

Institution: University of East Anglia		
Unit of Assessment: 34 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Humanitarian Journalism: Improving Crisis Reporting for More Effective Humanitarian Response		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Martin Scott	Senior Lecturer	2008 – to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Effective news coverage of humanitarian crises plays a vital role in enabling the response of the international community: but due to financial pressures, humanitarian news is in crisis. Dr Scott's research contributed directly to journalistic and organisational policy changes made at The New Humanitarian (TNH), previously IRIN), the largest non-profit, humanitarian news outlet in the world. Scott and his team helped TNH improve the focus, relevance, and impact of its coverage in order to promote more informed and accountable humanitarian action. After inviting Scott to help re-evaluate their editorial strategy, TNH increased its investigative journalism, expanded local expert analysis, decreased European stories, and offered more coverage of climate change and global health issues. It is clear from their feedback that this revised strategy has helped aid organisations around the world – TNH's main audience – deliver more needs-based, context-specific and accountable humanitarian responses, directly benefitting those affected by crises.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>News coverage of humanitarian affairs plays a vital role in highlighting the plight of those caught up in large-scale crises and promoting effective responses by the international community. This is crucial journalistic work at a time when levels of humanitarian funding have not kept pace with the requirements of countries needing aid. Over 109 million people in 53 countries are in need of humanitarian assistance, yet UN humanitarian responses plans have, on average, been only 61% funded since 2010. This lack of funding has life-and-death consequences for many thousands of people. For instance, in February 2020, a funding shortfall forced the World Food Programme to cut food rations for around one million people in Yemen, despite growing chronic hunger.</p> <p>Unfortunately, news coverage of humanitarian crises is itself in crisis. As one of the least profitable and most costly forms of journalism to produce, very few news outlets regularly report on these important issues. As the largest non-profit, humanitarian news outlet in the world, The New Humanitarian (TNH) plays a major role in shaping humanitarian stories within global news coverage. Its content is regularly republished by influential news outlets such as the <i>Huffington Post</i>, <i>The Guardian</i>, and <i>The Los Angeles Times</i>. TNH's main audience are aid sector professionals at international charities (INGOs), the United Nations, and national governments (5.1). Over 60% of its audience have 'some' or a 'significant' amount of decision-making authority in those organisations with a majority (53%) of INGO and UN executive management staff describing the service as 'important' or 'very important' to their work (5.1).</p> <p>Already aware of Scott's research expertise on its news coverage and journalistic practices, TNH invited him (and his project research team) to recommend improvements to the relevance, impact, and economic sustainability of its humanitarian journalism (3.1-3.5). This was necessary, in part, due to TNH's funding challenges: its reliance on donor support potentially made it more difficult to report critically on the aid sector. TNH has continued to stress its independence, even at the cost</p>		

of losing its financial support from the UN in 2015 (over an editorial dispute) – and was eager for an external research perspective on its options.

Scott and his team have researched the production, content, and funding of humanitarian news over the past five years, involving multiple newsroom observations, surveys of aid workers, and interviews with approximately 200 journalists, news managers, and media donors (3.1-3.5). Funded primarily by a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (3.6), phase one of their research was a yearlong study (3.1) of the journalistic practices and news coverage of TNH as it moved from UN-backing to private foundation funding. The research addressed previously under-researched questions about the sustainability of humanitarian journalism and the consequences of different funding models. Scott's research compared TNH's coverage, content, and production practices before and after accepting foundation funding through a twelve-month content analysis of TNH and nine other humanitarian news producers (including Al Jazeera English, the BBC World Service, and Reuters). This research is the first and only in-depth case study of either foundation-funded journalism or a specialist humanitarian news outlet (3.1).

Scott's research showed that pursuing and maintaining foundation funding did exert some influence on TNH, via a combination of revenue expectations and the need to satisfy the different norms and values of journalism, humanitarianism, and philanthrocapitalism. Scott specifically identified three key issues in his research that had an impact on TNH (3.1):

1. **Content:** The dual pressures to maximise audience reach, and to focus on issues which could appeal to non-specialist audiences, had led to a substantial increase in TNH's coverage of Europe and a lack of coverage of climate change and global health. This geographic and thematic shift might undermine the organisation's ability to draw international attention to neglected issues and crises.
2. **Sources:** The change in TNH's revenue model had affected its sourcing practices, which led to a decline in the use of 'local experts' as sources. Scott's team recommended TNH rectify this by incorporating more local, expert voices by, for example, making greater use of freelancers.
3. **Investigative role:** The research emphasised the scope for TNH to increase investigative reporting to better promote transparency and accountability to the aid sector. After the UN relationship ended, TNH had adopted a limited 'watchdog' role, with the percentage of TNH's outputs that qualified as 'investigative' seeing only a marginal increase (from 4% to 6.5%). Scott's research also noted this was a unique opportunity, given the lack of investigative coverage by TNH's competitors.

3. References to the research

3.1. Donor power and the news: The influence of foundation funding on international public service journalism

Scott, M. Bunce, M. & Wright, K.

(2017) *International Journal of Press/Politics* 22:2. 163-184. DOI: 10.1177/1940161217693394

[Contains the key findings of the research underpinning this impact case study. The journal has a two-year impact factor of 3 and a five-year impact factor of 3.7 and is ranked very highly amongst other Communication journals (11/88) and Political Science journals (22/176)].

3.2. Foundation funding and the boundaries of journalism

Scott, M. Bunce, M. & Wright, K.

(2019) *Journalism Studies*, 20:14, 2034-2052, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2018.1556321.

[Winner of the Wolfgang Donsbach Outstanding Journal Article of the Year Award, Journalism Studies division, International Communication Association, 2020].

3.3. Foundation-funded Journalism, Philanthrocapitalism and Fraud Allegations

Wright, K. **Scott, M** and Bunce, M.

(2018). *Journalism Studies*. 20:5, 675-695, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2017.1417053

3.4. Our newsroom in the cloud: Slack, virtual newsrooms and journalistic practice

Bunce, M. Wright, K and **Scott, M.**

(2018). *New Media and Society*. 20:9. 3381-3399. DOI: 10.1177/1461444817748955

3.5. The state of humanitarian journalism

Scott, M. Wright, K. and Bunce, M.

(2018) *University of East Anglia*. humanitarian-journalism.net/blog/state-of-humanitarian-journalism-2/. [This is a widely publicised industry-focused report].

Research Grants:

3.6. PI: **M, Scott**. Project: 'What is Humanitarian News?'. Funder: UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Early Careers Research Grant. Grant value: GBP177,841.23. Project dates: Oct 2016 – Oct 2018.

4. Details of the impact

News coverage of humanitarian crises is vital in enabling the international community to understand, respond to, and avert such emergencies. It is also crucial in determining levels of public support for humanitarian aid. But it is facing a growing economic crisis, with news organisations covering international affairs facing an 'extinction event' in many countries. In short, humanitarian news is in crisis, just when it is needed most.

This has long made The New Humanitarian (TNH) the key media news source for those working in policymaking for, and providing assistance to, the many millions of people across the world needing humanitarian support and protection. This unique reporting responsibility has weighed heavily on the agenda: its previous close relationship with the UN reportedly led to a more constrained reporting style. In 2015/16, TNH and its audience of aid workers, recognised the need for a shift in strategy.

Shaping A New Strategy for Humanitarian News Reporting at TNH

Scott and his colleagues were invited to contribute to a thorough re-evaluation of TNH's editorial strategy after it shifted to a new business model. Scott presented research findings and recommendations to TNH's senior management (May 2016); gave a wider presentation to all TNH staff and management (August 2016 annual staff meeting, Geneva); and produced two 2016 internal reports for TNH detailing the results of his analysis of their outputs, which were discussed with TNH's management, staff, and board members.

"Dr. Martin Scott's analysis of TNH's output has helped us better understand ourselves ... At several instances, his findings have fed into internal reviews of our positioning and where our added value lies. It has provided additional data with which to make decisions around strategy" (5.1: TNH Director).

Those strategic decisions saw significant change in three areas:

1. Reversing the shift to locations and issues with greater appeal to non-specialist audiences (such as Europe): this re-established TNH's credentials for covering pressing issues and existential crises (including climate change) (5.2).
2. Reversing the decline in the use of 'local voices' as sources: this recognised the crucial role that local knowledge and expertise can play in heightening awareness and facilitating humanitarian action (5.2).
3. Strengthening TNH's 'watchdog' role, and the increase of its 'investigative' reporting to 17% of its output (5.2).

In essence, TNH's readjustment of its geographic and thematic focus was directly influenced by Scott's research findings and this readjustment had a direct effect on humanitarian actors' ability to respond to crises, based on objectively identified needs.

"Martin's research ... did force us to think ... [we] tried to rein back in some of the Europe coverage ... [it also made us] realise how little we covered issues like health, climate change and economy ... Since then, we have certainly made a considered effort to increase the coverage on those themes" (5.1: TNH Director).

Content analysis shows that TNH did 'rein back' reporting on Europe, declining from 12% (2015) to 7% (2017). Equally, TNH's revised editorial strategy led to significant increases in coverage of 'Weather and Climate' from 2% to 10% across the same period (5.2).

The impact on TNH's output has been deep and sustained. TNH's 2019 'theory of change' cites the findings of Scott's team as justification for its focus reflecting the needs, opinions, and proposed solutions of those most affected by crises (5.3). Moreover, a 2018 survey of TNH's audience (5.4), carried out by the marketing agency Media Cause (1626 respondents), showed these fundamental shifts in TNH's reporting strategy and outputs had been noticed and welcomed by TNH's audience, as is discussed below.

Impacts on TNH's Audience: The Aid Sector

The scope and content of TNH's humanitarian reporting has a significant influence on decision-making processes of humanitarian actors, who require timely and accurate information to respond objectively to identified needs in crises. The continued impact from Scott's involvement in TNH content and editorial strategy on the aid sector can be categorised in the following four ways:

1. Focusing the Attention of Humanitarian Actors on Forgotten Crises, Leading to Action

TNH's shift in geographic and thematic coverage helped them to better serve the humanitarian sector by investing more in their traditional core strengths. A significant majority of their readers think that TNH now covers issues (72%) and locations (64%) that other news agencies fail to.

"TNH covers stories from 'forgotten' places, and offers a critical voice to those most impacted by conflict and war" (5.4: 2018 survey respondent).

The increases in TNH's coverage of health and climate change were particularly welcomed, as survey respondents described these as amongst the most 'useful' topics to cover (5.4). For example, TNH's reporting on the 'overlooked' March 2018 Yazidi healthcare crisis in Iraq prompted immediate action from the UN migration agency, Doctors Without Borders, and others (5.5.a). By the end of the year, the main hospital serving the Yazidi minority had acquired several ambulances and moved to better premises (5.5.b).

2. Enhancing the Knowledge Base for Needs-Based Humanitarian Responses

The proportion of 'local experts' cited in TNH's coverage doubled between 2015 and 2017 (5.2) and the audience survey showed that 40% of respondents noticed an increase in the extent of local 'expert analyses' (5.4).

"[Dr Scott] noted that we don't have a lot of experts ... cited in our stories ... That led to discussions at the board [that] we need to make a considered effort to increase the percentage [of], ideally local, analysts and experts we consult" (5.1: TNH Director).

TNH's increased emphasis on local, expert analysis has helped humanitarian professionals adopt policies and practices that address the most pressing challenges in faraway crises. 60% of respondents said TNH offers expert analysis and opinions unavailable elsewhere (5.4: 2018 survey).

"TNH informs our understanding of field realities and policy debates and helps us assess how well our donor funds are spent" (5.6: Valentin Zellweger, Swiss Ambassador to the UN in Geneva).

3. Promoting Greater Transparency and Accountability Across the Humanitarian Sector

Dr Scott's research also 'validated' (5.1) TNH's increased focus on providing greater transparency and accountability in the humanitarian sector. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of TNH outputs in the form of 'investigative' or 'campaigning' journalism increased significantly from 6% to 17% (5.2). In addition, 40% of survey respondents thought that TNH had recently improved its investigative reporting (5.4).

"TNH provides a much needed accountability mechanism for the sector that otherwise prefers to self-govern" (5.4: survey respondent).

As an example of the impact of this increased investigative reporting: in 2018, a TNH investigation into alleged chronic corruption in the UN's resettlement process in Sudan led the UN's refugee agency to suspend resettlement operations in the country (5.7).

4. Impacts on the Aid Sector at an Institutional Level

A significant proportion of TNH's readership also claim that its revised approach has stimulated further research and/or advocacy (73%), informed organisational and operational priorities (35%), and/or prompted a push for policy change (29%).

"[TNH] scans the globe through a lens that is of unique value for the UN. Your critical voice as an organisation that knows us is of great value" (5.8: UN Assistant-Secretary-General, Fabrizio Hochschild).

For example, in March 2017, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others used TNH as a source when calling on the UN Human Rights Council to launch an inquiry into abuses against the Rohingya (5.9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1** Interview with TNH's Managing Director, by UEA Research Associate, 2.3.2017. Transcript and full recording held on file at UEA.
- 5.2** A content analysis of all TNH outputs, 1.12.16 – 31.5.17. Carried out by Research Associate.
- 5.3** TNH's 2019 "Theory of Change".
- 5.4** Media Cause. 2018. TNH Audience Survey Analysis. February 2018. (1626 respondents).
- 5.5** Tom Westcott. Iraq's Yazidis return to a healthcare crisis. 16.3.18 (a) / TNH's 2018 Annual report (b).
- 5.6** Zellweger, Valentin. 2016. IRIN Headquarters Opening: Opening remarks. 20 Oct 2016. 3:05. YouTube content downloaded and held at UEA.
- 5.7** UNHCR UK. 2018. UNHCR suspends resettlement programme from Sudan as fraud probe gathers steam. 17 May 2018.
- 5.8** Fabrizio Hochschild, UN Assistant-Secretary-General, cited in TNH's 2017 Annual Report.
- 5.9** Amnesty International. Open letter calling for an UN-mandated international Commission of Inquiry or similar international mechanism to investigate serious human rights violations in Rakhine State, Myanmar. 3 March 2017, 16/5814/2017.