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Conceptualizing Humanitarian Journalism by Examining Insiders' and Outsiders' Perspectives on Practices Emerging from Contested Boundaries

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Abstract

Humanitarian journalism, or journalism that focuses on humanitarian news, remains an ambiguous concept. It is defined either by its content or by its focus on crisis reporting and is often conflated with other forms of advocacy journalism. This study explores practitioners' perspectives (journalists, freelancers, and NGO communicators) to better understand the practices associated with humanitarian journalism. Drawing on boundary theory and in-depth interviews with practitioners within and outside journalism, as well as those working at the intersection, the findings revealed six elements of humanitarian journalism identified across the three groups of practitioners and actors. Practitioners described humanitarian journalism as an impact-driven, collaborative model; a positive approach to constructive storytelling; participatory community journalism; and practice-based journalism that emerges from contested established boundaries and challenges a one-size-fits-all approach. The findings suggest that humanitarian journalism incorporates elements of constructive journalism, often complementing or expanding the boundaries of traditional journalism and, at times, challenging the normative routines of traditional journalists.

Keywords: crisis reporting; humanitarian news; global humanitarian organizations; professional identity; boundary work

1. Introduction

Although some 339 million people worldwide are in urgent need of humanitarian support due to conflicts, environmental disasters, and climate change, only a small proportion of these crises receive international news coverage (Glasman & Lawson, 2023; Hawkins, 2011). The lack of consistent international news reporting renders many crises around the world what journalism scholars call forgotten crises (Joye, 2009; Kwak & An, 2014; Yan & Bissell, 2018). Selective humanitarian coverage can significantly shape perceptions of crises and responses to them. As the "CNN Effect" suggests, intensive media coverage of humanitarian disasters can compel governments and international organizations to act quickly, whereas limited coverage can reduce pressure on policymakers to respond to crises (Livingston & Eachus, 1995; Boin et al., 2009) and exacerbate funding disparities across humanitarian emergencies (Sobel Cohen et al., 2021; Yüksel, 2026). More broadly, selective or limited coverage can reproduce global hierarchies that assign differential value to human life within a Western-dominated world order (Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2009; Rusta & Simoni, 2024).

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Another form of selective media coverage focuses almost exclusively on images of starving children or devastated landscapes. Such coverage, when presented without sufficient context, frames humanitarian intervention as a matter of charity, thereby diverting attention from accountability and long-term solutions (Pruce, 2019; Baughan, 2021). Scholars have also warned that repeated exposure to graphic depictions of suffering may normalize such suffering and foster public indifference (Chen, 2016), moral fatigue (Chouliaraki, 2006), and emotional desensitization (Gray, 1999).

Moeller (2018) termed this phenomenon "media fatigue" to describe the media's rapid shift from one crisis to another (p. 11). Over time, persistently pessimistic coverage may contribute to both intentional and unintentional news avoidance (Fletcher et al., 2020; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

Humanitarian journalism remains conceptually ambiguous, in part because of limited research and its interdisciplinary nature. Little research has examined how practitioners understand and enact humanitarian journalism. Scholars argue that to fully understand humanitarian communication, researchers should study it through interdisciplinary lenses (Chouliaraki & Vestergaard, 2021).

This study contributes to the field through a journalistic lens by exploring how these practices converge with or diverge from the established doxa (Bourdieu, 1991) of journalism and where humanitarian journalism sits in relation to adjacent journalistic practices. More precisely, the study aims to understand these practices beyond the binary distinction of being inside or outside journalism; instead, it engages perspectives from practitioners who operate between, across, or at the intersection of established professional boundaries. To address this gap, the study adopts a practitioner-based examination of humanitarian journalism alongside better-researched adjacent forms of journalism. Informed by boundary theory, the study provides an analytical boundary space to examine practitioners "inside," "between," and "outside" conventional journalism, to identify practices that may emerge within humanitarian journalism.

In scholarly discourse, it is defined either by its content or by its focus on crisis reporting and is often conflated with other forms of advocacy journalism. Meanwhile, structural transformations in the media ecosystem—including technological change and the growing professionalization of humanitarian actors—have produced new forms of expertise and authority (Barnett, 2005, 2022; Newman, 2018). Journalism is widely understood as a socially and discursively constructed field shaped by evolving norms and professional rules (Vos, 2019; Hanitzsch, 2017; Wiik, 2010). Within this fluid landscape, this study conceptualizes humanitarian journalism not as a fully institutionalized genre but as a contested set of practices whose boundaries are negotiated among multiple actors. Drawing on in-depth interviews and actors' meta-journalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016), this study examines how actors both within and outside journalism negotiate journalistic practices and define the boundaries of an emerging genre (Ferrucci, 2020; Vos & Singer, 2016). This continuing process of negotiation means that journalism and journalists are constantly being defined and redefined, rendering journalistic identity "liquid" (Zelizer, 1993; Jaakkola et al., 2015).

The literature identifies participants in humanitarian news production as beat reporters, freelancers, citizen journalists, and professionals working in NGOs (Johnson & Dade, 2019; Wright, 2019; Scott et al., 2023; Cooper, 2018; Powers, 2018). This study contributes to the literature in multiple ways. First, it complicates existing understandings of the field amid the continuing rise in humanitarian crises and disasters worldwide. Second, it advances understanding of ongoing boundary negotiations by drawing on journalists' and non-journalists' perceptions of humanitarian journalism as an emerging journalistic genre. Third, it seeks to clarify the ambiguity surrounding humanitarian journalism as a genre

whose practices and role conceptions may not conform to traditional journalistic norms. To do so, this study examines humanitarian journalism in relation to better-researched approaches such as constructive journalism, peace journalism, and solutions journalism, identifying where their practices converge and diverge and how these relationships may help clarify the boundaries and characteristics of humanitarian journalism as a journalistic practice. For example, in peace journalism, journalists make deliberate choices about what and how to report during conflicts and have opportunities to advocate for peace in their societies (McGoldrick & Lynch, 2005, p. 5). Solutions journalism is defined as "rigorous reporting on social problems" (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 60) and solution-based stories are driven by the potential impact of the reporting. Constructive journalism draws on positive psychology, emphasizes citizen engagement, and is evidence-based (Seligman, 2010; Rosen, 1999).

Building on the concept of boundary work, this study conceptualizes humanitarian journalism by exploring the perspectives of traditional and non-traditional actors, including those who work across the boundaries between these fields. Accordingly, 20 journalists (10 traditional journalists and 10 freelancers) and 20 communications professionals working within non-governmental humanitarian and human rights organizations were interviewed. Because a discursively constructed genre of journalism may be conceptually ambiguous, identifying the practices associated with it can facilitate a clearer understanding of the genre (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Vos & Singer, 2016; Scott et al., 2023). The goal of this study is therefore to examine how practitioners and professionals perceive their roles and to identify the practices associated with humanitarian journalism as an emerging genre.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Constructive Journalism

Constructive journalism has emerged as an approach that seeks to address the limitations of traditional news reporting. The approach began to gain prominence through the efforts of Danish journalist and scholar Ulrik Haagerup. Haagerup (2017) argues that news should move beyond merely identifying problems and instead explore possible solutions and responses.

Scholars define constructive journalism as public-oriented, future-oriented, and action-oriented, with the aim of avoiding bias toward negativity in the news (Hermans & Drok, 2018), and argue that constructive journalism emerged in response to declining trust in news media and a perceived negativity bias in journalism (Baden et al., 2019). Studies indicate that audiences often experience news fatigue or engage in news avoidance when exposed to overwhelmingly negative coverage (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020).

Constructive journalism builds on theories from positive psychology, public journalism, and solutions journalism. First, positive psychology focuses on human strengths, resilience, and well-being rather than merely on problems (Seligman, 2010). Second, constructive journalism intersects with public journalism, which emphasizes citizen engagement and prioritizes community participation and dialog (Rosen, 1999). Third, constructive journalism is linked to evidence-based solutions journalism, which reports on responses to social problems (McIntyre, 2015). Thus, constructive journalism provides a framework that incorporates solutions reporting, contextualization, and possibilities-oriented framing within positive storytelling.

Despite its growing popularity, constructive journalism has faced several critiques. Some critics argue that journalism's primary function is to expose wrongdoing and that focusing on solutions could dilute this function (Bro, 2019; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Critics also suggest that overly optimistic framing could appear promotional or advocacy-driven rather than neutral (Bro, 2019; Overgaard, 2023; Van Antwerpen & Fielding, 2023).

However, proponents suggest that constructive journalism does not replace investigative reporting. Instead, it supplements traditional coverage by providing context and reporting on responses to problems (Haagerup, 2017). Baden et al. (2019) found that constructive journalistic framing reduces feelings of helplessness among audiences. In this sense, constructive journalism can be considered a response to negative news; however, news need not be exclusively positive to be constructive. It can address conflicts or problems while empowering readers and offering possible solutions. As this model of journalism develops, the journalistic profession is increasingly seeking to challenge routines that focus primarily on conflict and to portray the realities of the world more accurately (Beckett & Deuze, 2016).

2.2. Research on Humanitarian Journalism

The definition of humanitarianism is contentious and complex. Scholars in mass communication have encouraged the study of humanitarian crises across disciplines, including international relations, development studies, and public health (Kocks et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2021; Blanchet et al., 2017). They have also called for humanitarian communication to be studied through a multiplatform and interdisciplinary approach to better understand the complexity of its terminology. Accordingly, humanitarian communication should be theorized from the perspectives of various disciplines, such as media and communications, journalism studies, development studies, international relations, cultural studies, and sociology (Chouliaraki & Vestergaard, 2021; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Schwarz et al., 2016; Joye, 2009). A humanitarian crisis is a critical situation involving large-scale human suffering, often due to conflicts, natural disasters, or political instability (Väyrynen, 1996). A key characteristic of a humanitarian crisis is its sudden and overwhelming nature, which often exceeds the response capacity of local governments (Kapucu & Özerdem, 2011). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines humanitarian crises as those requiring an urgent international response to alleviate suffering, protect lives, and ensure human dignity (UNOCHA, 2024).

Humanitarian crises are categorized as natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, or man-made crises, such as armed conflict and political unrest (Väyrynen, 1996; Rubinstein, 2022). Natural disasters can exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities in conflict-affected or otherwise vulnerable settings. For example, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti struck a country experiencing severe political unrest and extreme poverty, thereby escalating an already complex humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian crises can also be exacerbated by conflicts, which have long been recognized as significant drivers of human suffering, causing famine, forcing people out of their homes, and resulting in mass displacement (Shepherd & Williams, 2014).

News media often use disasters to generate attention, promote compassion, or facilitate relief responses (Shepherd & Williams, 2014). As such, crises that receive little media attention tend to be neglected by both the public and policymakers (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Boin et al., 2017). Consequently, public perceptions of crises and responses to media coverage can contribute to some crises remaining underfunded and underreported. For example, crises such as the ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic have been described as "forgotten" because of minimal media coverage, which can result in fewer international interventions and less funding (Scott et al., 2018).

Broadly, humanitarian discourse encompasses texts that generate concern and elicit responses through the media or humanitarian organizations (Vestergaard, 2021). Furthermore, scholars have examined humanitarianism in the context of power dynamics between the West and the Global South and the representation of suffering (Roepstorff, 2020). Such representations of suffering can reproduce colonial stereotypes and portray

affected populations as passive and dependent on those who control funding. In terms of humanitarian news production, Western news media have been criticized for selectively covering humanitarian crises based on considerations such as timeliness (i.e., breaking news) and access to and oversight of protracted events (Allen et al., 2018). In response to these criticisms, coverage of humanitarian issues has increasingly incorporated personal narratives and portrayed affected people as active agents (Graham, 2014).

Scholars in journalism studies have approached the definition of humanitarian journalism in three ways. Some scholars simply define humanitarian journalists as those covering "the beat" involving "humanitarian events, humanitarian disasters, or coverage of relief efforts" (Cooper & Cottle, 2015; Ross, 2004; Scott et al., 2022). Scholars also defined humanitarian journalism as more than coverage; it is frontline reporting aimed at producing "an effective humanitarian response" (Scott et al., 2021). In such reporting, "the human connection is at the heart of the story" (Duncan & Newton, 2014, p. 69). A third approach identifies humanitarian journalism with a critical cultural perspective that values human equivalence and "flat hierarchies of human life," whereby all news representing "others has the potential to be humanitarian" (Scott et al., 2021, p. 205).

The New Humanitarian, a news organization established by the UN after the genocide in Rwanda, is now an independent newsroom. It defines its work as "fact-based journalism from the heart of conflict and disasters to improve the lives of the millions affected by humanitarian crises around the world" (The New Humanitarian, 2024).

Based on the literature reviewed, this study suggests that understanding humanitarian journalism requires two approaches. First, it should be explored within the broader discourse surrounding its evolving conceptualization and practice through continuous dialogue between journalists and non-journalistic actors. Second, humanitarian journalism should be situated alongside other forms of journalism that deviate from traditional practices.

For example, peace journalism, a concept developed by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, was proposed in 1970 as an approach through which journalists could report more responsibly when covering conflict (Galtung, 1986). In peace journalism, journalists make deliberate choices about what and how to report during conflicts and have opportunities to advocate for peace in their societies (McGoldrick & Lynch, 2005, p. 5).

Another approach is solutions journalism, first introduced in the academic literature when Davies (1999) proposed it as a way to enhance investigative journalism. In 2010, The New York Times launched a blog focusing on solutions to social issues. In 2014, the Columbia Journalism Review noted that The Washington Post had introduced The Optimist, a digital email newsletter for subscribers intended to provide aspirational content (Fink & Schudson, 2014). Solutions journalism is defined as "rigorous reporting on social problems" (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 60) and offers solutions-based stories that highlight successful responses. Solutions-oriented journalism is driven by the potential impact of reporting and, therefore, emphasizes the journalist's active role. Bro (2008) characterizes active journalism as an approach in which reporters help communities address problems rather than simply reporting on them (Lough & McIntyre, 2018).

2.3. Boundary Work

Sociologist Gieryn (1983) introduced the concept of "boundary work," which refers to efforts to distinguish between science and non-science and to the ways in which professionals strive to demarcate their fields. Boundary work involves defining what constitutes legitimate science and epistemic authority and determining who produces legitimate knowledge, often to protect the epistemic autonomy of a particular field.

Vos and Singer (2016) argue that a field's boundaries are "continually subject to disruption by both exogenous and endogenous forces" (p. 144). External factors, such as

technological advances and shifts in societal norms, can therefore challenge or reshape a field. At the same time, internal factors, such as debates within the profession and among practitioners, can redefine or blur its boundaries. Thus, a field's boundaries are continually negotiated in response to pressures from both within and outside the profession (Vos & Singer, 2016). Scholars have defined journalism as both a socially constructed field and an interpretive community grounded in norms that legitimize, validate, or challenge journalistic practice (Zelizer, 1993). Meta-journalistic discourse comprises public utterances produced by professional journalists and those outside the profession (Carlson, 2016).

The literature reviewed above provides a conceptual framework for integrating theoretical structures into an analytical lens. On one hand, Bourdieu's field theory offers a starting point for distinguishing insiders and outsiders through the field's doxa. However, the literature review on constructive journalism shows that conforming to the doxa is not the only way and shows the limitations of a binary insider–outsider interpretation. For example, constructive journalism adapts elements from adjacent fields such as positive psychology, public journalism, and solutions journalism. Although constructive journalism faced backlash from opponents, it helped address a limitation in how knowledge about journalism practices is produced.

To address this limitation and expand the theoretical site of interpretation, boundary work provides an additional lens for examining how humanitarian journalism practitioners renegotiate, contest, or reconstruct established boundaries. Additionally, studying the practice alongside adjacent fields will broaden interpretations by exploring which elements of practice within, outside, or at the intersection best align with Humanitarian journalism.

Therefore, integrating these scholarly frameworks offers a creative space to reevaluate practices that are constantly reproduced or reinterpreted. Rather than examining them through only two categories, this approach broadens the analytical lens. Such theoretical expansion allows emerging themes from the in-depth interview analysis to surface, consistent with the interpretive nature of qualitative research.

3. Method

In-Depth Interviews

Gubrium and Holstein (2012) suggest that interviewing is a form of communication in which the researcher and the participant are actively engaged. Active interviewing goes beyond asking questions and documenting responses. Effective communication depends on mutual awareness, observation, and reaction.

This engagement helps create a conversational foundation from which respondents can express pertinent experiences. Because this collaborative methodology captures individuals' unique stories, it is difficult to detach these stories from respondents' cultural contexts and informed agency. "Life comes to us in the form of stories, and personal narratives are approached as individualized constructions. Respondents tell us stories but do not do so in a social vacuum." (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012, p. 52).

Forty interviews were conducted via Zoom with three groups of participants: 20 journalists, comprising 10 who self-identified as covering humanitarian beats and 10 freelance journalists who had worked with both news institutions and international humanitarian agencies, and 20 communications professionals working with 10 global humanitarian and human rights organizations. In addition, two in-depth interviews were conducted with one of three authors who have written about humanitarian journalism and with the CEO and news editor at The New Humanitarian. The three participant groups were selected to provide perspectives from different positions in relation to the boundaries of journalism.

The first group, comprising traditional journalists, represented the normative, institutionalized profession and served as a baseline for examining journalistic norms and identity

"insiders". The second group, comprising freelance journalists, worked across two fields of practice and therefore provided insight into boundary-work negotiations. This group also builds on previous research (Cooper, 2018) calling for a more nuanced understanding of practitioners whose prior journalism experience has transformed their humanitarian work "in between and may help conceptualize humanitarian journalism. In addition, members of this group had experience in visual and digital journalism, which facilitated their transition into the humanitarian field. The third group comprised communications professionals from INGOs who were "outsiders" and, although outside journalism, had produced reports while working under highly challenging conditions. Including this group expanded and complicated the application of boundary-work theory by incorporating perspectives from outside journalism. Together, the three groups' perspectives provided a framework for understanding practice-based research.

The researchers sent three IRB-approved recruitment emails to initiate recruitment across the three participant groups. The researcher sent the first email to the CEO of The New Humanitarian to introduce the study and facilitate access to journalists. The researcher sent the second email to a freelance journalist with experience at Voice of America and humanitarian organizations to facilitate introductions to other freelance journalists. The researcher sent the third email to the Director of Communications at Anera to initiate recruitment among INGO communication professionals. The researcher also identified potential participants through publicly available professional contact information listed on institutional and organizational websites, particularly under "Our Staff" and "Contact Us" sections. Because the study targeted journalists and communication professionals, these publicly listed professional contact details provided an appropriate means of initial contact.

Snowball sampling was subsequently used to recruit additional participants through referrals from initial contacts and participants. No compensation was provided, and participation was entirely voluntary. Each recruitment email clearly stated: "Your participation is voluntary, and there are no consequences for choosing not to participate or withdrawing from the study. Confidentiality of all participants will be maintained."

The researcher's 15 years of professional experience across journalism and the humanitarian field facilitated access to an initial network of professional contacts. The researcher used the snowballing method to recruit additional participants. No compensation was provided and participation was entirely voluntary.

To further investigate the journalistic genres with which members of each group identified their work, three distinct sets of interview questions were developed. The first 10 questions, which focused on role conception and ethics, were asked of all three groups, whereas the second set was tailored to each group's professional background and experiences. For example, participants in each group were asked to identify differences, overlaps, deviations, and perceived relationships. At the end of the interview, the author asked what goals were expected and posed a hypothetical question: "What type of journalism do you see yourself producing: advocacy, solutions journalism, or peace journalism?" Some interviewees were unfamiliar with solutions journalism; the author used impact journalism to make sure all members agreed on the term used.

Each interview lasted 45–60 min, and respondents provided in-depth answers to the questions. Notably, interviewees, particularly journalists, expressed their personal perspectives in response to the questions rather than their organizations' guidelines. The researcher used the three-step qualitative research analysis method of Emerson et al. (2011). First, the author read the transcripts in detail, wrote notes in the margins, and created an Excel spreadsheet for coding. The second stage involved open coding, with the data examined line by line in relation to the research question to identify recurring themes and patterns. In the third stage, the author revisited the highlighted data to identify patterns

and themes and begin writing the findings section. An Excel spreadsheet was used to track quotations and their links to the final themes. Data collection continued until no new information or themes emerged, indicating saturation (Alsaawi, 2014).

The 40 participants included professional journalists and humanitarian professionals (22 men and 18 women), with an average of 17 years of professional experience. They included two senior journalists with over 25 years of experience working in journalism and with humanitarian aid agencies. The participants comprised a global group of journalists who covered humanitarian beats and communications professionals from 10 global humanitarian agencies operating in disaster zones. Participants' work had appeared in AP, AFP, Voice of America, Al Jazeera, CNN, The New Humanitarian, Reuters, and NPR. Participants involved in humanitarian work had worked for UNHCR, Anera, IHP UK, Oxfam, Doctors Without Borders, IRUS, Direct Relief, and Amnesty International. All interviewees were promised anonymity, and this study received Institutional Review Board approval.

RQ. *How do practitioners (journalists, freelancers, and NGO communicators) describe the practices of humanitarian journalism?*

4. Findings

Following a thorough analysis of the data, the author identified six elements across responses from both insiders and outsiders that characterize the practice of humanitarian journalism. Humanitarian journalism is impact-driven, built through collaboration among multiple actors, grounded in constructive storytelling and participatory community journalism, shaped by practices that emerge from contested journalistic boundaries, and characterized by challenges to a one-way, universal model of news production.

4.1. Impact-Driven Journalism

Journalists described humanitarian reporting as driven by the broader purpose of creating impact. A journalist working for The New Humanitarian addressed a common misconception that humanitarian journalism constitutes pure advocacy, distinguishing its practice from that of advocacy: "Campaigners or advocates start with an answer and look for evidence to support it. Journalists start with a question and then ensure that the answer reaches those who can use it to create change. Our tool remains fact-based journalism . . . I think that's a helpful way of thinking about it."

Another journalist captured this distinction by describing how he continually assesses his journalistic role: "You have to go back and ask yourself, what is your job? Is it to inform people or to change public opinion? If you are trying to change public opinion, are you a journalist or an activist?" He continued: "There is a fine line between describing the truth and being accused of taking sides." Another journalist said that their reporting might lead to policy change or humanitarian intervention; however, she emphasized the role of informing rather than directly advocating.

Interviewees from NGO communications departments stressed that organizations have dedicated units, staff, and resources to support targeted campaigns. This finding suggests that organizations are driven more by impact than by advocacy: "I think we want to do more impact solutions in terms of communicating about what MSF is doing, for instance, in terms of waste reduction, or like climate change or making our operations greener. I think there are a lot of impact solutions. Long-term solution, in that we're going to show you that these people are hungry. So hopefully, some policymaker somewhere will fix it."

Most interviewees mentioned "writing to inspire" as a fundamental goal of their content: "I'm all about getting to the facts, even if they're uncomfortable and hoping people will use that to make some change. . . It can inspire my work to make changes, but I would

say it impacts." One communications officer provided the example of refugees: "They used to work as midwives in the past, and now they are trying to find their way, but it's always their pride and their humanity." Another communications staff member said, "They're still agents of their own lives and their own change, and even in the situation that they have right now."

They viewed impactful stories as intended not only to inform but also to inspire action and influence communities, policy, and international relations: "I think my main goal would be like, just telling the truth and also to impact communities . . .to bring light to a situation."

Participants described impact within humanitarian work as operating on two levels. The first concerns the effects of a crisis on communities and therefore frames the immediate impact of the problem: "Impact can be the impact of the crisis or the impact of the conflict or famine." The second is solutions-based, with impact understood in terms of long-term solutions. Interviewees also described framing crises in terms of their impact at the individual level: "We're not talking about abstract issues. This is what's at stake for actual people and how it's impacting lives. What the reader can do about it themselves."

4.2. Collaborative Model

Participants described impactful reporting as being achieved through robust collaboration with local journalists. Such collaboration was considered important for addressing the undervaluation of local expertise and the tendency to credit local journalists merely as "fixers" or producers. One journalist captured this dynamic succinctly: "There is a huge imbalance of power. . . Often, the work that international journalists do. You cannot do that work without local journalists, and most of the credit goes to the international journalists." Participants also introduced the concept of "parachute journalists," whose practices can exacerbate this disparity because international journalists with limited knowledge of the regions on which they report often rely heavily on local journalists' interpretations. One journalist described a "parachute journalist" as follows: "an unfortunate phrase. . .a lot of journalists parachute in. They're sent by their companies, and oftentimes, they do not always get the story right." Participants emphasized that local journalists play a particularly important role during conflicts: "I think local journalists are super important, especially in conflict, because they are the ones who know the story. They'll know the story while it's happening because they're living in it."

4.3. Positive Approach to Constructive Storytelling

Humanitarian journalism adopts a more positive approach that aligns with elements of constructive journalism. One interviewee said, "We want to make sure the pictures are not showing people suffering or. . .in compromising positions." Another said, "We prefer photos that show people and their ability to get things done and do things . . .the idea is we're not just showing a bunch of people who are like victims." Another participant emphasized the importance of placing responsibility on systems rather than individuals.

Communications officers generally perceived their practices as a form of constructive storytelling that shifts the narrative from despair toward possibilities: "You should be looking after these people in need because they're in desperate need. So that's kind of like the impetus that we're coming from." Most interviewees expressed a shift in the types of stories they report, emphasizing positive framing through "constructive humanitarian storytelling." Rather than focusing on grief and sadness, they sought to highlight strengths, hope, and change. A senior communications director said, "If you give them agency, they will stand up and fight and work and educate themselves and live, live good lives and create improvement, positive lives."

Interviewees described hope and optimism as essential to constructing humanitarian stories and identified this emphasis as a key shift in storytelling practices over time. For example, one participant described UNHCR's humanitarian stories as having shifted from a focus on sadness, grief, and horror toward softer, more hopeful storytelling. He characterized this practice as emphasizing positive impacts and meaningful contributions: "On the other side of that is that a hopeful success story as the refugee being settled in a place now they're starting their own business."

4.4. Participatory Community Journalism

Freelance journalists identified the role of eyewitnesses as a key element of humanitarian reporting but described a redefined understanding of this role. As one journalist explained, the role shifts from that of an "observer" to a "witness with a purpose": "Bystander who witnesses something, reports on it, tries to get to the truth of it, to the facts. And one way to do it is sort of like storytelling. . .The story of one is the story of all." Another journalist observed that the humanitarian journalist's role must move beyond that of a detached "disinterested observer" and adopt a more "active", "participatory role."

One participant described this participatory approach in terms of service to communities: "Journalism should be seen as a service industry. . .to improve people's lives, and so we should be guided by the communities that we're trying to serve in terms of determining which narratives matter, how we tell the stories, and whose voices are amplified in those stories . . ."

Interviewees emphasized that ethical storytelling in humanitarian reporting requires a personalized approach rather than an abstract or generalized approach. They suggest that individual stories and human-centered narratives help audiences better connect with crises. One way interviewees described applying this concept was by highlighting needs and presenting them at a personal level.

One humanitarian participant emphasized that when people are affected by war, famine, climate change, and other external circumstances, their agency and broader identities should also be acknowledged: "I think there is kind of a big shift to center refugee voices and tell their own stories in their own words. . .. either playing a musical instrument or learning something or showing their profession and all of these things."

4.5. Practice-Based Journalism Emerging from Contested Boundaries

For the journalists interviewed, practicing humanitarian journalism did not mean compromising the journalistic principles they had learned. Participants generally indicated that covering a humanitarian beat was no different from covering other beats, although humanitarian coverage was particularly centered on "people." However, journalists expressed concern that stepping outside their normative roles might compromise their independence. They suggested that resistance to change comes not only from the practitioners but also from the established institutional norms of the traditional news organizations for which they work: "Now, things are happening in the practice that might diverge from what we see as ideal or what we see as a good practice." Journalists also described institutional challenges associated with engaging in practices that deviate from established norms, including having stories blocked or filtered. For example, a story using a subjective or untraditional approach may be rejected. Participants also reported that pitching humanitarian stories from particular angles could create publication obstacles: "The original client was unsure that they were going to be able to continue with the piece, and so I pitched it around to another client, and it was picked up by the New York Times, by their opinion section."

Freelancers producing impactful, professional stories outside traditional newsrooms described quality and technical expertise as core elements of their work. These included

creating a hook and nut graph, providing context, incorporating quotations, and verifying information. Participants emphasized "structural elements" and "capturing attention." As one senior journalist and media relations officer noted, "Start off with a paragraph. . .that's going to capture your attention, and then by the third paragraph, it should have. . .the nut graph. Why you're writing the story, why this matters, why you should continue reading. Get the facts on the top and have some background quotes." Another journalist emphasized the importance of fact-checking: "Sometimes you can get the materials, but then you need to verify it."

In this sense, when practitioners move beyond an institutionalized normative space, they adapt journalistic norms to the requirements of new professional spaces. Most journalists expressed that working in a less regulated environment allowed them to deviate from doxa, which Bourdieu (1991) conceptualizes as the beliefs, values, and norms taken for granted within a particular field. This deviation fostered "openness" and "flexibility" to develop new skills combining the strengths of journalism and humanitarian work. In this context, such actors perform hybrid roles as journalists and humanitarian professionals.

Interviewees from outside journalism suggested that the value of humanitarian stories is determined by the urgency of a need or problem rather than conventional newsworthiness, potentially increasing the production of humanitarian news. For example, a social media communications officer highlighted, "Finding ways to tell the stories of the lives of the people so that it's about them, that this dirty water? Why, it's affecting their life. And then the process of creating the well. And then how the community's reaction to when the water from the well came, and had they access to clean water, and how that impacted their lives, and what they can now do with their lives, now that they do not have to collect the dirty water."

4.6. Challenging the One-Way Universal Model of News Production

Interviewees called for culturally sensitive and adaptive reporting. They described a shift from the traditional view that journalists simply "report facts" in a war zone toward an "act of witnessing with the goal to spur actions and prevent further harm." Participants associated this approach with "Challenging the flattened narrative," emphasizing the need for journalists to reconsider the value they contribute and how journalism is practiced: "they're going to have to start thinking about what is it that we bring . . .the value that we add . . . there's going to be lots of questions about how we do the journalism." One journalist illustrated how flattened narratives fail to fully capture the realities of communities' lives in crisis zones. These realities include survival, everyday activities such as cooking despite war, and the continuation of art, music, and livelihoods amid destruction. "Challenging flattened story values means moving away from 'prioritizing stories through a dominant perspective, not telling stories, and determining their importance through Western audiences, instead of honoring the diverse lived realities."

5. Discussion

Through interviews with practitioners, this study examined how insiders and outsiders negotiated their roles in humanitarian journalism practices. Because no clear academic definition exists, the actors' perspectives proved insightful for unpacking the ambiguity surrounding practices aligned with humanitarian journalism. To understand journalism as a socially and discursively constructed field, the actors' discourse is essential for better defining the practice (Carlson, 2016). To understand this discourse, the author asked interviewees to describe their roles in producing humanitarian news and identify the journalistic genre they believed their work belonged to. The findings identified six elements of humanitarian journalism across the three groups of practitioners and actors.

As illustrated in Figure 1, these six themes provide a practice-based conceptualization of humanitarian journalism.

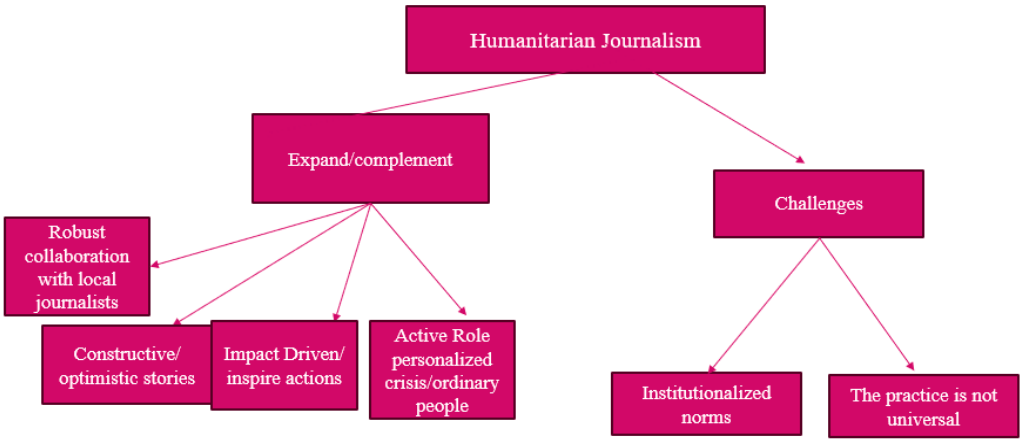


Figure 1. This figure summarizes the main themes across the three groups in an attempt to conceptualize practice-based humanitarian journalism.

First, practitioners described their role as impact-driven journalism, with less emphasis on advocacy. They reinforced that the practice begins with a question that leads to the story without a specific outcome in mind, unlike advocacy, which aims to persuade and influence opinion. Both journalists and freelancers emphasized their independence, while NGO communications professionals made it clear that their work focuses on in-depth situation reports detailing evidence-based accounts from the ground, with advocacy situated in separate departments. Second, interviewees emphasized the importance of collaboration and building robust relationships with local journalists in the region being reported on to address power imbalances. This collaboration helps foster an inclusive interpretation of the context of a crisis. The collaboration entailed working with NGOs on the ground to build expertise and share authoritative knowledge about the crisis. The third element is that humanitarian journalism adopts a more positive approach that aligns with elements of constructive journalism. Rather than focusing solely on negative news, it emphasizes positive stories that fall through the cracks of conflict, such as stories of survival, response efforts, resilience, and community solidarity. The fourth element emphasizes that ethical storytelling in humanitarian reporting requires a personalized rather than an abstract or generalized approach. Participants suggested that providing individual stories and human-centered narratives helps audiences connect more deeply with crises. The fifth element is that humanitarian news coverage should be seen as a complement rather than a rival to traditional media. Humanitarian journalism, like mainstream journalism, is primarily driven by the quality of the product (production and content), which applies to both written and visual stories. Journalists raised concerns that, by stepping outside their normative roles, they may encounter resistance from the newsroom. The sixth element is that humanitarian journalism should be culturally sensitive to the communities it covers.

The findings revealed that traditional journalists (covering humanitarian beats) were less informed about the practice of humanitarian journalism, as they were driven by institutionalized norms of neutrality. Their intention to comply with these norms stems from newsroom resistance to accepting counter-practices: even when practitioners tried to establish such practices, they found that their pieces would end up in the opinion section or never be published.

Informed by boundary theory, this study proposes a framework for examining professionals who have moved beyond the boundaries of journalism into adjacent fields. Little research has examined the practices of those who were once insiders in journalism and

later worked in adjacent fields, namely freelancers who worked for traditional news outlets and later moved into the humanitarian space. Interestingly, those who produce visual and digital content were found to be at the intersection of two adjacent fields. Boundary theory explains how these professionals perceive the legitimacy of practices that may deviate from journalism's core practices while continuously negotiating the internal and external factors that reshape and redefine their practices (Vos & Singer, 2016). Through a boundary lens, this study argues that embracing an evolving journalistic identity does not require compromising the core foundations of verification or ethical standards. Rather, such flexibility offers a novel lens for understanding how journalistic practices are constantly negotiated and adapted while professional values remain intact. Therefore, humanitarian journalists' roles reveal a non-binary, hybrid practice constructed through continuous conversations among insiders (journalists), those who operate on the boundaries of each field, and outsiders.

One novel contribution of this study is its examination of humanitarian journalism through a wider lens encompassing insiders, in-betweeners, and outsiders. The study argues that understanding the field requires capturing these collective positionalities alongside and in relation to one another. Taken collectively, these perspectives reveal how the boundaries defining the practice shift across different positions rather than being defined by any single group. The practices of humanitarian journalism draw on those of freelance journalists (in between boundaries) and NGO communicators (outsiders), both of whom occupy a zone of practice that deviates from the field's central doxa and norms. Although all interviewees across the groups mentioned that humanitarian reporting is centered on people and aims to serve people, humanitarian journalism is best defined at its boundaries.

Another notable contribution of this study is its examination of the relationship between humanitarian journalism and other well-researched types of journalism that deviate to some extent from traditional journalistic norms.

The findings indicate that, first, unlike peace journalism, none of the interviewees linked their work to advocacy. Two interviewees mentioned that advocacy may constitute 20% of their work, but they would not consider their work entirely advocacy-based. Previous research suggests that practitioners construct peace journalism with advocacy in mind (Bhowmik & Ferrucci, 2024). Second, the interviewees in this study refrained from grouping their work with advocacy journalism aimed at promoting peace. Participants preferred to use the word "impact" rather than "advocacy"; for example, they described an impact-driven approach in which they begin with a "question in mind" and clearly indicated that they wanted to communicate impact in terms of the impact of climate change, the impact of displacement and refugees on their new communities, the impact on policy, and the impact on international reporting. Impact can also be understood in two ways: the impact of the crisis and the impact of long-term solutions to the crisis. Although they write to inspire change, they remain committed to facts and truth-telling without any intention of advocacy. Based on this analysis and the practice approach, this study suggests that humanitarian journalism is closely grouped with solutions and impact journalism, which offer solutions-based stories driven by the impact of the news (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 60) and is less aligned with an advocacy-driven approach to journalism.

Third, humanitarian journalism was examined in relation to constructive journalism, and the findings indicated several commonalities. First, the two genres strive to address the limitations of traditional news reporting through action-oriented reporting that aims to avoid bias toward negativity in the news (Hermans & Drok, 2018). Such an action-driven approach overlaps with the literature on humanitarian journalism, in which humanitarian discourse encompasses any text that generates concern and elicits a response through the media or humanitarian organizations (Vestergaard, 2021). Second, the two genres of

reporting share a goal that extends beyond reporting negative news. For example, audiences often experience news fatigue or avoidance when exposed to overwhelmingly negative coverage (Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020). This study suggests that one characteristic of humanitarian journalism is framing news with a positive angle: "Not images showing people suffering, but their ability to get things done; avoid victimhood or despair and show strength and hope." Additionally, the findings reveal an overlap in the risks these two genres may face; for example, audiences may perceive coverage as advocacy or solely good news, which may undermine journalistic credibility (Mast et al., 2019; Meier, 2018).

This study argues that humanitarian journalism may help sustain public attention to global crises while offering audiences possibilities for engagement beyond narratives of despair. By presenting crises through a broader range of perspectives, humanitarian journalism may counter the negative framing that contributes to compassion fatigue (Moeller, 2018) and make crises more relatable through a sense of shared humanity (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018; Poerksen, 2013). Therefore, at its core, the practice addresses aspects of reality that may be overlooked in predominantly negative crisis reporting.

This study should not be interpreted as romanticizing a promotional genre of reporting, as critics of constructive journalism have claimed. Rather, humanitarian journalism requires conversations with practitioners from outside the boundaries of practice—i.e., integration with people living in crisis zones, from eyewitnesses to freelance local reporters—to determine how news stories should be shaped to represent a particular reality, rather than starting from a position of advocating a universal perspective. Humanitarian journalism is built on collaborative models involving local journalists and humanitarian and human rights organizations. It inspires responses that improve lives while challenging the one-way nature of knowledge production.

This study does not define humanitarian journalism; instead, it establishes a foundational framework for conceptualizing this genre of journalism grounded in practice (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Vos & Singer, 2016). It finds that these practices occur in a less regulated space that diverges from the doxa, or set of norms (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, it rejects a binary classification of traditional versus counter-practice (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). This study encourages framing stories through a hope-based perspective, drawing on narratives of survival and resilience.

For knowledge of humanitarian journalism to grow within the field of journalism, greater attention must be paid to hybrid practices that emerge from contested boundaries. This includes greater attention to training, dialog among practitioners, and the diverse professional identities of humanitarian actors who report on crises with the goal of improving lives and safeguarding the dignity of communities impacted by disasters.

This paper contributes to the literature on international journalism in two ways. First, it illuminates actors' perspectives on the practices associated with an emerging genre of journalism. Traditional journalists often resisted publishing content perceived as compromising journalistic objectivity. However, the findings suggest that a fact-based focus on impact does not compromise news quality. Rather than contradicting established journalistic norms, this approach offers a more critical, culturally and contextually grounded perspective that can engage audiences and help address power dynamics. Interestingly, the ambiguity surrounding humanitarian journalism stems partly from the lack of an established academic definition. By contrast, peace journalism has received considerable academic attention, although its practices remain contested (Hanitzsch, 2007; Lynch, 2008).

Second, this study suggests that journalism can expand its boundaries and move beyond dominant representations of distant suffering. The findings indicate that these practices are already present but remain under-researched. Further professional training and recognition of humanitarian journalism as a distinct journalistic genre are therefore needed.

The continuing ambiguity surrounding its definition reflects the ongoing negotiation of roles among insiders and outsiders to the field.

Humanitarian news production evolves through constant boundary negotiations. This research is limited by the small number of participants who self-identified as humanitarian journalists. Future studies should focus on local/international collaboration models and training to better understand the genre.

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