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Like Moths to a Flame: The News Media, the United Nations, and the Specialized Agencies

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Like Moths to a Flame: The News Media, the United Nations, and the Specialized Agencies

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The way the world receives the news began to change in 1980 with the transmission of the first signals of a little-known broadcaster based in Atlanta, Georgia. At 6:00 pm EDT on 1 June 1980, the words from a producer, 'Take 11, mike cue, cue New York,' were followed by those of the announcers: 'Good evening, I'm David Walker ... and I'm Lois Hart." The Cable News Network — or ` The News Channel,' as it was originally called - was on the air. In that instant, 24-hour-a-day satellite television news was born. It would eventually alter the face of journalism and gradually change diplomacy in the industrialized world.

Over the next few years, CNN took on an influence far greater than any conventional television network. Described as the 'sixteenth member of the Security Council' by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali,[2] it and the other global news media began to act as the barometers or filters of what was valid, valuable, or appealing for the powerful people who tuned in to watch.

As with any profitable commercial venture, CNN spawned global imitators in many languages - BBC World, DeutscheWelle satellite, SkyNews, CBC Newsworld, NHK International, among them. The ` CNN effect' (defined as the 'loss of policy control to the news media') began to proliferate. With time, its impact was felt in humanitarian organizations overseeing complex human emergencies. Once non-governmental organizations (NGOS) found success in promoting

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their work through extensive use of public relations techniques and the electronic news media, the larger UN organizations and agencies began to follow their lead.

Gradually, the notion of media 'agenda-shaping' was no longer an issue: what mattered in the assessment of many analysts was the degree to which the media shaped the agendas of political leaders. The network with the strange name became a 'must-see' for heads of government and heads of state around the world, many of them declaring that CNN's reporters were more useful, informative, and effective than most diplomats could ever be.

As the media extended their reach, the mandates of some of the international organizations began to change. This phenomenon was dubbed 'mandate creep' by those in the UN system. With no clear parameters, and desperately in need of funding for programmes to sustain them, UN organizations and agencies moved into those areas that produced optimum attention and extra-budgetary funding, regardless of their respective mandates.

To complicate matters further, the dominance of the satellite news networks has led many 'mainstream' media to reduce their coverage of international affairs, shrinking the 'window of opportunity' for public attention. And a plethora of NGOs now compete with the UN for the same donor funding from industrialized countries and individuals. From CARE to OXFAM to Save the Children, the competition for donor funds and 'share of mind' is enormous in a multi-billion dollar 'business' to serve the least advantaged of this world.

THE. FALL OF THE WALL

One of the first important events in the expansion of the global media occurred on a cold November night in Germany in 1989: the Berlin Wall was breached and then attacked by thousands of East and West Germans. And television was there to record it. The fall of the Berlin Wall could be seen as a metaphor for the communist system and the crumbling Soviet empire itself. In short, it was 'a television moment.' Amplifying its importance was the fact that it was broadcast live' into boardrooms, homes, and cafes around the world. If one event can be said to have proved to people that 'real history' could occur in 'real time,' this was it.

But with the fall of the wall came a change in the way the media reported the news: where the prism of the cold war once shaped information, the absence of that dominant geopolitical issue rendered some stories irrelevant to editors in major centres. Political developments that might have merited attention within the context

of East-West friction were now less compelling. 'Now a coup d'etat in an African country is still a coup in an African country,' said Bernard Gwertzman (former editor of the *New York Times).* As a news story it's marginal ... do you need to report it?"

`LONG-TERM WORK DOESN'T INTEREST YOU'

In the post cold—war environment, the media have had a complicated relationship with humanitarian operations. Famine in Africa, earthquakes in Mexico, and floods in India all grabbed headlines and coverage as events in remote places became more accessible. But there has been no rapid expansion of international coverage of humanitarian work outside of complex emergencies or disasters.

When the electronic media acquired the ability to go almost anywhere in the world, the optimistic observer expected that they would do so. But expectations of a new 'golden age' of international television reporting were never fulfilled, in part because of problems with transporting equipment, travel costs, and the risks of going into dangerous places. As Anne Winter, a UN worker, has written, there is so little context-based reporting on television that 'coverage of emergencies in the developing world will clearly take precedence over the less spectacular long-term development concerns. This reinforces the common perception in the public mind that the emergency situation in developing countries is the normal state of affairs."

Boutros-Ghali once told a reporter: long-term work doesn't interest you because the span of attention of the public is limited. Out of 20 peacekeeping operations, you are interested in one or two. And because of the limelight on one or two, I am not able to obtain the soldiers or the money or the attention for the 17 other operat ions."5 The evidence shows that despite the access of the media 'centre' to the developing world 'hinterland,' the market for international news is far from overwhelming. Even though most transnational news-gathering services - Reuters, AP, AFP or UPI - have offices in far-off capitals, there is not yet a true appreciation of international news in North America and Europe. The statement of us Senator 'Tip' O'Neill that 'all politics is local' appears to have been taken to heart in the industrialized world: local and national issues continue to dominate newscasts from New York to Munich and from Vienna to Vancouver.

One reason is the psychological phenomenon of 'projection.' Most media consumers want to read or see reports about people like themselves. Within the framework of the commercial or government-sponsored media, broadcasters and publishers want to attract

the largest audience possible for a programme or publication's advertisers. Demographics also come into play. In the United States, Canada, and most European countries, the dominant racial group is European Caucasians. As *Time* magazine writer Barbara Ehrenreich put it: 'If there were a couple of million blonde, blue-eyed people facing starvation somewhere, the media coverage would be so intense we would know their names ... We'd see them as individuals.' This notion is supported by a report in the *Ottawa Citizen* in May 2001 - as the third item on the back page of the first section. Under the heading 'International News': 'Civil War Takes 2.5 million lives,' the story read: About 2.5 million people died in eastern Congo during the country's 21/2-year civil war, an international humanitarian organization says.'

According to Garrick Utley, a former NBC-TV foreign correspondent, the emergence of the vast choice of channels has also had an effect on how the news is reported. 'The decline [in interest for news] has pushed network news producers to the apparently logical, if journalistically undesirable, conclusion that foreign news is expendable unless it is of compelling interest to a mass audience. The new "litmus test" at work is whether viewers [in the producer's opinion] will instinctively "relate" to the story."7

The role of drama in news reporting is hardly new: as far back as 1963, the executive producer of the NBC Evening News, Reuven Frank, was instructing his staff that 'every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama.'

In a 1995 study, the Pew Centre for the People and the Press outlined the American media's coverage of international affairs thus: ` More than 40 per cent of international news stories have conflict or its conditions as the "direct driving event" ... Foreign events and disasters must be more dramatic and violent to compete with national news; Certain regions and topics are under-reported: Africa, South Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands, agriculture, demographics and education.'"

Although Canadians have shown a greater propensity for consuming international news, the driving interest of most Canadian reporting will be Canadian, or American, involvement in the story. American content is popular, given our obsession with our neighbours to the south and the volume of coverage available from American news services and networks. The Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers calculated in 1981 that most newspapers in Canada devoted about 25 per cent of their 'news' content to international

issues,' and that is probably accurate today. However, when stories are eliminated that mention a Canadian connection or a link with an event in the United States, the figure drops to less than five per cent on average.

The cause and effect of this lack of interest and lack of market is by and large a low investment in the expertise or the bureaus to provide international coverage. The complexities of covering a civil war, a humanitarian emergency, or a political campaign require journalists familiar with the ground upon which they are standing. Given the lack of resources devoted to international news, the average report from the field is undertaken by a correspondent who is flown in from elsewhere and neither speaks the local language nor knows the local culture and has no contacts to cultivate, aside from official sources. It is not surprising then that most reports focus on the 'how' and not the 'why.'

When asked at a recent CBC foreign correspondents forum in Ottawa about the problem of lack of context in news reporting, as foreign bureaus are closed and correspondents make flying visits to foreign capitals, the simple response was: 'We do our homework, but the CBC needs more money for more resources.' But the problem does not just lie with either homework or scarce resources: to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan: The medium is the problem.' CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge admits he shudders at the number of people who rely on television as their sole source of news, echoing former correspondent Joe Schlesinger, who once said that 'Television is the [news] menu. If you want to eat, go somewhere else.' Television, with its speed and reliance on the visual, implies a lack of context.

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

When the United Nations was founded in San Francisco in June 1945, it inherited many agencies that predated even its predecessor, the League of Nations. These 'specialized agencies,' as they came to be known, owed very little to the UN. The World Health Organization (WHO), International Labour Office (ILO), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) had their own executive boards and budgets. They were not then - and are not now - answerable to the secretary-general of the United Nations and are funded through a combination of member-state contributions (in effect, ` membership dues') and extra-budgetary funding. Add to that mix a plethora of UN organizations - UNESCO, UNICEF, UNEP, and UNDP - that are responsible to the secretary-general and have survived despite boycotts and funding shortages. Within neither the UN

organizations nor the specialized agencies is there a process or the desire gradually to merge some organizations with others, or allow them to be `sunsetted' - that is, wound up when they cease to be effective.

However, since the late 1980s it appears that the 'balance of power' in these international organizations has shifted. Funds have begun to flow to those organizations that are perceived to be doing the most work, especially in competition with NGOs. Some have found some issues particularly attractive to the media: globalization, sustainable development, human rights, child labour, and infectious diseases all attract headlines and donor interest. Many organizations and agencies are investing in programmes to deal with those issues. This 'mandate creep' into media-attractive areas has made for complicated relationships between organizations in the UN system and donors. As Ian Smillie, a Canadian humanitarian worker, says: ` Bilateral donors are often the worst instigators of competition and mis-coordination, and there are currently 16 different UN agencies with a mandate to work in relief and emergency situations. Until a smaller number are effectively mandated ... these problems will remain.''°

Mike Moore, the former director-general of the World Trade Organization and once prime minister of New Zealand, told me that when he arrived in Geneva in 2000, he was struck by the competition between agencies: 'It was ... surprising when I arrived here - the number of institutions that were almost at war with each other, similar to tribes and political parties back home.'" A 1999 Japanese government report [12] recognized the problem of overlapping mandates and called for a review or at least recognition that competition between humanitarian agencies was a problem.

At the same time, bilateral aid began to dry up as governments launched deficit-cutting exercises. Within their official development assistance (ODA) 'envelope,' many G-7 governments have reduced their contributions to the UN and to the specialized agencies, in some cases preferring to undertake their own bilateral programmes. Some agencies like UNESCO have been officially or unofficially boycotted. The end result has been competition among the UN organizations, the specialized agencies, and NGOs for the same scarce funds.

The push for emergency aid further reduces budgets for long-term aid funding, which in turn effectively guarantees the prospect of eventual emergency demands. There are few people who would contradict the notion that the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s would have been ignored were it not for the compelling images that

appeared on British, American, and Canadian television. But campaigns like 'Band Aid' do not solve the long-term problems. According to Michael O'Neill, a former aid worker, 'Such aid does not develop local capacity to solve the problems that created the famines in the first place, and in the opinion of some assistance specialists, sometimes makes the situation worse.'" Ian Smillie recognizes the failings of the media in his examination of the competition between agencies, noting that some emergencies never become major media events - Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Liberia are examples. As a result, 'the ability to respond is limited to whatever unrestricted funding can be raised.'"

CASE STUDIES IN AGENDA-SETTING

In the past decade, there have been undoubtedly hundreds of instances of agenda-setting by the news media. I cite here only two of several such instances. Both provide support for the thesis that the UN and the specialized agencies are influenced by the power of the media in setting their courses.

A cautionary tale: Rwanda 1994-6

When the airplane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, Juvenal Habyarimana and Cyprian Ntayamira, respectively, was shot down as it approached Kigali on 6 April 1994, the events that unfolded led to the deaths of 800,00 people in a massive genocide. Within a few months, and again two years later, many of the people responsible for the murders were the objects of a massive humanitarian undertaking, to save their lives, driven by much greater media attention than had been given to the original genocide that they perpetrated. In many ways, the media was a major part of that story.

In June 1994, over a million Hutu escaped Rwanda to the border areas of Rwanda and Zaire in fear of the new Tutsi-led government that had promised to seek out the agents of the genocide. Although there had been some reporting of the massacres of the Tutsis, when calm came to Kigali in June with the change of government, there were far more journalists present to witness the exodus of the Hutu. As a result, photos and video images of starving Hutus in Zaire were much more prominent than similar film of dead Tutsi floating in Rwanda's rivers only a few months before. And the humanitarian agencies arrived to serve these starving 'victims,' among them the *genocidaires.* David Rieff has noted that 'aid workers in Rwanda asserted that the headquarters of several of the most established aid organizations overruled their recommendations not

to intervene, insisting that if they were not involved, fundraising would be hopelessly compromised.'

At the same time, the Hutu knew that relief aid would be waiting for them in Zaire. Michael Maren, an aid worker in Rwanda, called the competition between agencies a 'relief circus,' adding that ` the word was out in Rwanda that food and medical care existed on the other side. Aid made the exodus possible. Aid made the exodus logical. The killers fled into the open arms of international charity.'

In 1996, a new disaster loomed in Rwanda. The source was the armed conflict between Zairian Tutsis (the *Banyamulenge)* and Hutu gangs in the refugee camps, who controlled the Hutu refugees and prevented them from repatriating to Rwanda. At the same time, civil war was raging in Zaire between the regime of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and a series of rebel groups (including the *Banyamulenge)* led by Laurent Kabila. The resulting decline in safety and services left hundreds of thousands of refugees with little choice but to move from the camps. The Rwandan government wanted to prosecute many of the people on the other side of the border for the atrocities of 1994, but the international community was reluctant to allow them easy access to the refugees.

The prospect of a major humanitarian undertaking was also a serious challenge for UNHCR, UNICEF, the agencies, and many NGOs, which once again led to competition among them. The ongoing turf war between UN organizations, agencies, and NGOs was fought in the battle for media profile. In a 1998 report on Rwanda, the UN's Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) did not mince words: `The perceived equation is that high-volume operations in media-attractive operations generate visibility, which in turn generates funds, which facilitates expanded operational capacity."

As the UN waited for the refugees to cross the border, the Rwandan government decided to act. Rwanda invited all returning citizens to return to their communes. On 15 November vast numbers accepted the `invitation.' An extraordinary scene unfolded in the international media: a virtual river of African humanity, walking into Rwanda, beyond the reach of the humanitarian agencies. Criticized for not protecting the refugees when they were in the camps, UNHCR was now excoriated by donors for not providing secure shelter in Rwanda. As a result, there was a decline in donations of several millions of dollars, [16] which in turn led to the layoff of several thousand UNHCR staffers and restricted operations.

Years later, the high commissioner for refugees, Ruud Lubbers, reflected on this phenomenon. 'It is true, when you depend on

voluntary contributions, the media play an enormous role to activate politicians to go to parliament or to cabinet to make a plea for money for a big operation. But if the big operations are not there - or are not perceived to be big - it's much more difficult [to operate the organization"' The OCHA acknowledged this phenomenon in its 1998 report when it concluded that, not only in the Great Lakes region, but right across the UN system, 'the phenomenon of competition for visibility is one which has grown to proportions where it undermines perceptions of the motivation of humanitarian action.'

For their part, the news media never really got the story right: they were hardly present when the killings occurred in April 1994, and, following the American lead, did not call it genocide. Then they provided sympathy and support for the *genocidaires* in June of that year. In 1996, when the same killers returned as refugees to face justice the media reported only on the short-term issue of the return and the logistical challenges it presented.

Three years later, UNHCR (and the other agencies) would regain positive media profile and enormous donor support when it became responsible for refugees from the conflict in Kosovo. That war attracted the media attention, involvement, and investment of North Americans and Europeans alike. One could be forgiven for wondering if the reason was the similarity in appearance between the refuges and the large percentage of the media audience.

Arsenic in Bangladesh: losing the race against time

In 1970 and 1971, East Pakistan was devastated by a cycle of calamities rarely imagined, even in the poverty and squalor that had been the hallmarks of life in south Asia in the middle of the 20th century. A cyclone devastated the main city of Dhaka and surrounding villages, killing a million people almost overnight. As the ground water became excessively polluted with the bodies of the dead and the excrement of the living, cholera and dysentery claimed the lives of tens of thousands more. War followed this devastating cycle, as Pakistan attempted to maintain control over its breakaway province. Millions were dislocated, and tens of thousands died in the fighting.

Over the few short years of this ongoing disaster, the dead totalled some 10 million. Bangladesh (`Bengal nation'), the country that emerged from the struggle, soon became synonymous with poverty and despair. A country desperate for some good news found it in the promise of UNICEF and other agencies to assist the

Bangladeshi to dig shallow tubewells as a source of fresh water. The wells were relatively simple to dig, and required a depth of only 25 metres to be fully efficient in providing fresh water.

By the 1980s, millions of wells had been built (by 2002, the calculation was over ten million). In 1985, the first case of arsenicosis - arsenic poisoning - was reported in western Bangladesh, even though there was no evidence of arsenic present in the area, either in nature or in industrial applications. Gradually, more cases began to surface of people suffering gangrene or liver problems, with the telltale spots that indicated arsenicosis. Five years after the discovery of the first arsenicosis cases, UNICEF published a thorough analysis of its tubewell programmes in Bangladesh, India, and Nigeria. *From Handpumps to Health* makes no mention of arsenic.

In time, tests were conducted to determine the source of the arsenic poisoning. Trace amounts of arsenic were indeed found in the tubewells - between 10 and 100 parts per billion, above the WHO standards, but almost undetectable without sophisticated testing equipment. Eventually, it was discovered that the naturally occurring arsenic was the product of the erosion of arsenic-bearing sediments into the land when the Himalayas began, millions of years ago.

UNICEF then undertook a series of pilot projects to test wells in various areas of the country, mitigating arsenic contamination in the wells, and experimenting with new technologies. Experts from around the world were brought in to work on the problem. The section of UNICEF Bangladesh once responsible for water and sanitation was 'ramped up' to provide alternative sources of fresh water through the filtering of arsenic. The organization sought research on the causes and the means of solving the problem before raising the funds necessary to solve it. In the first stages of the discovery of arsenic contamination, reporters from a variety of media flocked to Bangladesh to cover the story. The reviews were not good.

In an article in the *New York Times,* Barry Bearak speculated that `if this were the United States, they'd call out the National Guard and get everyone bottled water.'[17] CNN's Christiane Amanpour, on special assignment for CBS's flagship public affairs program, *60 Minutes,* produced a piece titled 'With the Best of Intentions.' While the report was balanced in showing the problems of disease that the tubewells had solved, it did nothing to counter the impression that UNICEF was at fault: `No one suspected that the clear water in the new wells would simply replace one poison with another,' she said. Later that year, Susie Emmett of BBC News portrayed the arsenic crisis as the `world's largest case of mass poisoning.'

In response to the negative reporting, UNICEF Bangladesh decided to pursue an aggressive media strategy, and in March 2000 I began to work on a programme of public awareness of the efforts being undertaken by UNICEF to deal with the arsenic crisis. Senior executives talked of being on a 'war footing' on arsenic contamination. Over two months, materials were developed to be shown abroad and at fund-raising events. The media campaign was to be delivered as part of a donor strategy that would involve an extensive tour of industrialized country capitals in Europe and North America. The theme was 'The Race Against Time.' One op-ed piece read: 'This is a race against time, for time itself is our enemy: if we test wells and provide alternatives quickly, research shows that the symptoms of arsenicosis can be reversed. If not, millions of men, women and children will become sick and die.'

The strategy focused on raising us$22 million to 'kick-start' the arsenic mitigation work. The assessment of UNICEF Dhaka was that the issue of blame for the development of the tubewells was no longer a factor. The challenge, as expressed at a meeting of the World Bank, UNICEF, and Bangladeshi social agencies at the Dhaka community hospital in May 2000 was to 'solve the problem,' not to be concerned with blame.

When the media strategy was submitted to UNICEF in New York, the reaction was negative. Conditioned by coverage of the issue in previous years, headquarters feared a frontal media attack on UNICEF's reputation, which could affect donations. In a memorandum from UNICEF New York's assistant director of communications, in consultation was other senior executives, orders were sent to 'spike' the aggressive media and public awareness campaign. According to the memo, ` there was a consensus that an aggressive campaign was not required.' The rationale was that 'this was a campaign that would last at least a decade' and that no one in New York liked the theme of 'The Race Against Time,' which was 'not only cliched, but also inappropriate.'

The memo also suggested that this was not a 'genuine emergency' along the lines of disasters such as that in the Horn Of Africa. Echoing the *Times* report in 1998, the memo read: 'If this were really an emergency, we would be providing bottled water' to the millions of people suffering from arsenic poisoning. The suggestion that the media would be 'sympathetic' to the extensive work under way to develop alternatives was 'naive and simplistic.' UNICEF normally was able to place only three op-ed articles per year in the *International Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times;* those placements were being saved for other (more important) issues.'18

A new media plan was drafted, eliminating any proactive media campaign; the materials and the campaign to raise funds and donor awareness was shelved. The arsenic committee met less frequently, and UNICEF gradually withdrew from its frontline position on the issue to allow the World Bank to take the lead.

In the *New York Times* of 14 July 2002, Bearak wrote of his trip back to Bangladesh four years after the arsenic crisis had begun. He found many of the same problems, more deaths, and little being done by the international community. In an ironic turn of phrase, he wrote: The race against time has gone badly. In the four years since The New York Times first looked into the situation, the nation's arsenic mitigation project has been hobbled by the unforeseen problems of so unprecedented a crisis ... Most of the country's estimated 11 million wells have yet to be tested. Most stricken villages are absent solutions.'19 There was little mention of UNICEF, however. Clearly New York's strategy of keeping a low profile had worked.

DOES THE MEDIA SET THE AGENDA - AND SHOULD IT?

There is a consensus among some academics that the media, particularly television, have agenda-setting propensities, but not policy-directing capacities. Many analysts appear reluctant or are unable to show a clear link between the role of the media and the shaping of policy. But leaders in democratic societies - who are, after all, dependent on the whims of a fickle electorate for their jobs - have long known that they have to take into account the role of public opinion. The corollary to this statement must be that the most important decisions are those that are not popular. If every decision made by a government was solely based on short-term political considerations, there might be no income taxes, no police, no infrastructure, no war (or war all the time). But we accept constraints such as taxes or police as necessary in order to coexist and to avoid anarchy.

As both Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman have illustrated, it would be extremely naive to think that our attention to and relationship with the news media over the past century have not transformed us as human beings. The news media's ubiquity, especially in the industrialized world, has made us more aware of the world at large - and that includes all of us in Western society, leaders and followers, the best educated and the least literate.

While some analysts take issue with the suggestion that the media have an influence in shaping a nation's foreign policy, they are not as troubled by their role in shaping international organizations.

Nik Gowing of the BBC contends that real-time TV reports appear to be most influential when they deal with humanitarian crises. When the media show images that almost scream out for leaders to 'do something,' it is often easier to respond with a humanitarian initiative than to worry about the long-term root causes or a costly military effort where there is no active self-interest.

In the emerging mobility of the 20th century, the so-called ` father of public relations,' Edward Bernays, believed that the American public would be less grounded in the narrow parochialism of their pasts. The undermining of their prejudices would result in greater susceptibility to the power of suggestion. The success of Bernays's work can be clearly identified in the multi-billion dollar public relations industry that he spawned. PR fundamentals are based on the ability to shape behaviour by constantly adjusting strategy and tactics to match the prevailing ethos - and that is what leaders attempt to do.

The cynical comment of the 19th century French politician, Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, at the barricades – 'I am their leader. I've got to follow them' - is not dissimilar to Bernays in the context of modern political and media strategies. It would be almost unthinkable to elect a leader who was not acutely aware of the effects and demands of media and public relations and who did not have the extensive skills required to apply that awareness. As Robert McNeil suggests: 'Governments in office cannot chuck the image-making habit. Increasingly, government policy is marketed by images. The making of foreign policy becomes, in part, a contest of images.'

If that is true of elected leaders, it quite clearly must be the case with appointed or elected heads of organizations. Although their mandates are not circumscribed by the ongoing exigencies of electoral politics, they are still public figures with significant responsibilities and the budgets to go with them. Without the daily requirements of a legislative question period, a board of directors responsible to shareholders, or the give-and-take of a system of checks and balances, they are provided with extraordinary powers unlike those of the private or public sectors.

The greatest measure of the success of these leaders becomes their ability to attract funds and world attention to their causes. As a result, more and more people with expertise in politics and public relations are being brought in to manage international organizations. At present, many of the heads of the most important UN organizations and specialized agencies are former political leaders, and until recently four of them were former heads of government.

WHO's Gro Harlem Brundtland was prime minister of Norway in the 1980s and 1990s. She believes the move to appoint former politicians is a trend that can 'be very helpful' in advocacy campaigns and in ensuring influence. UNICEF's Carol Bellamy says there is an enormous value in having former politicians in the top positions at the UN agencies. Canada's ambassador to the World Trade Organization, Sergio Marchi, an experienced politician himself, sees former political leaders in charge of UN agencies as an asset because 'they know the media game quite well from their own perspectives, but they' ve come a long way [and know] the needs of the media.' It is a natural step to presume that the appointment of former political leaders to positions of influence in the international field is linked to their profile and their familiarity with the media.

But if the media carry such influence in international decision-making, does 'the tail wag the dog' - that is, can the superficial trump the substantive in a detrimental way? The answer must be a qualified yes. In my case studies, decisions were arrived at and policies were shaped with serious consideration of the media's influence. In Rwanda, the media's ability to attract humanitarian intervention for the *genocidaires* and the competition for media attention by agencies is recognized as a bleak chapter in the UN's history.

UNICEF's decision to avoid potentially negative news media treatment of the issue of arsenic contamination in Bangladesh wells might be rationalized as a case of 'once burned, twice shy.' But UNICEF's mandate is to serve women and children in emergencies. Not acting in an emergency is an abrogation of the organization's mandate.

CONCLUSION

Obviously, then, the media can and do set the agendas of the humanitarian agencies and their work. The question remains: should they? As a strategic approach, responding to the media agenda can mean the difference between financial failure and success. But setting one's agenda in anticipation of what will prove popular or media-friendly is a denial of the notion that one should do the 'difficult' jobs well.

Newspaper claims that they offer 'history on the run' are absurd in today's desire for vacuous electronic immediacy over substantive context. A lack of insight on the part of reporters, the impact of sights and sounds from complex emergencies, the brevity of 'news cycles,' and the temptation to seek funding to maintain operations in the face of competition have all made meeting short-term funding goals a

necessity, not a luxury, for many UN organizations and specialized agencies.

If short-term goals are given priority, where does that leave the long-term goals and the necessary but unattractive elements of UN mandates? Water, sanitation, and nutrition programmes are fundamental building blocks in the maintenance of life, but by and large they do not receive the attention or the funding they should. In the competition for media attention and donor funding, the mundane tends to be set aside for the newsworthy. Nigel Fisher, UNICEF's special representative in Afghanistan, acknowledged that media attention and long-term planning are in conflict. Asked if it made him angry that 'it takes a war to get attention to Afghanistan,' he admitted that 'when a crisis breaks you get a lot of global attention and media attention and a lot of donor support. The problem is to try and sustain that past the initial crisis when the bombardment stops and the TV cameras go away.'

Many modern economists see free and open competition as the most efficient way of separating things of value from those that are to be considered inferior. But there are two problems with 'quasi-Darwinian' competition at the UN: first, UN mandates are expected to be within exclusive areas of jurisdiction (so that in a perfect world there would be no 'mandate creep'). Second, the agencies are expected to undertake difficult and sometimes unpopular projects over the long term. The criteria applied by the media (short-term goals and priorities based on image) or competition for power and profile are quite clearly counter-productive to these objectives.

Genuine leadership at the heads of these organizations, and in the executive offices of the countries supporting them, must recognize the egregious influence media impose on UN operations. Only when the problem is recognized can it be solved. Clearer mandates, more intense co-ordination to prevent competition, and the support of member-states to circumscribe responsibilities would be important first steps. Alternatively, co-ordinating media efforts among NGOs, the UN, and the specialized agencies would go a long way towards establishing international priorities in the minds of journalists and opinion leaders in a calculated, strategic, and substantive way.

At the same time, the media must take up the greater study of international organizations as part of their mandate to inform the public effectively - beyond those who are already interested or involved. Better training for journalists, greater dedication of resources to complex issues, and assigning reporters with a view to

long-term understanding of the region, territory, or country to which they are assigned should be part of their mandate. Garrick Utley says there is too much 'dashing around the world' by journalists, and he suggests that in future reporters will be judged 'on the quality and depth of knowledge he or she possesses.'

But, as Walter Lippmann noted, even if there are changes in the media's approach, 'the press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing in one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision. [Leaders] cannot do the work of this world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episode, incidents, and eruptions.'20

It is up to the United Nations and its agencies to operate with a ` steady light of their own,' rather than falling prey to the shifting interests of the media. It is that lack of focus, sacrificed for timeliness - an engaging if frustrating attribute of the media - that is leading to a lack of context in donors and the general public. This, in turn, is drawing the UN, the specialized agencies, and many NGOs to seek the most attractive aspects of their mandates and to neglect the harder work in a way never envisaged by the founders of the UN. Without some determined action, this trend will continue.

The media will always have an influence on the way policies are shaped, decisions are made, and actions are taken, especially in humanitarian work. But despite their crucial role in scrutinizing issues and informing the public, they should not be the sole determiners of power, profile, prestige, or profitability on the international stage. It is up to the people who care about the respective roles of the United Nations, its organizations, and the specialized agencies to ensure that all continue to function as they were intended: to serve the international public interest and to advance the cause of a better world. Genuine leadership in nations and in organizations must take into consideration the influence of the media in shaping opinion and policy - because that influence is a huge factor in the process.

For the UN, its organizations, and the specialized agencies, the media can be as important as any issue or any financial or logistical factors of a crisis when making an assessment about how to manage that issue or crisis effectively. However, at other times, when one must choose between long-term policy and short-term media agendas, the leaders of the UN and its agencies have no choice but to operate with a sense of a higher responsibility, to choose the policy that ensures the long-term betterment of humankind, whatever the consequences.

ENDNOTES

1 CNN archives, CNN website [http://www.cnn.com].

2 "The UN has been a success" — an interview with the secretary-general,' *Time Magazine,* 23 October 1995.

3 Quoted in Warren Strobel, *Late-Breaking Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace 1997), 66.

4 Anne Winter, *Is Anyone Listening? Communicating Development in Donor Countries* (Geneva: UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service 1996), 13-14.

5 "'The UN has been a success.'"

6 Quoted in Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue* (New York: Routledge 1999), 22.

7 Garrick Utley, 'The shrinking of foreign news,' *Foreign Affairs* 76(March/April 1997), 7.

8 Quoted in Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue,* 18.

9 Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1981, 125.

10 Ian Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar* (London: IT Publications 1995), 118.

11 Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this article are from personal interviews conducted by the author between June 2001 and May 2002.

12 Koichiro Matsuura, 'Revitalizing the U.N. specialized agencies,' Government of Japan website: [http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/unesco/un-matsuura.html]

13 Michael O'Neill, *The Third America: The Emergence of the Non-Profit Sector in the United States* (London: Jossey-Bass 1984), 125.

14 Ian Smillie, *Relief and Development: the Struggle for Synergy* (Providence RI: Thomas J. Watson Institute 1998), 39.

15 UNOCHA, Strategic Humanitarian Coordination in the Great Lakes Region 1996-1997, an Independent Study for the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 1998, item 144; available at hup: //www.reliefweb.indocha_ol/pub/greatlalc/

16 *Ibid. items* 4 and 5.

17 Barry Bearak, 'New Bangladesh disaster: wells that pump poison,' *New York Times,* 10 November 1998.

18 Author's notes, UNICEF memo, May 2000.

19 Barry Bearak, 'Bangladeshis sipping arsenic as plan for safe water stalls,' *New York Times,* 14 July 2002, Al.

20 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press 1922), 229.

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