Africa and Ireland:
Aspects of a Media Agenda

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John Horgan of the School of communications, NINE, Dublin, suggests that the response of the Irish media to the African famine of 1984 raises a number of questions about the criteria used in reporting "newsworthy" events. He contends that media concentration was on the short-term causes and Irish relief efforts with little attempt to analyse the deeper issues involved. He proposes a number of items for a future media/Third World agenda.

Introduction

The explosion of world interest in the African famine in 1984 did not leave Ireland — and its media — unmoved, That famine had caught the world's eye, and at the centre of the maelstrom of human activity it evoked one particular Irishman — Bob Geldof — who made at least the English-speaking part of that world conscious of the virtues of plain speaking. Ireland itself rose to the challenge with unparalleled generosity, its per capita contribution to relief overshadowing that of many richer and more powerful European neighbours. As the weeks turned into months, and the months into years, and the famine faded from our screens and our sensibilities, there was at least the consciousness of a job well done, The media, for its part, had played an essential role in awakening the public to the magnitude of the task, and in channelling aid to where it could be most effectively deployed, Its graphic images in words and pictures had become part of our visual vocabulary, a sort of grammar of poverty that we were all called upon to parse and analyse.

Making allowances for the broad colours in which I have painted it, this might be widely regarded as a fair enough representation of the way in which the events of 1984 impinged on the collective Irish consciousness through the media, and of the response which these events evoked. But is this what actually happened, or is the sketch above little more than the outline of a myth that, once formed, will be almost impossible to disentangle from reality? It is the contention of this article that the historically and structurally conditioned responses of the Irish media to the events of 1984 in Africa, and particularly in Ethiopia, raise major questions about the definition and content of news' for the media themselves, as well as suggesting a number of important items for a future media/Third World agenda. In attempting to define some of the questions, I have drawn on the report Images of Africa, which I prepared for Trocaire, and which examined media coverage of Africa and the famine over three periods of two months each, in 1984, 1985 and 1986.

The study, which was prepared as part of an international exercise involving a number of Non-Governmental Organisations, had as its major purpose the identification of the principal parameters within which the Irish media approached the complex questions relating to Africa, to famine, and to underdevelopment. The findings of the survey must be interpreted with a measure of reserve in the light of the fact that the survey periods amounted to only one sixth of the total period, but at the same time the trends evidenced by the research were on the whole quite sharply delineated. Individual media may, outside the survey periods, have carried coverage of Africa which was more detailed or complex than that which occurred within these periods, but

questionnaires completed by media executives indicated that the coverage studies could be regarded by and large as a fair sample of the whole.

The findings principally indicated a relatively poor correlation between the positive response to the phenomenon of famine in Africa in ideological terms, and the media commitment to, and manifestation of, this response. Manpower commitments by the media were generally low, and the level of analysis of the deeper issues involved was uneven. Coverage as a whole could be described in terms of a graph which both rose and fell steeply: long-term interest in the phenomenon was, with few exceptions, not sustained. Irish efforts, both voluntary and governmental, to alleviate famine received generally favourable coverage; aid initiatives and strategies by the EEC and by indigenous governments were less favourably commented on, and the media's interpretation of the famine focussed primarily on short-term aspects such as drought and crop failure.

Newsworthiness and the African Famine
Galtung and Ruge (1965), in a classic study, identified four major culture-bound factors which, they argued, influence the transition from events to news in the developed world. These are that events are more likely to become news in the following circumstances, or in any combination of them: (a) the more the event concerns elite nations; (b) the more the event concerns elite people; (c) the more an event can be seen in personal terms, as due to the actions of specific individuals; and (d) the more negative the consequences of the event, whether actual or anticipated. News coverage of the 1984 famine in Ethiopia and other sub-Saharan countries, in Ireland as elsewhere, suggests very strongly that there is another major factor governing the transition from event to news: the degree to which an event is magnified in the public eye by a series of positive editorial decisions by an elite news organisation. In the case 011984 and Africa, the decision of the BBC to give major news time to a report by Michael Buerk in October 1984 evidently triggered a whole series of decisions in other media 'organisations, and increased the amount of coverage in exponential terms in a comparatively short period. The coverage might have taken place in any case, once the scale of the tragedy became more widely known: but it is certainly arguable that the timing of this particular explosion of news coverage was strongly influenced by BBC editorial decisions, and less by the intrinsic 'newsworthiness' of the events being described.

The whole concept of 'newsworthiness' is, indeed, one that must be approached with considerable caution. Most working journalists probably still use, as a working hypothesis, some form of Tuchman's ironic assertion (1973-74) that "it would appear that news judgement is the sacred knowledge, the secret ability of the newsman, which distinguishes him from other people", Tuchman and others, notably Rosengren (1974) Fiske and Hartley (1978), the Glasgow Media Group (1980) and Curran (1981), have delineated, in one way or another, the more persuasive thesis that news is a socially constructed reality which can be best understood in the context not just of the events, but of the structures and forces which help to shape these events. (1)

Viewed in this light, the symbiotic relationship between various news organisations assumes a significance of its own, and may well help partly to explain the sequence of events in the Irish media. This possibility is underlined by the fact that in Ireland, which in view of subsequent events might have claimed a special sensitivity to the

problems of hunger and development in Africa, early indications that a catastrophe of extraordinary proportions was in the offing were not followed up. A graphic RTE radio interview on Day by Day with an Irish missionary who had returned from Ethiopia, for instance, broadcast well before the Buerk report, produced an unsolicited flood of dash from members of the public, but failed to generate any equivalent response from within the station itself, or in the print media, which regularly monitors such programmes, It should also be borne in mind that there is a special relationship between Irish and British media, in that the penetration of the Irish market by the media of the neighbouring island, both print and electronic, has created a situation which is probably without parallel in Europe. Only along the US-Canadian border would similar interpenetration occur, and even then significant differences would be evident. In this context, it is certainly worth considering the degree to which Specifically British news priorities influence the news priorities of Irish media organisations.

Nor need this he a matter of simple editorial choices: the options themselves may be limited. Many of the sources of foreign news most readily available to Irish newspaper editorial personnel either originate in Britain or are tailored with a specifically British market in mind. Ireland is not especially well endowed with resources, and its media organisations likewise. Sometimes an inexpensive, British-oriented news service is, in the eyes of hard-pressed executives, infinitely preferable to no service at all. Independent foreign news coverage is so cost-intensive that it is an option available on any scale only to a small number of media organisations in any country, and these organisations will have their own internal priorities: in the case of Dublin-based media organisations, for example, Belfast, London and Brussels are three areas that will soak up the greater part of the available resources, leaving little or nothing for autonomous coverage of events in other locales. At the same time, it is unwise to assume that there is necessarily a positive correlation between national wealth (or media organisation wealth) and an outward-looking, world-directed media philosophy: in the United States, without argument one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world, there are three times as many media correspondents covering the White House as there are covering the entire world outside the United States, and only one in every hundred American journalists is working overseas on foreign assignment.

News organisations, cash-starved and inward-looking though they may be, nevertheless also maintain a tradition of rapid response, and this is a factor which should also be considered in the light of what happened in 1984. This ‘fire-brigade’ journalistic activity, as it is sometimes described, operates notably at times of heightened international tension and major natural catastrophes. It was evoked with dramatic speed in the case of the African famine, once the trigger factors had come into play: most Irish media organisations had organised reports direct from the affected areas within a week of the Buerk report.

The speed of the response, however, served principally to mask the nature and the extent of the problems confronting Irish media organisations in a situation of this kind, These problems, on closer examination, relate partly to resources and partly to the availability of suitably qualified personnel. On the former point, it is worth noting that only two of the four major Irish news organisations were initially convinced enough of the importance of the story to commit a full-time staff journalist to the task;

the other two chose free-lance people, with a correspondingly reduced resource implication. Of the four organisations, only one had on hand a reporter who had previous experience of an analogous situation: the reporter in question had in fact reported the Ethiopian famine ten years previously.

This is, of itself, not unusual. As Tunstall (1978) has pointed out 'the work carried on within the occupation of journalism is seen as being non-routine. It emphasises personal qualities, and interpersonal skills -.- rather than being capable of systematization'. There is, of course, a hidden tension here. Journalism, at some level, demands expertise: and yet the choice of its practitioners has for many years been predicated on the existence of a corps of individuals with a sound basic training, who can be expected to throw themselves into new and totally unexpected situations and master their complexities in the shortest possible period of time. This role model of the journalist has persisted, in spite of some evidence that the end-result of this form of activity is less likely to be expertise, than 'pack' behaviour (in which all journalists in a given news situation will follow an implicitly agreed emphasis in their reporting). As one former journalist, now in academic life, has commented: 'The essence of news judgement is that it is consensual. Consensus minimises the need for discussion and speeds routine role- performance' (Roschco, 1975).

In the early 1960s in Ireland, however, some cracks began to appear in this structure, with the incremental decision, by a number of news organisations to appoint specialists outside the areas in which individual expertise had up to then been considered essential (principally political reporting) A number of specialist correspondents were accordingly appointed, both by RTE and by the newspaper organisations. Some have survived: others have not. In all cases, the decision to appoint a specialist in one area or another seems to have been taken on the basis of journalistic intuition: some areas were instinctively seen as being of greater public interest — and therefore of greater value to the organisation's circulation or audience drive — than others. Education and religion were certainly beneficiaries of this new mood, and were to be joined by agriculture, medicine, tourism, labour and other areas. The expansionism of the Sixties, however, has given way to the retrenchment of the Eighties, and there are some indications that, while specialist correspondents continue to exist and play a role in their respective organisations, they are increasingly expected to abandon their specialist role for greater or lesser periods in order to meet the more urgent manpower needs of the organisations for which they work. This points, in turn, to the existence of the tension within news organisations between routine and non-routine news tasks. At a time of expansion, and comparatively generous manpower provision, non-routine news-gathering and investigative reporting can assume a greater prominence. When the harsher economic winds begin to blow, the more routine tasks — reporting the Oireachtas, the courts, the sports, the traffic accidents, the speeches and the public meetings — re-assume their dominance: with them - 'the journalistic general practitioners come back into their own. The corollary of this 'general practitioner' skill, however, is that the greater part of the activity and energy of the reporter in question will be absorbed by the necessity to acquire some familiarity with the outline of any new situation. In certain circumstances, the sheer physical and logistical difficulties associated with the transmission of their reports to base may in any case leave them time for little else. The result is a job which is rarely done less than competently. But which may have to sacrifice depth and insight in order to safeguard precisely that level of competence

which is expected.
The problem was compounded, in the case of the 1984 African famine, by the fact that there was little 'news', in the classic sense of that word, to write about, People were dying, often in horrific circumstances, and in huge numbers. The traditional 'news' format, however, is inadequate for dealing with such a reality over an extended period: if a thousand people have died yesterday, it is of decreasing 'news' significance if eight hundred people die today, particularly if one cannot be sure of the exact numbers, and the deaths in any case are taking place in a remote country from which one does not hear very often. To make the events vivid, and to relate them more immediately to the experience and interests of the media audience, it is necessary to resort to journalistic techniques more properly associated with features than with news: the 'colour' piece, the personal interview, the personal description, the first-person, eye-witness report (as contrasted with the impersonality of the traditional news mode).

At one important level, this is all very much as it should be. Journalists would be doing no service to their profession if they were to descend, at speed and relatively unprepared, on situations of great complexity, prepared to pontificate on its rights and wrongs and to engage in cheap didacticism. The question that must be asked, however, is whether the rapid response of the kind outlined above does journalism sufficient credit, in the medium and long term, and whether there is need for a more integrated approach by media organisations which would allow them the possibility of a more flexible, and ultimately more informative, reaction to major events. Some news organisations are better at this than others: a year and a half after the initial flood of publicity about the African famine, the whole question had all but disappeared from some media agendas: in others, reflective and thoughtful coverage of various aspects of development were filling in the details of a picture that had initially, and of necessity been sketched with very rapid brush strokes indeed. But the picture is, at best, an uneven one.

Whether carried out as part of a fire-brigade' response, or as part of a more considered reaction to a complex social, economic and political reality, the reporting of such an event — or series of events — as the African famine of 1984 is still certainly replete with ideological content and significance. A certain world view, and a view of Ireland within that overall perspective, is an essential component of every reporter's vision, and its main components can be delineated by a careful study of the material. The picture that emerges may be a crude one, and the overall balance may not reflect with accuracy the particular priorities of some individual reporters and of their organisations, but the outlines are unmistakeable, and are a valid source for reflection.
Irish media coverage of the famine

Initially, there was a strong ideological message that, even though the famine itself might or might not have been avoidable, its relief was a matter essentially of finance and logistics. Coverage focussed on the amounts of money being raised by various agencies, and on the methods being employed by these agencies to deliver aid to where it was needed. It might be argued that this particular focus was an inevitable reflection of the degree to which personnel in the agencies concerned were instrumental in bringing the problem to the attention of the public in the first place. On the other hand, it is noticeable that the demand for a response from the Irish government, as such, is slower to internalise. The time lag is not great, but the fact

that there is such a time lag, and the order in which the responses of the agencies and of the government are presented to the public eye by the media, underwrites the suggestion that a primary — perhaps even the primary — appropriate response to a human tragedy of such dimensions is seen as falling into the area of private charity rather than into that of bilateral or multilateral activity by governments. This suggests in turn that the 'charity mentality' is seen as ideologically valid, and is supported as such implicitly by the media. Other elements in the media coverage during the periods studied lend support to this view: the favourable treatment accorded to statistics about the per capita Irish private contribution in relation to that of other countries; the generally heightened role of the agencies, and the religious underpinning to much of their work; and the dramatic focus on individual fund-raising efforts, some of them heroic, some of them verging on the bizarre.

Notable also in this context is the generally supportive attitude displayed by the media towards the involvement of the Irish government in efforts to meet the challenge posed by the famine. The fact that Ireland held the presidency of the EEC during the period when the famine first began to make international news was itself significant, in that a large amount of European aid to the famine area was being channelled through the EEC on a multilateral basis. The possibility is that the media, which was almost universally supportive of all actions taken by the Irish government during this period, may have operated on the assumption that echoing, reporting, or implying criticism of the Irish government's own performance — as indicated by its overseas aid targets, for example — would be ideologically dissonant In the event, the overall image presented to readers and viewers during this period was essentially of a united, national effort, spearheaded by private agencies, with everyone playing their part, from the captains of industry and government to the children and the unemployed. This overview of the sit9ation was, in turn, reinforced by the regular repetition and elaboration of historical parallels between the Ethiopian experience of famine and the Irish experience of famine more than a century earlier. The message was not historically complex nor particularly subtle: as we had suffered, we should be the first to understand, and to help, those who were now suffering. Whatever about the quantity of our response, the quality was to be different, because of our experience. And, at another level, the existence of so many Irish personnel in the field gave our media a unique perspective on the problems, as well as guaranteeing that the scandals occasionally attendant on the distribution of international aid would not occur. A potentially serious problem arising from this emphasis is the degree to which media coverage of the events in Africa became, at one level, another exercise in national self-absorption — a sustained hymn of praise to our own charitable efforts which overshadowed and at times even obscured some of the mare fundamental long-term issues.

It is, of course, easy to interpret this phenomenon more benignly:
the media would have been aware, in a general sense, that massive publicisation of the growing success of fund-raising efforts would encourage further generosity, and to that extent all news of this kind was good news, guaranteed its place on the daily schedule. But there is a finite number of reporters, and a finite amount of media space, whether on newsprint or on the air. Allocating it overwhelmingly to news-gathering activity which focuses on the short- term problems is understandable, but will inevitably have the effect of reducing the amount of media space available for other treatments of the same topic, and thus, the range (if not the quantity) of

Information available to the general public.

A journalistic response to such a criticism would undoubtedly maintain that a primary responsibility of the news organisation is to give its audience what its audience will he interested in. In addition, Galtung and Ruge point out that their definition of news places a high value on events which are culturally comprehensible to the media audience, and which happen over a relatively short period of time. A famine in Africa can be made culturally comprehensible to an Irish audience principally by focussing on the activities of Irish people involved in the relief efforts (the historical parallels, after all, merely serve as a trigger, and cannot be repeated indefinitely). More significantly, a famine, and the events, policies and actions which give rise to it, of its nature takes place over an extended period of time, and is therefore by definition unsuitable as ‘news’ for an audience which wants the beginning, the middle and the end of its news menu to become visible in rapid sequence.

The unsuitability of the African famine as a ‘news’ story in the traditional sense of the word, and the limited interest on the part of the news media in detailed and complex explanatory journalism, emerge as structural factors which, having little or nothing to do with the individual competences of reporters or even their personal views about the events they witness, sharply restricted the panorama offered to Irish audiences at this time.

Media assessment of the causes

It is inevitable, however, that disaster journalism will at some stage progress beyond mere reportage. Any disaster, whether an aircraft crash or a famine, suggests strongly to journalists that there was a precipitating event which, if accurately identified and publicised, will provide those in power with sufficient information to make sure that such an event does not recur. The comparison with aircraft accidents is instructive: the lengthy series of reports following, for example, the series of accidents involving faulty cargo loading doors on a particular type of aircraft in the late 1970’s is a case in point.

In the case of the African famine, four major causative factors eventually emerge from media treatment of the issues. The difference between this topic and, say, that relating to an aircraft crash, is the absence of any clear, unique cause. In this case, the very existence of a number of different possible causes — or of causes which may have contributed to the disaster in varying degrees — contributed to a softness of focus which probably left media audiences undecided about which causative factor was operative, or about how such factors could be rank-ordered. The four factors involved were, broadly speaking, (a) climatic and natural reasons, such as drought, crop failure, and the associated refugee problem, (b) under-development, with the concomitant issues of North-South economic relationships, the diversion of resources into armaments industries, etc., (c) a failure of response on the part of the EEC, and (d) mismanagement and waste on the part of African governments.

Climatic factors, together with the associated problems of human migration and destitution, appear most frequently as a possible cause: the implication is that, had the harvest come up to expectations, there would not have been a problem. Famine, in this context, is seen primarily as an act of God, a natural disaster which could be neither

foreseen nor prevented, but which — precisely for these reasons — makes substantial and acceptable demands on human generosity.

Under-development — a phenomenon which makes equally substantial, if less acceptable, demands for political justice — is rarely depicted in the media as a primary cause of famine. When under- development is adduced as part of the explanation, it generally appears in editorials, where injunctions to reorganise world trade patterns, for example, appear to have been written by people with very little expectation that things will actually change at any time in the foreseeable future. The more radical forms of analysis, in fact, are more likely to find their way into the 'Letters to the Editor' column, where particular interest groups and individuals who share such a world view may, on occasion, be allocated significant space. At the same time, the fact that these views appear in the letters column, where the writers' views are by definition not necessarily shared by the newspaper itself, inevitably reduces their impact and significance. Part of the problem, from a media organisation's point of view, is that opinions of this sort do not constitute 'news' unless they are uttered by persons of substantial status — by Galtung and Ruge's 'elite'. Taking its cue from the general public discourse, therefore, the media tends to marginalise such explanations and analyses.

It is a different matter where the EEC is concerned. Indeed, for a brief period the EEC, and its food mountains, came close to assuming the role of the Biblical scapegoat, sent out into the desert with the sins of the Community on its back. Notable here was the trend to generalisation, which tended to conflate the CAP and the EEC. The image of hard-hearted bureaucrats snatching food from the mouths of hungry children was one which had a certain irresistibility for some commentators, even if it meant that the finer points of some of the arguments and issues were necessarily left unexplored. What was significant also was the relative unwillingness of the media either to explain the political complexities of EEC decision-making procedures, or the financial implications for the Irish government (among others) of certain decisions that might be taken by the Community in relation to food stocks and aid generally. The implication in many of the critiques of EEC policy towards Africa, whether direct (as in feature articles and editorials) or indirect (as in the prominence given to attacks on the EEC by representatives of Irish organisations and by individuals) was unmistakeably that the EEC was in some sense an entity apart. The resource implications of its decisions were seen as irrelevant to its member states, and the Community itself was envisaged as a reality endowed with a degree of supra-national authority and autonomy which is not supported by either the principle or the practice of EEC legislation.

The absence of a media focus on Ireland's bilateral responsibilities towards the Third World, and the strength of the media emphasis on the responsibilities, real or imagined, of the EEC as such, were such as to indicate the probable existence of a journalistic soft option: attacking an external target rather than examining a more complex reality in a way which might be more demanding of a financial response, or unflattering to an image which had already been created of national benefaction.
Nor was the third causative factor absent from the media: hostility to Indigenous African governments is a notable feature of some reporting — either because of supposed inefficiency, or because of spending on armaments, public buildings, or festivities. Even where this critique is accompanied by critiques related to other

possible causative factors, it is not evaluated relative to those other factors, and media audiences are left to draw their own conclusions about which factors are of most significance.

The media focus on the EEC is worth examining in more detail, because, taken in conjunction with more general aspects of Irish coverage of European affairs, it suggests one possible explanation for the perceived tendency where Irish media reporting of EEC affairs generally is concerned, for reporters to analyse events in terms of their perceived relevance for the country (rather than for the Community as a whole), and in particular in terms of their possible effects for good or ill on Irish income and economic activity. At some levels, this attitude can produce reporting as patriotic as that emerging from, say, an international sporting event: the 'national interest' is seen as coterminous with the interests of whichever sectional group is threatened by an EEC development, whether farmers (frequently), fishermen (less frequently), or social welfare recipients. There is some evidence, although it is marginal to my case, that this is by no means unique, and that it is by and large what media audiences expect in conflict situations in which their own country is involved: the attitude of the popular British press to the Falklands invasion provides a particularly dramatic example. Less dramatic, but just as relevant, is the hostility evidenced by the American public to US reporters who were critical of the Grenada invasion.

What I am suggesting, in effect, is that in the reporting of the African famine the focus was, at least initially, blurred by the emergence of a 'national interest' context, in which important aspects of the overall situation were obscured by the unarticulated, and unrelated, series of decisions by large numbers of media personnel which put a premium on the representation of the Irish response to the famine as appropriate, adequate, perhaps even heroic, and certainly better than that of 'rival' nations with whom we rub shoulders on the international stage. To say this is not, I must emphasise, to hint at the existence of a conspiracy theory or of anything remotely resembling it. It is to underline my earlier contention that if we accept that 'news' is essentially a social construct, it pays to look behind that construct at the society in which it is created and given life. If that society has, as in this case, a positive self-image of itself in relation to the Third World and famine aid, this will in turn strongly influence the nature of its media coverage of a major Third World issue. This has both positive and negative aspects.

An agenda for the future

I have, up to now, concentrated to some degree on the negative aspects: the way in which, for example, the viewing of such events through an Irish prism can distort some elements in the overall picture, magnify others and cause some almost to disappear. But there are also positive aspects, and these help us to set at least part of an agenda for the future. That agenda should involve media, government, third world agencies and the educational system (not least that part of it which is devoted to the education of journalists) in a concerted attempt to build on the positive aspects of that Irish self-image in order to improve not only the quantity but the quality of the information about Third World issues and developments reaching the Irish public through the media.

As far as the media themselves are concerned, there is a need to question whether the

reporting of Third World issues and events can indefinitely be left to non-specialists — people who may well be excellent reporters, but who may necessarily be restricted in what they can offer by way of analysis and interpretation because their energies are committed to ensuring the processing of basic information. Decisions in this area need not necessarily involve a substantial re-allocation of the existing resources within media organisations: a policy development which would put a higher priority on specialised knowledge and background information in the areas concerned would undoubtedly improve the quality of Irish journalism on Third World topics in the medium and possibly even in the short term. Insofar as government is concerned, there is a particular need and, given Ireland's foreign policy stance, a particular opportunity — to encourage and facilitate journalistic exploration of the complexities of international trade and geopolitics, quite apart from the necessary and to some extent routine task of keeping the Irish media audiences informed of the practical outreach of Ireland's bilateral and multilateral aid programmes.

The agencies themselves are to some extent caught on the horns of a dilemma: as voluntary, fund-raising bodies they can undoubtedly benefit from a view of the Third World and its problems which can be simplistic, superficial, and paternalistic. In the media coverage studied, in addition, their logistical role in seriously under-developed countries was so vital to the media of their own countries that their own role in relation to aid and development was, by and large, taken as given by the media concerned. It is not impossible that the absence of any major analysis by the media of the role of the NGOs, their relationship with governmental and multilateral agencies, may on occasion contribute to a certain lack of self- criticism on the part of the agencies concerned. These agencies have to develop ways of deepening the public consciousness of the issues involved in a developmental way, sharpening the public focus without downplaying or minimising the positive effects of uncomplicated altruism. They should do this, in part, by identifying the media as a key target audience, not just in terms of logistic and other assistance to enable media coverage of the areas in which Irish aid is being spent, but in terms of cooperating with media executives in what is, in a key sense, a public educational programme. Such a programme could not be successfully initiated without practical decisions on both sides. Unless this is done, and done as a matter of some priority, the failure to generate a response to African famine that goes beyond the simple call to charity and altruism runs the risk of producing, particularly in the media, a reaction against further coverage of famines in places that are further away and less culturally comprehensible. The danger is that each successive famine will have to be that much more disastrous and life-threatening before it can claim media attention: in some unconscious way, the media will be uninterested in a disaster that does not promise to be bigger than its predecessors, because small disasters are no longer 'news'. The case-hardening effect of too frequent exposure to coverage that does not explore the matter in sufficient detail, and relate it to other factors, should not be under-estimated. At worst, it may engender a feeling of helplessness which will threaten to remove such events from media agendas completely.

As far as the educational system is concerned, there is undoubtedly a need to broaden the curricula in journalism education to include aspects of development and geo-politics into such courses dealing with government and public affairs as may be presently taught as part of these courses. Journalism educators will recognise that there are risks in all this: most would-be entrants to the journalistic profession come to

pre-entry educational courses with a strongly distorted impression of what the journalistic profession actually entails, and their lecturers would be chary of any emphasis which might suggest that the majority of students would be posted abroad by their new employers to exotic and romantic locations. This, however, is essentially a professional problem for journalism educators, and one which is readily capable of solution. Given the fact that journalism, of its essence, involves the transmission to a mass audience of information about events and trends that audiences cannot witness personally and directly, the kind of curricular development suggested here is both timely and particularly appropriate.

All in all, the events in Africa in 1984, and their subsequent explorations in the Irish media, should be regarded as a springboard for the future at least as much as an exercise which has been accomplished. There are encouraging signs that some of the lessons of the Sub-Saharan African experience in 1984 are being taken to heart.

Footnote
1. McQuail (1983) suggests that the available evidence about news content “lends a good deal of support to those who argue that the content of news is very much determined by a variety of external political, ideological and cultural constraints and by internal organisational and technical requirements” (p.142). McQuail, Denis: Mass Communication Theory: an Introduction, Sage, London 1983.

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