NETWORK WAR JOURNALISM: ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2011 CRISIS IN SOMALIA

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The 2011 crisis in Somalia was reputed by the United Nations (UN) to be one of the worst world drought crises in the past 60 years (Gettleman, 2011). In order to illustrate the relevance of the Somali crisis in media discourse, this article presents the results of the analysis of four reports on the crisis from the two-dimensional theoretical perspective: (1) war journalism and (2) narrative strategies used to report on global crises. The analysed reports are the following: 3 video reports uploaded on YouTube: (1) “The report of the US daily news broadcaster Democracy Now!: Horn of Africa Famine: Millions at Risk in ’Deadly Cocktail’ of War, Climate Change, Neoliberalism”, (2) the report of Al Jazeera English: “AJE speaks to Somali model Iman about the crisis”, (3) the report of Concern Worldwide: “Drought crisis in Somalia: inside report” and (4) Robin Hammond’s photoreportage “Drought crisis in Somalia – in pictures”, published in the online edition of The Guardian on 14th July 2011.

The first comment should be made on the choice of the term drought crisis to define the critical situation in Somalia in summer 2011. The main argument against the suitability of the term is related to its narrow meaning: the term undermines the fact that Somali people were under extreme conditions not only due to the agricultural disaster but also because of the unceasing war of terror being conducted by Al Shabab, a local Islamist terrorist unit aligned with Al Qaeda. Since some famine-stricken regions were under their control, humanitarian aid organizations could not effectively coordinate provision of aid supplies (Gettleman, 2011). Therefore, it would be more accurate to refer to the complex situation in the country simply as a crisis. The neutral character of this term helps to exhibit the multidimensionality of the problem in Somalia, as it is reflected in different definitions of the Somali crisis. For example, Ban Ki-moon (2011), UN Secretary-General, once stated that the crisis is a ‘catastrophic combination of conflict, high food prices and drought’. His words were paraphrased by Kiki Gbeho (2011), Head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Somalia (UN–OCHA Somalia). According to her, the crisis in Somalia is the result of ‘the ongoing conflict, several consecutive seasons of drought […] and price heights’, which she visibly described as a ‘deadly cocktail’. Similarly, the investigative journalist Christian Parenti (2011) defined the crisis as ‘a combination of war, climate change and very bad policy’.

Secondly, special attention should be paid to the fact that there is a direct correlation between the choice of narrative strategies used to report on global crises and their effect on public compassion for victims. The analysis of the reports on the Somali crisis shows that the information on crises in general should be delivered in an unconventional format in order to evoke both public interest
and – what is more important – compassion for the victims. The term *unconventional format*, however, does not mean that traditional narrative strategies should be abandoned. The reports of Democracy Now! and Concern Worldwide are good examples that the standard ‘four item famine formula’¹ (Moeller, 1999) can be still used to report on crises but it needs to be modified in order to deliver newsworthy and attention-catching content.

Thirdly, in all of the analysed reports, the status of objectivity as the professional journalistic norm is put into question. The reports present events in Somalia at a more emotional level, thus reflecting recent critical discussions on the role of objectivity in war journalism (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2003; Boudana, 2010). The central argument in this discussion is encoded in the term ‘feminization’ of news values (Tumber and Prentoulis, 2003), which puts emphasis on emotions and subjective perceptions of reported events. Such a delivery of the information has a clear purpose: to evoke public compassion for suffering Somali people and to stimulate some action in order to help them. In a broader context, it could be seen as an important contribution in evoking *global compassion* in Höijer’s (2004) sense: the media reports on the Somali crisis might help to raise public awareness of human suffering in different parts of the world.

In addition, the combination of more objective information on the crisis with the subjective perceptions of the reporters offers a broader socio-political perspective on the events in the country. In order to understand what kind of effect such a combination has on the recipients of the reports, it is useful to refer to Hammond’s photoreportage. The report offers a discussion on the situation in the country at three different levels: aesthetic, political and symbolic. This three-fold meaning of Hammond’s message allows reaching different audiences: some people might get attracted to the aesthetic qualities of the photographs, others might appreciate the ‘dry-fact’ information on everyday life in refugee camps and the geopolitical situation of Somalia or be interested in how symbolic references to other reports on the Somali crisis or crises in general are reflected. Therefore, the multidimensional character of the information in Somalia encoded in Hammond’s message helps to situate the crisis in a broader socio-political context.

Another point should be made on gender stereotypes: the reports combine stereotypical and non-stereotypical images of Somali people. One of the most visible elements in the characterization of crisis victims in the analysed reports is that all of them follow the principles of the ‘dominant victim code’² (Höijer, 2004), based on gender stereotypes. Special preference is shown for images of suffering women, elderly people and, especially, with children.

¹ The elements of the formula are the following: (1) people must be starving to death; (2) simple causes and solutions; (3) the plot of a morality play and (4) disturbing images.

² The code reflects the so called ‘victim hierarchy’: victims can be classified on the basis of their worthiness in terms of Western political interests and media attention (worthy vs. unworthy victims) (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and their helplessness or innocence (ideal vs. less ideal victims) (Höijer, 2004). Innocence and vulnerability are typically associated with women, elderly people and, especially, with children.
children. For example, Hammond uses images of infants in 15 photographs out of 17. Nonetheless, there is an attempt to abandon the discriminatory perspective on Somali people. For example, the Somali-American model Iman, the leading voice in the report of Al Jazeera English, argues that Somali women are capable to act in order to improve the situation in the country and that they should not be perceived as hopeless creatures who need to be under special protection.

Furthermore, both verbal and visual images of suffering children serve as a tool for psychological manipulation in order to draw public attention to the situation in the country. The (re)use of images of children in different parts of the reports has a clear functional purpose: the public is more likely to be convinced that the situation in Somalia is very complex if there are so many images of suffering innocent children. Furthermore, they can stimulate to provide some help not just for Somali children but for all Somali people, regardless of their age and sex.

Moreover, in order to provide a complete view on the media case of the Somali crisis, some questions for further discussion can be raised after contrasting the reports. The first point should be made on ‘ideological balance’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010): it can be argued that the imperative to take some political measures to stop the crisis encoded in the term CNN effect (Freedman, 2000; Robinson, 2002) is true for all of the analysed reports, whereas counter-information which underlies the concept of Al Jazeera effect is reflected with a different degree of intensity. Having in mind the unequal representation of a variety of viewpoints, it would be useful to analyse information on the crisis from diverse ideological backgrounds. Special attention should be paid to comments under each of the reports uploaded on YouTube and contrasting information provided by media organizations or individuals from countries whose position in the global media market might vary significantly. Such juxtaposition would not only help to extract more objective data on the Somali crisis but would also exhibit economic and political dimensions which are relevant in the international relations of Somalia. This broader socio-political perspective on the crisis can be labelled under the term YouTube effect (Thussu, 2011), which reflects the potential of YouTube to offer a platform to deliver more ideologically balanced information due to the interactive character of information (re)distribution.

Secondly, the analysis of Hammond’s photoreportage in terms of war photojournalism has reflected the ambiguous relation between propaganda, symbolism and aesthetics and their overall impact on the communicative value of his message. The (re)use of symbols in different parts of the report does not allow to clearly determine whether Hammond cares more about humanitarian pro-
paganda or aesthetic appreciation of his work. This question should also be understood in a broader context: having in mind Griffin’s (2010) idea that there is a direct relation between war photojournalism and the CNN effect (Freedman, 2000; Robinson, 2002) in terms of the communicative value, it would be useful to analyse this relation and its reflection in the media case of the Somali crisis in more detail.

Finally, referring to Webster’s (2003) idea of information warfare, the last comment on media coverage of the crisis should be made on the complex relation between mediation and mediatisation. The results of the analysis of Hammond’s photoreportage and the YouTube reports seem to clearly show that the reporters take an active role in the dissemination of humanitarian propaganda in the public sphere. Although this fact reflects their potential to mediatised information on the crisis, on the other hand, it does not exclude their role as mediators completely. Having in mind this, it would be useful to analyse media coverage of the Somali case from the perspective of the complex relation between mediation and mediatisation in order to see how these two elements correlate and what kind of effect this correlation has on the overall communicative value of the humanitarian messages presented in the reports.

REFERENCES


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