

ANDERSON, B. 2024. Humanitarian journalists: covering crises from a boundary zone. *Journalism and mass communication quarterly* [online], 101(3), pages 799-801. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990241253806>

Humanitarian journalists: covering crises from a boundary zone.

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2024

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3 ***Humanitarian Journalists: Covering Crises from a Boundary Zone.*** Martin Scott, Kate
4 Wright, and Mel Bunce. Abingdon and NY: Routledge, 2023. 127 pp.
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7 **Reviewed by:** Bissie Anderson, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK
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12 In today's reality of recurrent global crises and human rights abuses, the *Washington*
13 *Post* slogan "democracy dies in darkness" cannot be a more fitting encapsulation of the role
14 and responsibility of journalism. In crisis zones, where democracy is but a distant dream,
15 shining a light on human suffering through bearing witness can be the difference between life
16 and death, or at least between impunity and accountability. These reporting practices are the
17 centrepiece of *Humanitarian Journalists: Covering Crises from a Boundary Zone*. The
18 authors—Martin Scott, associate professor in media and international development at the
19 University of East Anglia; Kate Wright, associate professor in media and communications at
20 the University of Edinburgh; and Mel Bunce, professor of international journalism at City,
21 University of London—document the important work of humanitarian journalists around the
22 globe through an impressive, empirically rich five-year study involving 150 in-depth
23 interviews and content analysis of humanitarian media coverage. Acknowledging that the
24 uneven news coverage of global crises is the result of rigid formulas of reporting international
25 news, long sedimented into 'news values' that tend to valorize entertainment and domestic
26 issues (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), the authors set humanitarian journalists as an antidote to such
27 conventional reporting norms and practices, showing that "another kind of humanitarian
28 journalism is possible" (p. 6).
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51 The book begins with a short preface that distils the essence of the study through the
52 portrait of Sophia – a fictional humanitarian journalist constructed by the authors. This is an
53 original approach to personalizing the role, identity and struggles of humanitarian journalists,
54 but also a clever way to set the stage for the various themes that the book goes on to explore.
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3 In the introduction, the authors offer a definition of humanitarian journalists – as those
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5 reporters who, driven by both humanitarian and journalistic principles, cover under-reported
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7 crises, amplify marginalized voices, and actively seek to add value to mainstream coverage of
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9 humanitarian crises, which often happen away from the media spotlight. Scott, Wright and
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11 Bunce clearly and unequivocally highlight the consequences of (not) shining a light on under-
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13 reported crises. The stakes of doing so, or not, the authors argue, are high – political
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15 attention, international awareness, levels of financial aid, and not least, what they call a
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17 ‘hierarchy of human life’, where some people’s suffering is seen as more worthy of attention
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19 than that of others.
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24 The book draws on field theory and its corrective - Gil Eyal’s concept of ‘boundary
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26 zones.’ In Chapter 1, the authors conceptualize the work of humanitarian journalists, with
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28 their unique, hybrid journalistic-humanitarian values, through the theoretical lens of
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30 ‘boundary work’ and view it as a ‘space of opportunity.’ Further engaging with the liminal,
31
32 bridge position of humanitarian journalists between the fields of journalism and
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34 humanitarianism, Chapter 2 raises questions about the peripherality, precariousness, and
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36 constructive, watchdog function of these reporters. In doing so, Scott, Wright and Bunce
37
38 make an important contribution to the scholarly debate around the boundaries of journalism
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40 (Eldridge, 2018; Schapals, 2022; Schapals, Maares and Hanusch, 2019), by presenting
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42 another type or ‘peripheral actor’ – the humanitarian journalist. Neither insiders nor outsiders
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44 (or confusingly, *both-and*), these actors occupy a hybrid position in a ‘thick boundary space’
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46 between the two fields. Whilst acknowledging their peripherality, the authors also implicitly
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48 challenge it: humanitarian journalists are both journalists, and humanitarians, but not quite
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50 either exclusively, compared to their mainstream counterparts.
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55 Chapter 3 explores humanitarian journalists’ sourcing practices and values, showing
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57 how they deviate from traditional journalistic notions of newsworthiness and source
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3 hierarchies. Their liminal status and autonomy give these reporters more leeway to
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5 experiment in their praxis, giving rise to novel hybrid journalistic-humanitarian practices,
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7 which include ‘reporting under-reported crises,’ ‘adding value’ to existing mainstream
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9 coverage, and ‘amplifying marginalised voices.’
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12 Chapter 4 examines how the concept of ‘humanitarianism’ shapes humanitarian
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14 journalists’ practices, showing that these peripheral actors approach it with a ‘conceptual
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16 ambiguity’ that serves as a strategic advantage. This ambiguity allows them to experiment
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18 with journalistic norms and practices, and to perform a role mainstream journalism avoids
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20 when reporting on humanitarian crises – uncovering the systemic, root causes of a crisis,
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22 rather than its sporadic surface-level coverage.
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26 In the final chapter, Scott, Wright and Bunce pose a logical question: if humanitarian
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28 journalists occupy the boundary zone between the two fields, but are not recognized as a
29
30 legitimate part of either, then is humanitarian journalism a nascent field in its own right?
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32 Through exploring how these actors relate to each other, the authors find that, despite their
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34 unique characteristics, they are still weakly institutionalized and lack a shared identity.
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36 Therefore, the authors conclude, we cannot talk about a unique humanitarian journalism field
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38 – at least not yet. In their concluding remarks, Scott, Wright and Bunce stress the precarious,
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40 marginalized nature of these reporters’ work, which comes from their peripheral position at
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42 the boundary of two fields. They point to the blind spots of the ‘boundary zone’ paradigm as
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44 the in-between position of humanitarian journalists denies them access to symbolic capital
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46 and material benefits associated with belonging to a field.
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51 Yet, we are aware of significant shifts in the field of journalism, where boundaries
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53 are ever-blurring and the wall separating traditional from novel actors and practices of
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55 journalism becomes *a curtain* (Coddington, 2015), where advocacy and emotions replace the
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57 rigid formulas of detached reporting in war zones and authoritarian contexts (Kotišová & van
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3 der Velden, 2023; Medeiros & Badr, 2022), and we are being encouraged to think “beyond
4 journalism” (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). In light of these changes, perhaps the boundaries of
5 journalism are more permeable than imagined and legitimacy in the field is arguably
6 becoming easier to achieve, for better or worse. Shouldn’t the legitimacy of new peripheral
7 actors be defined through the prism of their societal contribution and impact, rather than
8 through their peripheral position in a boundary zone? Isn’t bearing witness and shining a light
9 on dark corners of the world journalism’s *raison d’être* after all? *Humanitarian Journalists:
10 Covering Crises from a Boundary Zone* is a stride towards accepting the important work of
11 humanitarian journalists as an integral part of the journalistic field, pointing to *what
12 journalism could be*. In the increasingly febrile geopolitical situation that we find ourselves
13 in, with growing risks of more conflicts and humanitarian crises, Scott, Wright and Bunce’s
14 book is a timely and important intervention showing us that democracy does not have to die
15 in darkness, if only we recognize the work of humanitarian journalists as a legitimate, and
16 indeed crucial, form of deep reporting, and, following the authors’ call, join in efforts to
17 support it.
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