the NGOs in this study rely, perhaps more than ever, on hiring carefully selected photographers or organisational team members for sourcing visual material. In this sense, as an interviewee from Red Cross explained, 'we're moving towards using user-generated content, but that's still in the future for us.' Significant in this context is the problem of ascertaining the truthfulness of an image, 'definitely one of the reasons we don't use [social media] images very often. There is always a question of where the photo actually came from, who took it, who shared it.' (media lead Yemen, Oxfam) This study's NGOs typically commission photographers and train programme delegates locally placed to use mobile devices to generate imagery informed by day-to-day engagement and local knowledge. In relying on professionals and their own staff, accuracy and truthfulness are pursued through channels of trust. 'You are reliant on the photographers' professionalization of their work and you expect them to tell you the truth,' stated one interviewee (senior press officer, Oxfam), while another pointed to community understanding: 'we have that very important (…) knowledge of the local

situation which means we are in a best place to make sure we are representing appropriately.' (press officer, Save the Children UK) In this sense, then, there is an attempt to establish a bounded space based on communities of trust in an otherwise very fluid media infrastructure, one in which normative conventions are perceived to be at constant risk of being compromised.

Furthermore, this commitment to a protean ethics of visibility complicates ambitions for NGOs as mediators of invisible conflicts at the same time as marking them out from other actors. Whilst privileging their ability to gain access and contextual knowledge, it may also frustrate pursuits for mobilising protest and moving people to act. An interviewee from Oxfam noted, for example, the 'shocking imagery' used in BBC news coverage of Yemen and in a Channel 4 documentary, imagery that Oxfam would not generate themselves, 'can be extremely powerful and can really say what is actually happening to some very vulnerable people.' (senior press officer, Oxfam) Photojournalists' ability to distinguish varied aspects of conflict situations can therefore come to reaffirm and extend agendas of NGOs otherwise impractical, if not impossible to pursue – leading, in effect, to the visualising of suffering being 'outsourced.' At the same time, it may reaffirm news values NGOs simultaneously deplore. In the words of one photo editor:

> News organisations have their place and they serve a different purpose. I think we need that. I think it's absolutely essential to public discourse and information. But it's not our purpose. As much as we contribute to maybe the bigger picture, our objective is not to tell the news. (photo editor, International Committee of the Red Cross)

Evidently, then, the competing interests playing out over the generation and uses of humanitarian imagery do not align neatly with journalistic logics or frames, not when strategic priorities displace news values. Instead, it is by recasting the performativity of visual truth-telling for purposes of activism and intervention that the otherwise tacit, normative rationales necessary to foster political engagement will be thrown into sharp relief. To make the invisible visible, it follows, is to disentangle the typically subtle, nuanced ways in which the familiar binary between 'us' and 'them' is normalised within the acceptable limits of newsworthiness.

Conclusion

Returning to Fehrenbach and Rodogno's (2016) conception of humanitarian photography as 'moral rhetoric' outlined above, we have shown how its longstanding commitment to mobilize 'images of suffering, including extreme suffering, to enhance sympathy, empathy and a sense of responsibility or guilt in its viewers' continues to evolve in digital environments, sometimes in unexpected ways. The vital role it plays in 'triggering emotional response' remains a guiding tenet of visual form, practice and epistemology, one justified as a necessary means to shape 'public understanding of both what is going on "out there" and what is at stake' (2016: 6). In the words of one of our interviewees, this type of humanitarian storytelling can be defined by its promise to connect with distant publics, serving to 'spark their imaginations and get

them to engage in those stories that are thousands of miles away.' (press officer, Save the Children UK)

This article's empirical study, in striving to further explicate these issues, investigated pertinent dimensions of NGOs' engagement with evidence-gathering focused on the opportunities and constraints of visualising ostensibly 'invisible' conflicts and their immediate aftermath in varied, uneven representational contexts. 'Our images must be real,' a senior press officer with Oxfam stressed. 'We can't set up some sort of false view because of our image concerns, but there are restrictions about what we can show and what we do show.' Mediating the visual power of this imagery is to recognise the unruliness of its potentialities, this study demonstrated, inviting fresh thinking about how to best perform a curatorial role, one consistent with professional standards and procedures while, at the same time, benefiting from the news value associated with the emotive, visceral immediacy of first-hand, eyewitnessing of human suffering. Whilst seeking to engage people and stir responses through empathetic forms of visual communication, we also heard interviewees reaffirming commitments to upholding ethical guidelines and editorial processes shifting the visualisation of suffering away from 'victims'. In its place, alternative, creative appeals to human affectivity are being proactively pursued at the intersection of digital affordances, even 'outsourcing' uses of harrowing imagery to news organisations less invested in long-term strategic agendas.

Our approach highlighted how and why the uses of different imagery negotiated by NGOs elucidate the changing, stratified geo-politics of visibility demarcating the boundaries of newsworthiness, but there is further work to be done. At risk of being lost in current debates regarding how humanitarian photography is being recast by digital imperatives – for better in the name of democratisation or, as many fear, for worse as a rigorous, independent craft threatens to unravel – is the extent to which formative protocols and priorities set in motion in the early twentieth century continue to claim their purchase. 'The graphic form presents new, unique opportunities to leverage traditional devices including storytelling, witnessing, and naming and shaming,' as Monshipouri and Mokhtari (2016) maintain, yet for organisations to maximize their impact in a rapidly evolving visual culture, 'they must articulate an identity that is resonant with the audience as well as consistent with the progressive principles at the heart of human rights claims' (2016: 278). This complex process of articulation necessarily entails re-fashioning pre-digital modes of visual communication, including refinements in our conceptual vocabulary in order to rethink what counts as 'humanitarian imagery' with sufficient analytical specificity within digitalised conditions of possibility. We have endeavoured in this article to begin the task of meeting this challenge, and in so doing sought to show why the fluid, contingent strategies of representation, mediation and communication at the heart of the NGO-photojournalism interface warrant researchers' urgent attention.

Acknowledgements

References

Allan S (2013) *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Allan S (ed) (2017) *Photojournalism and Citizen Journalism: Co-operation, Collaboration and Connectivity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Azoulay A (2012) *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*. London: Verso.

Batchen G, Gidley M, Miller NK, and Prosser J (eds) (2012) *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis.* London: Reaktion.

Baker M and Blaagaard B (eds) (2016) *Citizen Media and Public Spaces*. London: Routledge.

Caple H (2014) Anyone can take a photo, but: Is there space for the professional photographer in the twenty-first century newsroom? *Digital Journalism* (ahead-of-print), 1-11.

Chouliaraki L (2012) *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-humanitarianism.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cooper G (2011) *From Their Own Correspondents? News Media and the Changes in Disaster Coverage*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Cottle S and Cooper G (eds) (2015) *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*. New York: Peter Lang.

Davison J (2007) Photographs and accountability: Cracking the codes of an NGO. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 20(1): 133-158.

Dencik L (2015) Social media and the 'new authenticity' of protest. In: L. Dencik and O. Leistert (eds.) *Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Protest: Between Control and Emancipation*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, pp. 203-218

Dogra N (2007) Reading NGOs visually: Implications of visual images for NGO management. *Journal of International Development* 19(2): 161–171.

Eskjær M (2016) Medialisering af frivillige organisationer. In: S. Hjarvard (ed.) *Medialisering: Mediernes rolle i social og kulturel forandring.* Copenhagen: Hans Retizels Forlag, pp. 241-270

Estrin J (2012) When interest creates a conflict. *The New York Times*, 19 November. Available at: http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/19/when-interest-creates-a-conflict/?_r=0

Fehrenbach H and Rodogno D (eds) (2015) *Humanitarian Photography: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fehrenbach H and Rodogno D (2016) 'A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child': Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective. *International Review of the Red Cross*, DOI:10.1017/S1816383116000369

Grant K (2015) The limits of exposure: Atrocity photographs in the Congo Reform Campaign. In: Fehrenbach H and Rodogno D (eds) (2015) *Humanitarian Photography: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64-88.

Grayson L (2014) The role of the non-government organisation (NGO) practicing editorial photography in a globalised media environment. *Journalism Practice* 8(5): 632-645.

Gürsel ZD (2016) *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hallas R (2012) Photojournalism, NGOs, and the new media ecology. In McLagan M and McKee Y (eds) *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*. New York: Zone Books, pp.95-114.

Hariman R and Lucaites JL (2016) *The Public Image*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hesford WS (2011) *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Joyce D (2010) Photography and the image-making of international justice. *Law and Humanities* 4(2): 229-249.

Kennedy L and Patrick C (eds) (2014) *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict*. London: I.B. Taurus.

Kozol W (2014) *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kurasawa F (2015) How does humanitarian visuality work? *Sociologica*, 1: 1-59.

Kyriakidou M (2014) Media witnessing: exploring the audience of distant suffering *Media, Culture and Society* 37(2) 215–231.

Linfield S (2010) *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Madianou M (2012) Humanitarian campaigns in social media. *Journalism Studies* 14(2): 249-266.

Manzo K (2008) Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood. *Antipode* 40(4): 632–657.

McLagan M and McKee Y (eds) (2012) *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*. New York: Zone Books.

McPherson E (2015) Advocacy organizations' evaluation of social media information for NGO journalism. *American Behavioral Scientist* 59(1): 124–48.

Monshipouri M and Mokhtari S (2016) Conclusion: The quest of human rights in the digital age: How it has changed and the struggle ahead. In: Monshipouri M (ed) *Information Politics, Protests, and Human Rights in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.267-293.

Moon R (2017) Getting into living rooms: NGO media relations work as strategic practice. *Journalism,* DOI: 10.1177/1464884917691542

Mortensen M (2015) *Journalism and Eyewitness Images*. London: Routledge

Murrell C (2015) *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The Role of Fixers*. London: Routledge.

Orgad S (2015) Underline, celebrate, mitigate, erase: humanitarian NGOs' strategies of communicating difference In: Cottle S and Cooper G (eds.) Humanitarianism, Communications and Change. New York: Peter Lang, 117-132.

Pantti M and Sirén S (2015) The fragility of photo-truth: Verification of amateur images in Finnish newsrooms *Digital journalism* 3(4): 495-512.

Pantti M, Wahl-Jorgensen K, and Cottle S (2012) *Disasters and the Media.* New York: Peter Lang.

Powers M (2016) The new boots on the ground: NGOs in the changing landscape of international news. *Journalism* 17(4): 401-416.

Pruce JR (2016) What does human rights look like? The visual culture of aid, advocacy, and activism. In: Monshipouri M (ed) *Information Politics, Protests, and Human Rights in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.50-72.

Sambrook R (2010) *Are foreign correspondents redundant?: The changing face of international news*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Sliwinski S (2011) *Human Rights in Camera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thomson TJ (2016) Freelance photojournalists and photo editors, *Journalism Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2016.1215851

Vasavada K (2016) Then and now: Evolving representations of children in UNICEF photographs, *Intersect* 9(3): 1-26.

Waisbord S (2011) Can NGOs change the news? *International Journal of Communication* 5: 142–65.

Wells K (2008) Child saving or child rights: Depictions of children in International NGO campaigns on conflict. *Journal of Children and Media* 2(3): 235-250.

Wright K (2015) These grey areas: Freelancers and the blurring of INGOs and news organisations. *Journalism Studies* 17(8): 989-1009.

Zarzycka M (2016) Save the child: Photographed faces and affective transactions in NGO child sponsoring programs. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 23(1): 28-42.