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**“Our relationship? It’s the odd mucky weekend, not a one night stand”
Journalists and aid agencies in the UK, and the current challenges to sourcing in humanitarian disasters.**

Dr Glenda Cooper, City, University of London

In humanitarian crises, the sources that journalists employ have always helped determine which stories achieve a high media profile, as well as play a part in framing the story (Manning, 2001; Cottle, 1999; Hansen, 1999). In particular, aid agencies acted as powerful gatekeepers to disaster zones, providing flights, transport, fixers and translators to journalists – and more recently, text, images and resources for the social web. Questions have been raised around transparency and objectivity in such reporting as a result.

This paper draws on 40 semi-structured qualitative interviews with UK national journalists (broadcast, print and online) and aid agencies belonging to the Disaster Emergencies Committee. As a result, this paper builds on journalism studies looking at boundary (re)negotiations in journalism and the source-media relationship to show the current patterns in what has been described as a “mutually exploitative” relationship. It compares and contrasts what assistance journalists say they accept from aid agencies and what aid agencies report. It examines how both sides are often unwilling to acknowledge the close association. It will also look at how the increasing professionalisation of NGO operations including the employment of former journalists and producing their own content may be affecting the power dynamics. Finally, it asks whether the slow emergence of scandals means this relationship has not only affected stories that are covered but those that are not.

Keywords: NGOs, aid, journalists, boundary negotiations, user-generated content, budgets.

Introduction

Y’know, [aid agencies and journalists] it’s a mutually exploitative relationship. It’s like two incredibly selfish people, go to Brighton for the odd mucky weekend, mutually selfish, it suits them to do it, and they both come back smiling and when they both mutually feel the urge, it happens again. But it’s not, it’s not one night stands, it’s not as callous and using as that.

(Interviewee X, Sunday broadsheet foreign editor London, 27 March 2013)

The sources that journalists use have long been a subject of scholarly debate because they not only help select which stories achieve a high media profile, whose voice is heard in them (Hall *et al.*, 1978; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978, 1990; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994) and how the story is framed (Manning, 2001; Cottle, 2000; Hansen, 1993).

Nowhere is this more apposite than a humanitarian crisis which often occur in difficult to get to places, and where it is often for various reasons to get people to talk without an intermediary. So when covering humanitarian disasters, journalists habitually turned to aid agencies to facilitate their stories. Meanwhile the aid agency acted as a gatekeeper for the media – but also relied on the media to publicise the situation in order to benefit from increased fundraising or political action. The result

was a complicated “corrupt, symbiotic relationship” (Naughton, cited in Cooper, 2007).

But what do both sides understand about the full implications of this relationship though, and how has this altered in a new media world? Scholars have traditionally written about how NGOs, rather than challenging journalistic norms have sought to mimic how journalists operate in order to maximize attention (Fenton, 2010; Cottle & Nolan, 2009), using the idea of ‘media logic’ as described by Altheide & Snow (1979). Waisbord (2011) however prefers to see the NGOs’ actions as part of the more widespread professionalisation of newsmaking in order to become “news shapers” (Manheim, 1998) and puts forward the idea of ‘journalistic’ rather than ‘media logic’ as a better way of understanding the NGOs’ approach, and encompassing news values, media formats, labour conditions and editorial positions. This may include hiring former journalists themselves as pioneered by Christian Aid and Oxfam in the UK (Cooper, 2007, 2011) and by others in Latin America (Waisbord, 2011) who then use tactics commonly used by public relations or government agencies to shape the news agenda, something echoed by Powers (2015) who sees NGOs work as expanding the borders of journalism. NGOs also try to maintain ongoing relationships with sympathetic reporters. As Waisbord puts it: ‘it is impossible to characterize the relations between NGOs and journalists in terms of complete collaboration or opposition’ (2011:151).

This paper looks at how both of these entities understand and articulate this relationship, in a world characterized by increased budget cuts (Moore, 2010) and increasing challenges from the fragmenting media landscape. It examines how both sides, for different reasons are often unwilling to acknowledge the close relationship they have traditionally shared, and how the increasing professionalisation of NGO operations because of the employment of former journalists and the ability to produce their own content may be affecting the power dynamics.

1. Methodology

More than 40 interviewees took part in this research. The subjects of the interviews were ‘elite’ (Gillham, 2000) – journalists and NGOs who have particular experience in this field. Journalists were selected by looking at UK national newspapers as defined by Lexis-Nexis whose primary audience was a general one [1] while for broadcasters, I looked at Ofcom’s reports and selected the top five sources: BBC, ITV, BBC News Channel, Sky News, Channel 4 [2] as well as Al Jazeera English to give a different perspective. I aimed to interview the foreign editor and foreign correspondent from each outlet, although this was not always possible [3].

The aid agencies were all members of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) - the umbrella organisation under which 13 agencies join forces when there is a significant acute disaster [4], being experts in humanitarian aid with strict membership criteria [5]. In general, those interviewed were the most senior member of the press office or, when relevant, the press officer specifically tasked to cover humanitarian emergencies and, when available, the social media/digital press officer as well

The interviews consisted of open and closed questions (Gillham, 2000:67-70; Kvale, 1996:133-5) and explored historical context and the contemporaneous situation. They were asked about protocols and experiences of reporting humanitarian crises, and how they interacted with the other group..

Interviews were generally face-to-face and lasted 45-75 minutes; when foreign correspondents were overseas, however, I interviewed them via Skype or telephone. Twenty representatives of aid agencies were interviewed; and 23 journalists, both editors and reporters.

2. Who covers humanitarian disasters?

Unlike crime or health, few journalists are specialists in reporting disasters (Large, 2007). In the UK, the BBC had for many years a ‘developing world’ correspondent but otherwise few journalists specialised in disaster reporting with newsrooms seeing them as ‘crisis’ events falling under breaking news. Those I interviewed tended to be known informally in newsrooms as ‘firemen’ – an old-fashioned gendered term for male and female reporters dispatched at a moment’s notice when a big event happens. Such reporters are often experienced, but in the absence of regular bureau staff, the nuances of individual countries or regimes may be lost. With little time to prepare and difficulty gaining access, such journalists may tend to rely on trusted sources such as aid agencies.

Thus, one of the first questions I asked editors I interviewed was whom they sent to cover humanitarian stories – foreign correspondents (based in country or nearby), ‘firemen’, general reporters or freelancers.

The financial strain most media outlets are currently under meant very few mentioned foreign correspondents. ‘Firemen’ were most commonly mentioned. One broadsheet editor said it was important not to send “someone green” – the exact phrase used by a foreign broadcast editor, who typically deployed a number of foreign correspondents now based in the UK for such stories.

This need for ‘experience’, however, was not repeated by the reporters. One broadsheet writer A said he was sent to cover humanitarian crises simply because he “was willing to go”. Another writer B was sent out to one disaster because s/he had been on holiday nearby. Meanwhile, a midmarket writer C said she owed her ‘fireman’ career to the fact that she knew several languages – however inappropriate they were to the area.

Because of the unpredictable nature of humanitarian disasters, journalists are often dispatched at short notice, so transport, fixers and translators tend to be organised on a very *ad hoc* basis. When covering his first disaster – the 1999 Izmit earthquake – interviewee A recalled recruiting a hotel waiter as his translator, because he spoke good English and had a car to get around. Journalists may also have difficulty getting to the frontline of a disaster without help from an external agency such as the UN, government agencies or international NGOs.

Why does this matter? Unprepared journalists working at short notice may be more dependent on such sources of information – and more easily influenced. For some journalists, this has gone further: whole trips have been ‘sponsored’ by NGOs, a phenomenon described as ‘beneficent embedding’ (Cottle & Nolan, 2009) [6]. This trend shows “spheres are overlapping more and more” (Roberts cited in Abbott, 2009).

To tease out the state of the source-media relationship in such stories, I asked a series of questions to both journalists and aid agencies to try to discover how dependent journalists were on aid agencies, in terms of getting to the story and reporting on it. I then compared the two different accounts.

3. The journalists' account

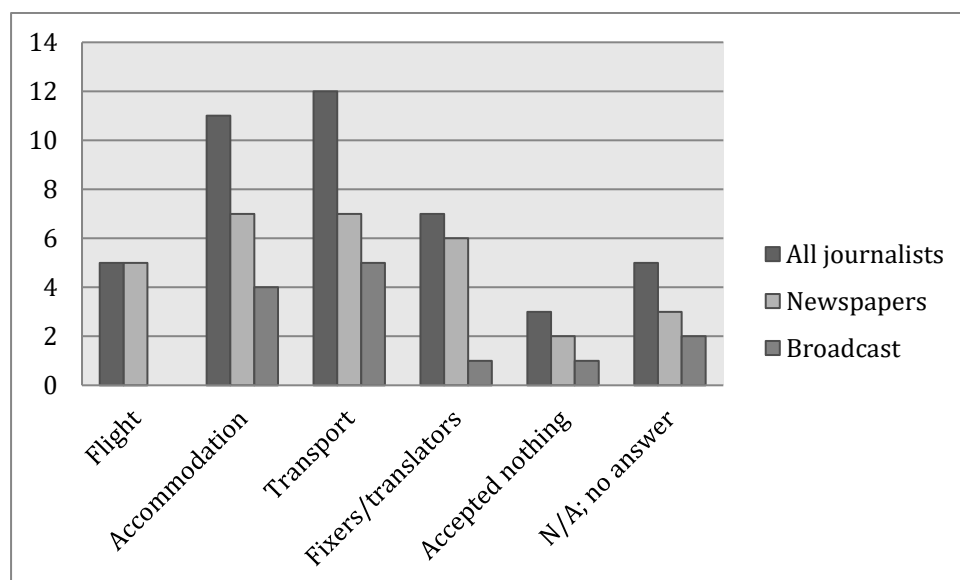


Figure 1: What journalists say they accept from aid agencies

Figure 1 shows that out of the 18 editors and reporters who answered the questions [7] there were only three (two newspaper journalists and one broadcast journalist) who said they would not accept any help from aid agencies. Even these few instances were contradicted, however – in two out of the three cases, another reporter/editor from the same organisation said that the organisation had accepted help from an agency at times.

Journalists were most likely to say they would accept transport *in situ* and accommodation. There was a ‘sliding scale’: most journalists were reluctant to say that they would use aid agencies’ facilities for fear of appearing compromised. For example, a ‘fireman’ reporter, D, said that he would sort out his own fixer and translator, but that if there was no other way to get to a particular story then he would go on an aid agency trip.

The fact that journalists have become a target for armed groups and terrorists in recent times (Cooper & Cottle, 2015) meant that some editors saw closer co-operation with aid agencies being less about journalistic (in)dependence and more to do with security. A tabloid reporter, E said editors had become much more security-conscious after the deaths of reporter Rupert Hamer and wounding of photographer Philip Coburn in Afghanistan [8]. The broadsheet writer ‘B’ had also had to accept safe accommodation and transport from an NGO in a refugee camp because their own paper could not afford to provide it.

There was some conflict between editors and reporters over what would/not be accepted. For example, G, a foreign editor at a broadcast organisation said she would be happy for NGOs to sort out transport and accommodation if it was a question of security or they were better placed to do so. But H, the senior correspondent at the same place, was adamant that he would not accept anything. Similarly, K, another editor at a broadcast organisation, said that his organisation’s policy was to never allow a charity to pay.

Even if we were embedded with the UN, I'd always say "how much do you think the board and person costs?"... I mean, ethically you don't want an aid agency to be paying for you when they should be giving the money to kids – and you also don't want a story coming out [about] that.

(interview, London, 22 May 2013)

Yet his senior foreign correspondent, L, cited a recent story she'd covered, when she had accompanied the UN special representative on sexual crime in conflict to meet the women in question and accepted UN support.

There is a negotiating system that can come into play as well: one photographer offered to give an NGO photographs he was taking in return for a lift into a refugee camp. And when B, the broadsheet reporter, needed translators s/he asked an NGO for suggestions.

Tabloid newspapers were more willing to admit using aid agency facilities. Foreign correspondent M said that an aid agency had paid for his flight to cover the Niger food crisis of 2005, and had done so on other occasions. C said newspaper-funded foreign trips had disappeared in recent years because of changes in budgets and in priorities but even before that, there had been a reliance on aid agencies to foot the bill. Meanwhile, for the most hard-up quality newspapers, the budget for foreign coverage was under such stress that the only way to cover stories was by taking NGO facilities, as a broadsheet foreign editor, N explained.

I'm afraid our deal was pretty much that we would always accept stuff like that. .. You know if those offers stopped coming, the truth is it would affect the quality of our foreign coverage

(interview, London, 31 October 2013)

Many reporters voiced fears that they were the potential victims of 'beneficent embedding' (Cottle and Nolan, 2009). B was sent out by his/her newspaper to cover the East Africa famine only to find the story that the aid agencies wanted him/her to cover was not as good as the one s/he discovered. In the end s/he had to compromise.

I find it actually quite perverse how much you end up embedded, effectively. It's no different to embedding with an army, is it? ... As a young journalist very keen to do foreign reporting, that's why you persuade your editor to let you do it. It'll be zero cost involved for them. But it's hard. Obviously you're kind of aware that there are parts that could be hugely compromising.

(interview, 'B', London, 9 April 2013)

4. The aid agencies' view

How did the perspective of aid agencies compare with what the journalists revealed? Did they have the same view of the relationship? Figure 3 reveals that aid agencies said that they were most likely to help journalists with transport and fixers/translators.

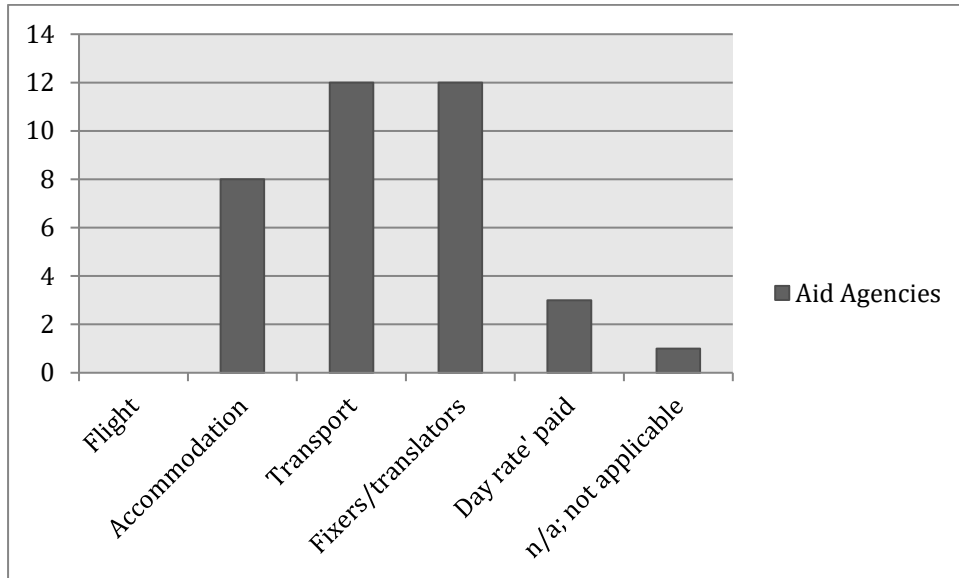


Figure 2: What aid agencies say they provide for journalists

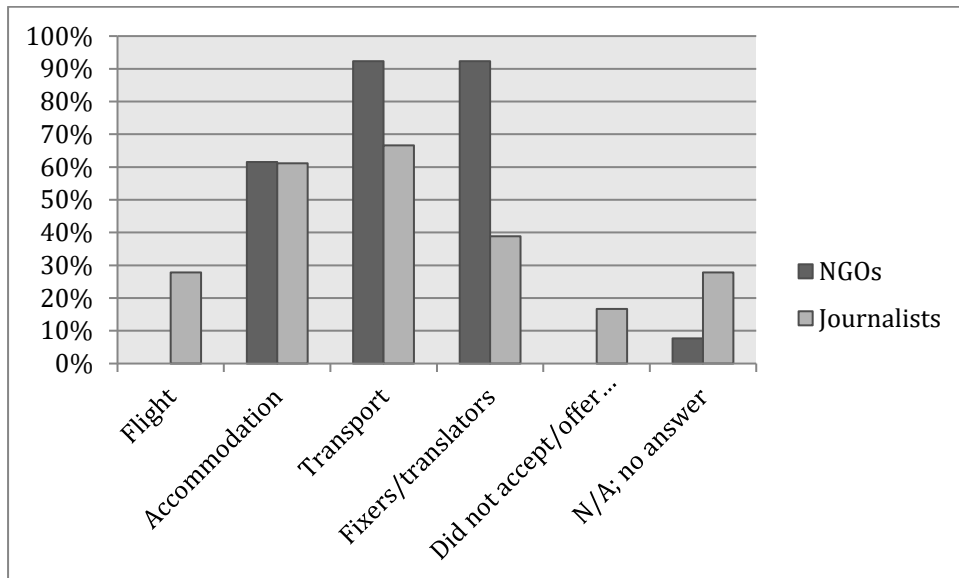


Figure 4: comparison of what journalists and aid agencies say is accepted

Comparisons are difficult because of the numbers involved (there were 13 aid agency representatives able to answer these questions compared with 18 journalists). But Figure 4 gives a rough sense that the NGOs generally report providing more for journalists than journalists admit accepting. This may be explained because NGOs are very focused on getting media attention, whereas for journalists, NGOs were an important source, but one of many. It may be that memories were clouded over what actually happened. Or it may be that journalists were reluctant to admit how dependent they were on NGOs in the field.

Flights – the one answer where journalists say they accept more than aid agencies give - was the source of some tension, because while the larger agencies had the clout *not* to pay for anything, some of the smaller agencies in need of exposure – were willing to pay. NGOs who employed former journalists in their press offices tended to be more reluctant to pay for journalists.

Personally, I think we shouldn't pay, but not because of the financial outlay but because if the news organisation hasn't paid out, then it hasn't reached the bar of being commissioned. They've got to put their money where their mouth is. If a commissioning editor has taken it out of their budget, then they'll get it into the paper.

(interview P, media manager, , London, 23 April 2013)

For items such as accommodation, transport or food, it was simply a question of practicalities. There was a clear – if not spoken – *quid pro quo*: access to case studies, a camp or a remote area meant that there would be an interview with or a name-check for the aid agency. For many aid agencies, it was simply a logical progression to offer their own staff as translators or fixers, which had the added bonus for the journalists that there were no further costs.

A 'fixer', in journalistic terms, refers to someone who helps by arranging interviews; conducting basic reporting; sorting out background briefings and security and either finding a translator or translating themselves (Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Palmer and Fontan, 2007). Fixers can direct journalists in where to go and whom to speak to. As such, they perform more than just a logistical role but an editorial one as well (Murrell, 2010) with the risk that without in-depth knowledge and context by the reporter, the event is seen through the filter of the fixer (Palmer and Fontan, 2007).

Interesting dynamics are created if fixers are employed by the aid agency. It may merely mean the fixer is someone the journalist feels comfortable with – 'people like us' as Murrell (2013, 2014) puts it. But by facilitating this sort of help, it could mean the story is framed in the way that most appeals to the agency.

The lines can get even more blurred in the use of freelancers. While editors often had clear policies on what they would and would not allow their staff to accept, when it came to freelancers there was less oversight. The tabloid reporter E said she had looked into being funded by NGOs for her freelance work because of their expense.

Last time I went to South Sudan it ended up costing me money – [I] had a magazine cover but was paid less than [the] cost of flights, warzone insurance and ultimately lost two weeks' normal work, plus the huge childcare cost. That's why I don't do it very often now, I can't afford vanity journalism and I have mouths to feed.

(personal correspondence, 18 May 2015)

Many aid agencies preferred to use staff reporters because there was more chance of the stories being published, but others would use freelancers in a number of different ways. For example, some agencies would not usually pay for flights, but would make an exception for "starving freelancers" – who would often receive little or no help with expenses from the media organisation. Some agencies would go further and pay the freelance a day rate. And while many would not employ freelance journalists, several were happy to employ freelance photographers to go out into the field, then offer the photographs to newspapers for free, or allow the photographer to sell them to the outlet.

5. Writing the story: NGO content and journalists' use of it

From the late 1990s onwards many aid agencies turned to employing journalists in their press offices (Cooper, 2007). Agencies, led by Christian Aid and Oxfam,

reformulated their press offices to more closely resemble media ‘newsrooms’ and used their press officers in a similar way to ‘fireman’ reporters.

The bigger, more high-profile agencies were the ones who employed most journalists (with Oxfam, World Vision, Christian Aid, Action Aid and the British Red Cross all having more than half their staff as former journalists). The former ‘journalist’ in an aid agency press office however was not necessarily a foreign correspondent - other employees included a former *Daybreak* producer or a writer from *Take A Break* magazine. This was even reflected in some of the names that the press officers were known by – such as ‘news editor’ ‘head of news’ or ‘head of world news unit’ to encourage a sense of journalistic professionalism.

This influx of former journalists into the media teams of aid agencies was welcomed by many journalists because they felt that the kind of requests they had would be rapidly understood and acted upon. But the new breed of press officers went further than facilitating journalists’ requests; they were now capable of writing or filming their own stories and offering it to media outlets.

The fact that aid agencies were hiring former journalists meant that their work was more trusted by the broadsheets; in some cases there was a blurring of lines about who the journalist was actually working for (Cooper, 2007).

The main problem was labelling. Both journalists and aid agencies admitted that there was often a lack of clarity. There were various reasons why journalists might not label it correctly – confusion or lack of desire to admit authorship and aid agencies did not always push for a correct credit, because for them the fact it was being used by a mainstream media organisation got the message across.

One Sunday broadsheet ran a splash on the food crisis in the Sahel where the aid agency came to them with photographs and case studies of women who were binding their stomachs with rope to mitigate the hunger pains. Others took the view that they would never use words from an aid agency but pictures were sometimes acceptable. D said that his organisation would be extremely reluctant to use aid agency footage but there were circumstances in which he could imagine it happening.

If they have an extraordinary video from an area where they've been and no-one else has access to it, I don't see a problem with using that as long as you very carefully say where it came from, when it was shot,
(phone interview, 14 February 2013)

For the aid agencies themselves there were different attitudes to what they wanted in return. For the smaller agencies, any interest from the media was worthwhile. For the larger agencies there was a tension about getting the credit.

There were however circumstances where the agency would request that their name was not used in anyway; usually because of fears it might endanger aid workers in the field. There had to be a realisation that aid agencies and journalists worked closely together, said Z, head of media at a large agency, and that this was not necessarily a bad thing in the way that it was always portrayed.

It's a symbiotic relationship in a way, there are things we know about and there are places that we can take journalists, and there are people we can give them to interview that they would probably struggle quite hard to find of their own volition...but there is, as I said, this kind of bizarre mindset further down that we are somehow tainted.”

(interview Z, London, 12 February 2013)

Conclusion

Because of the very nature of humanitarian disasters, journalists are often highly dependent on aid agencies for help in reporting in a way that they would reject in other situations, or look for more diverse sources (Ryle, 2000; Cooper, 2007). This paper builds on previous journalistic studies (Carlson, 2009; Wright, 2015; Powers, 2015a, 2015b; Waisbord, 2011) to see how the source-media relationship remains pivotal in the coverage of humanitarian disasters.

In purely practical reasons, newsdesks would defend this in order to get the story out, and point out that the journalist's and media outlet's commitment to professionalism and objectivity would mean that there should be few concerns about this closeness. Journalists questioned typically rejected the view that they were dependent on aid agencies in a significant way, although the most hard-up newspapers did admit to using agency resources frequently, and the NGOs themselves reported far more often that they had set up fixers, translators and paid for cars and accommodation. Few would admit interviewee X's colourful description of the 'mucky weekend' but ongoing relationships suggested this was the case.

For aid agencies the benefit was that there was also a framing of such stories that aid agencies were the 'good guys' in a way that more commercial organisations were not. Even those journalists who had fairly critical remarks to make about aid agencies were typically prefaced with a disclaimer. .

In more recent times as aid agency offices have professionalized, and access to high quality photographs, videos and text has increased (Cooper, 2011; Wright 2015), journalists also appear more willing to use content produced by aid agencies as the basis of a report. As such the relationship between the two remains a mutually beneficial one despite the threats posed to it by the rise of user-generated content. The increasing ease with which photographs, copy and videos can be published and sent via social media, however, means that both the media and aid agencies are exploring areas outside this traditional dichotomous relationship, with the use both of bloggers, and social media influencers (Cooper, forthcoming).

Finally, this paper has looked at the relationship between aid agencies and journalists in the context of stories that were covered by the media. Future research may well want to examine whether this relationship affected stories that have *not* been covered. In particular it would be interesting to analyse whether the scandals that affected Oxfam GB and Save the Children UK in early 2018 [9] might have emerged earlier if there had been a more critical approach taken by journalists towards aid agencies. These stories were eventually both revealed by journalists – at *The Times* and the *Mail on Sunday* but whistleblowers at Save the Children UK said that they had been trying for years to interest the media in the story with very limited success (Phillips, 2018).

NOTES

1. Nexis defines UK national newspapers as the following: *Daily Mail; Mail on Sunday; Daily Star, Daily Star Sunday; Financial Times; Independent; Morning Star; Daily Telegraph; The Business; The Express; The Guardian; The Independent; The Mirror, The Sunday Mirror; The Observer; The People; The Sunday Telegraph ; The Sunday Times; The Times.*

2. See Ofcom News Consumption in the UK, 2015
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/81772/news_consumption_in_the_uk_2015_executive_summary.pdf
3. Eg, the Mirror had abolished the role of foreign editor as part of its cutbacks (Brooks, 2008)
4. There are currently 13 members of the DEC; Merlin was incorporated into Save the Children in July 2013.
5. For more details see
http://www.dec.org.uk/sites/default/files/PDFS/membership_criteria_-_sept_2014.pdf
6. Cottle and Nolan are comparing the journalists' experience with those embedded with army divisions during the Gulf Wars.
7. Five either did not answer or it was not relevant to their job.
8. Hamer and Coburn were attacked while embedded with the US Marine Corps in Afghanistan on 9 January 2010. Hamer was killed and Coburn suffered severe leg injuries.
9. In February 2018, the Haitian government suspended Oxfam GB's operations in the country after allegations of sexual misconduct by staff there (O'Neill, 2018); former Save the Children staff members Brendan Cox and Justin Forsyth were accused of misconduct (Walters, 2018).

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