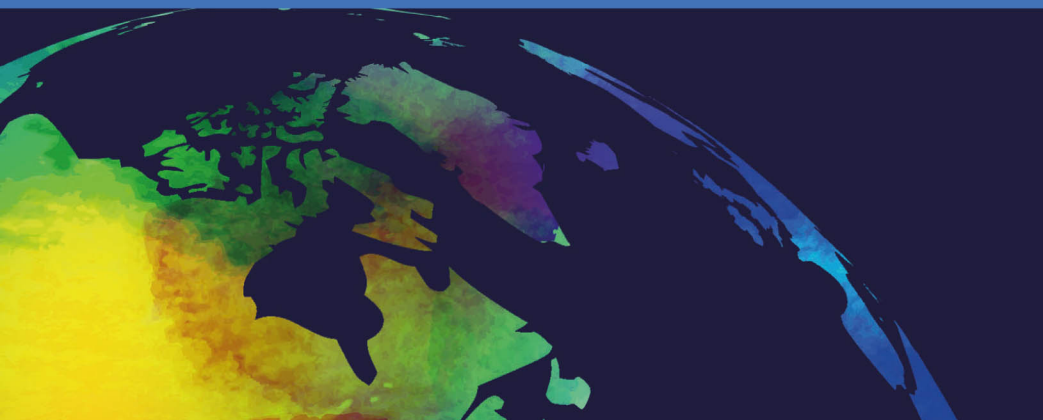


ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



Humanitarian Journalists

Covering Crises from a
Boundary Zone

MARTIN SCOTT, KATE WRIGHT,
AND MEL BUNCE



‘This book offers an in-depth and detailed exploration of ‘humanitarian reporting’ outside of mainstream news organisations, based on extensive empirical research. It makes a valuable and innovative contribution to the field and one that is better sensitised to the fast-changing media ecology and changing forms of humanitarianism in the world today.’

— *Professor Simon Cottle,
Cardiff University, UK*

‘Drawing on a unique 5-year collaboration and over 150 in-depth interviews with practitioners, Scott, Wright, and Bunce document the precarious conditions in which humanitarian journalists do their jobs, analyze how these journalists contribute to accountable humanitarian action, and argue for qualified support from governments and private donors. A must read.’

— *Florencia Enghel, Associate Professor in
Media and Communication Studies,
Jönköping University, Sweden*

‘Why do journalists sacrifice security to create new professional practices? This empirically rich book, about actors working at the interface between journalism and humanitarianism, puts liminal spaces at the centre of inquiry into changing fields of power, and should in turn be put on many reading lists.’

— *Professor Alexa Robertson,
Stockholm University, Sweden*



Rucke Souza / Cartoon Movement.

Humanitarian Journalists

This book documents the unique reporting practices of humanitarian journalists – an influential group of journalists defying conventional approaches to covering humanitarian crises.

Based on a 5-year study, involving over 150 in-depth interviews, this book examines the political, economic and social forces that sustain and influence humanitarian journalists. The authors argue that – by amplifying marginalised voices and providing critical, in-depth explanations of neglected crises – these journalists show us that another kind of humanitarian journalism is possible. However, the authors also reveal the heavy price these reporters pay for deviating from conventional journalistic norms. Their peripheral position at the ‘boundary zone’ between the journalistic and humanitarian fields means that a humanitarian journalist’s job is often precarious – with direct implications for their work, especially as ‘watchdogs’ for the aid sector. As a result, they urgently need more support if they are to continue to do this work and promote more effective and accountable humanitarian action.

A rigorous study of how unique professional practices can be produced at the ‘boundary zone’ between fields, this book will interest students and scholars of journalism and communication studies, sociology and humanitarian studies. It will also appeal to those interested in studies of news and media work as occupational identities.

Martin Scott is an Associate Professor in Media and International Development at the University of East Anglia.

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**Martin Scott, Kate Wright, and
Mel Bunce**

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Preface

Sophia¹ is a humanitarian journalist. She works for a small non-profit news outlet that covers international aid and global affairs. She regularly reports on under-reported crises, with a focus on in-depth, explanatory and solutions-oriented journalism. She is particularly keen to highlight the perspective not only of affected citizens but also of a range of other local actors including rebels, aid workers, politicians and think-tanks. She has significant freedom to choose which stories to cover and how to report them and regularly commissions local stringers living in affected countries.

Sophia used to work for a large international news broadcaster. Despite having a permanent position and a significantly higher salary, she left after just 18 months because she was frustrated by what she felt was their rigid and formulaic approach to covering global affairs. She thought that much of their coverage of recent humanitarian crises was superficial and fleeting. Although she was proud that she helped to break a news story revealing corruption within an international NGO, she worries that it unfairly damaged the reputation of the humanitarian sector as a whole, because some of the subtleties of international humanitarian response got lost in the reporting.

The news organisation Sophia works for now generates very little advertising or reader revenue and relies almost exclusively on short-term grant funding from a very small number of private foundations. Although she has never felt under any pressure to cover stories in ways that might please their current or potential donors, she does resent the amount of time it takes to meet their reporting requirements. If their funding is cut, and she loses her job, she intends to work either as a freelance journalist or as an aid agency press officer. The only other news outlet she is aware of that covers similar stories has recently closed due to a lack of funding.

Sophia has never actually met any of her current colleagues in person as they all work remotely, in different countries. During their daily online editorial meetings they frequently disagree about which stories fall within their remit. There is no consensus about what makes a story ‘humanitarian’, as opposed to a human rights or global development issue, for example. For this reason, some of the stories she pitches still get rejected – and she doesn’t fully understand why.

Although Sophia was recently nominated for a One World Media award, in general, she is frustrated by the lack of recognition and reach of her work. She also worries about being able to pay the bills – she knows her job is precarious. But despite this lack of external recognition and the financial risks, Sophia is glad she took this job – because it allows her the freedom to do the kind of work she has always wanted to do.

Sophia is one of a small group of ‘humanitarian journalists’ whose work bridges the worlds of international news production and humanitarianism. She is motivated by both the traditional journalistic desire to document, witness and explain events and the desire to help alleviate suffering and save lives. There are a small number of news outlets employing humanitarian journalists like Sophia, who play a valuable role in the global media system. This book is about those individuals. It seeks to describe, explain and evaluate their work.

Note

- 1 ‘Sophia’ is a fictional journalist, constructed in ways which illustrate key themes in our findings (see Kotišová 2019 for an illustration of how creative non-fiction can be used to study crisis reporting).