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Famines are not a simple story

BJR 2014

23rd October 2014 marks the thirtieth anniversary of a significant moment in modern TV journalism: Michael Buerk's broadcast about a 'biblical famine' filmed in a remote part of northern Ethiopia. The images shot by Kenyan cameraman Mohammed Amin, together with Buerk's powerful words, produced one of the most famous television reports of the late 20th Century.

In an era before satellite, social media and YouTube, the BBC news item from Ethiopia went viral - being transmitted by well over 400 television stations worldwide. NBC even chose, almost exceptionally, to include it on their main news bulletin without revoicing Michael Buerk's original English commentary.

Bob Geldof of the Boomtown Rats viewed the news that day and as a result Buerk's famine report eventually became the focus of a whole new style of celebrity fundraising. This in turn produced another key television memory for a certain generation, the Live Aid extravaganza in July 1985 which itself became a transforming moment in modern media history.

The serendipity of news means that some stories resonate while on another day they would be ignored. It was pretty random that a report about very poor (black) people starving in a faraway country firmly loyal to the Soviet bloc and with no UK connection, should become such a major news story. And looking back it was the collision of various random factors that seems to have propelled the reporting of this famine to the top of the news agenda.

One of the most unlikely was the strike that Autumn by ITV technicians. Michael Buerk was not the first journalist to reach Korem in northern Ethiopia and to witness the suffering. There was another reporter Peter Gill who got there first. He filmed a report for the Thames TV programme "TV Eye". But when Gill returned to base there was no one to edit his material because of the strike. This gave the BBC the sense that they had an 'exclusive' and could steal a march on the opposition. Chris Cramer the BBC Foreign Editor at the time is quite unashamed that they took great pleasure in beating ITN with the pictures of the famine. But it also

meant he took another interesting and far reaching decision. Once Cramer knew there was no danger of ITV getting in first and long before the pressures of instant 24 hours news, he allowed Buerk the luxury of returning to BBC HQ in the UK to edit his material at relative leisure rather than having to cobble together a 'script on the back of an envelope and shovel something on a satellite from Nairobi'. Buerk is clear that having this extra time to think about and craft his script meant a huge difference. Those memorable words devised on the long night flight back were the result of that precious commodity that news journalism so often lacks – time to think. He recalls 'It took half a continent to get the opening right, working and reworking the sentences with the shotlist in front of me but the mind's eye back in Wollo and Tigray.....'

Raising funds differently

A huge fund raising bandwagon started to roll in the days after the original BBC report, including the newspaper proprietor Bob Maxwell chartering the *Mirror Mercy mission* to fly in supplies to Addis. Meanwhile a parade of celebrities and politicians from Mother Teresa to Senator Ted Kennedy rushed to reach the feeding camps in northern Ethiopia that Christmas. Such was the power of this reporting that even today Ethiopia, a country attempting to brand itself as a fast growing economy full of vibrant new enterprise, is still for many audiences defined by these historic images of famine from thirty years ago.

As a result of the media attention there was a whole new direction to public philanthropy in Western countries. Instead of charitable giving to faraway poor people being seen as worthy and a little dull, it became hip and cool. When Tony Blair launched the Commission for Africa in 2004 he referred to the way that his generation had been inspired by the Ethiopian famine coverage and Live Aid.

Despite all the fine memories of how suffering had been relieved by this remarkable effort, in the intervening years a number of more troubling and complicated issues have clouded these certainties. To start with are we even correct to identify this as the famine of 1984? Famines are long slow burning emergencies

rather than sudden events like tsunamis or earthquakes, which are always much more appealing in news terms. It now appears (from FOI documents) that diplomats, aid agencies and journalists had been trying to attract attention to the suffering in Ethiopia from 1982 when the severity of the food shortage first became apparent, but editors and news desks were not interested. Mike Wooldridge as BBC International Development correspondent went on press trips organized in 1983 and March 1984 by Save the Children and UNHCR to the feeding camps in Tigray and tried to get some attention for his story, but with little success. So it is more accurate to date the famine as 1982-1985 but the unpleasant problem is that the real appeal of food insecurity as a news story is catalyzed when there are images of stick thin children dying.

In the aftermath of Buerk's news story there were hand-wringing post-mortems and 'how can we do this better' sessions within aid agencies, Select Committees and the Overseas Development Administration (forerunner to DFID). They asked why no one had been able to focus crucial media attention when the widespread shortages were first becoming evident. The conclusion was that very often a famine is only judged to be news when these horrible images are present. But worryingly after the famine in East Africa in 2011 the same criticisms of the media interest only coming too late were still being made. And still today the same syndrome is happening elsewhere in Africa. BBC International Development correspondent Mark Doyle tweeted in July 2014 that 'famines are sexy, predicting them is not' drawing attention to a report on the approaching disaster in South Sudan.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28143584> Here once again, just as in 1980s Ethiopia, the famous conclusions of Amartya Sen are being played out. Famine is not a natural disaster but a social and political crisis where vulnerable groups lose their entitlements to food. This linked to his significant conclusion that it is democracy which stops populations from starving - because famines do not occur in countries with a free press.

It was not only the media that ignored the Ethiopian famine in that earlier period before the story 'broke' and eventually went worldwide. The evidence available through FOI requests demonstrates that the UK government was well aware there had been a famine in northern Ethiopia since 1982 but chose not to do anything about it. The British embassy in Addis was sending regular reports of the crisis and urgently requesting for officials to

come and visit to see the scope of the problem in the summer of 1984. They were firmly told by the Foreign Office in London that there were more important places to go and this really could not be a priority. It was only when the media 'revealed' the story in late October that the UK government sprang into action; the Foreign Secretary made a statement in Parliament the very next day and agreed to send airlifts of food and support other high-profile measures. Soon the embassy in Addis was overwhelmed by politicians and officials rushing to visit; by December 1984 they pleaded with London to reconsider if so many trips were really necessary.

The government was responding to public opinion, galvanized through the media. Politicians and officials were trying to be seen to help relieve suffering because the story, thanks to Buerk and then Bob Geldof, was now a UK domestic issue. MPs and Ministers were facing huge popular demands for the government to *do something*, as a result of the media coverage that spread throughout the press from broadsheets to the front pages of the tabloids. This presented a further insight into news judgments. Chris Cramer offered 'a set of still pictures from Buerk's report on the night it was first shown but he was politely turned down on the basis that African famine was not really a story for them.' A few days later the paper was running front page headlines two inches high screaming of the *Race to Save the Babies*.

In many ways it was admirable that the public were inspired to care and empathise with such remote suffering. It was in complete contrast to the image of selfish Thatcherite values associated with that period. The philanthropic response from all parts of the population was unprecedented and it was clearly in reaction to the media coverage. Yet in the subsequent years the simple news story taken up throughout the media of a sudden 'event' arising from 'natural' causes ie drought has unraveled and the whole episode has become a more nuanced and less comfortable one.

Revisiting Famine

The preference for keeping the story simple means that the social and political context of famine was left out, something that is evident today in South Sudan. In Ethiopia the authoritarian regime of Mengistu was fighting a major civil war against Tigrayan and Eritrean insurgents. It is no accident that these were the areas suffering from starvation because to a large extent the government

was deliberately causing the famine. They were bombing markets and trade convoys to disrupt food supply chains. Defence spending accounted for half of Ethiopian GDP and the army at that time was the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. The battles between government and rebel forces were the biggest in Africa since El Alamein. Yet this story of man made misery was barely told. Instead it was a simple narrative of failing rains, which kept things simple for both journalists and aid agencies. This also suited an authoritarian government which did not want foreign Western journalists nosing around and criticizing its policies. Even the UK government stuck to the simple narrative. The urgent departmental response group which met daily to brief senior ministers in reaction to the news reports, called itself the Ethiopian Drought Group – in the belief that this was what the problem was all about.

It was not only the simplification which impaired the reporting but crucial omissions and misunderstanding of much of the aid effort. There have been furious debates (see BJR vol 21:2, June 2010) about exactly what proportion of aid was diverted but there is little doubt that it was significant. The guerilla leader Meles, who later became the Prime Minister of Ethiopia when the rebels were victorious, admitted subsequently how easy it was to fool the Western agencies and use the aid for military purposes.

The Ethiopian government too had deliberate strategies for large scale manipulation of aid donations in pursuit of its brutal resettlement policies. Victims of famine were lured into feeding camps only to be put against their will onto unpressurised planes and transported far away from their homes. Some estimates have put the deaths resulting from this policy as higher than the original famine. And again the secrecy and brutality of Mengistu's regime made it relatively straightforward to divert aid and deceive outsiders. Germaine Greer was one reporter who was persuaded to write about the happy peasants being transported to a new Eden. Some aid agencies realized what was happening and protested – only to be expelled from the country. Others decided it was better to keep quiet and stay. The minutes of the Band Aid Trust reveal that there were inklings of the misuse and misappropriation of aid, but that a view was taken that it was too difficult to try and change things.

Very little of this messy complexity was conveyed by the media at the time to audiences who had empathized with the victims,

donated generously and wanted to see suffering relieved. Aid agencies too know that (straightforward) natural disasters are much easier to communicate than (trickier) man-made crises. Fundraising today for the humanitarian disaster in Syria has been pitifully low, and the explanation is that a difficult story without clear goodies and baddies is not an easy one to convey either for journalists or NGOs.

So how much has changed in the period since Michael Buerk reported from Ethiopia? In 1984 the only voices were from a white reporter and a European aid worker. A contemporary news report would probably have a wider range of participants. But beyond that much is the same. Not only has the problem of the media ignoring famine until it is a catastrophe and then simplifying the explanation, recurred many times. But even some of the same abuses associated with resettlement and villagisation, (which sounds homely but is in fact uprooting peasants and forcing them elsewhere) are still taking place in Ethiopia today. A Guardian investigation by David Smith (Guardian 7/07/14 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/06/britain-supporting-dictatorship-in-ethiopia>) in July 2014 revealed the UK government through DfID is funding such policies.

Finally there is the vexed question of stereotypical depictions of Africa. In the years after 1984 there was much examination and criticism of 'Afro-pessimism' and negative framing of Africa. But in many ways the images used in fundraising and reporting Africa still rely on those same old tropes. Still today, the nexus of politics, media and aid are influenced by the coverage of a famine 30 years ago.

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