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Collateral coverage: media images of Afghan refugees during the 2001 emergency

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Introduction

The paper is concerned with media coverage of the refugee crisis in Afghanistan during 2001. It begins by looking at how the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September had the result of stimulating renewed media interest in Afghan refugees. Paying special regard to the role of visual images in the reporting of disasters, the paper reviews the narrative strategies adopted by television news.

It considers the factors that have instigated media response by examining some general issues arising from the media coverage of disasters. While the central focus of the study is on BBC Television News Special reports on the Afghan refugee crisis, selective comparisons are made with other television broadcast channels, including Sky News and Euronews.

Based on the Afghan case study, I propose three main constituent factors contributing to the likelihood of effective media coverage of a refugee crisis. Firstly, in order to attract Western press coverage it is necessary for the crisis to be of such a magnitude that it cannot be ignored; or else it is necessary for it to be perceived as having some obvious connection with Western concerns. Secondly, the story will gain airtime if the nature of the crisis is such that it produces dramatic imagery - pictures with impact. Finally, if the style of the media coverage is sufficiently innovative it will stimulate interest in the viewers. The paper concludes with a critical review of media examples that break away from conventional news formulae.

‘Collateral coverage’ is the second in a series of papers that forms part of the research project, ‘Moving images: the media representation of refugees’ based at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, and funded by The Pilgrim Trust. Throughout the text, reference is made to the first paper ‘Refugees on screen’ (Wright 2000) which outlined the general ‘state of the problem’.

In Medias Res

The only difference between Hollywood and reality is Hollywood has a happy ending, and there’s a hero.

Robert Baer¹
CIA Case Officer, 1976-97

The literary term *in medias res* refers to instances where a story begins in the middle of events or a narrative. The term first appears in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* of 65-68 BC (Horace 1929). Directly translated from the Latin it means ‘into the midst of things’. It is a narrative device that is regularly used in the cinema, whereby: ‘a picture may begin with a ... sequence of dramatized action designed to hook audience interest...’ (Swain and Swain 1988: 46).²

¹ Pollack, R. (2002). A warning from Hollywood. *Panorama*. R. Pollack. London, BBC, 24 March.

² One such example is the opening sequence of Brian de Palma’s feature film *Carlito’s Way* (USA, 1993 141 ins, colour)

As with the news stories that followed the World Trade Center attacks, circumstances dictated that as television viewers we were thrown ‘into the midst of things’. The story started with a strong action scene that immediately engaged the audience’s interest and before long the attention had shifted from New York to Afghanistan. It was then that the Afghan refugees, who had been at the periphery, found themselves in the midst of things, occupying a position at the centre of the world’s stage:

Overnight, Afghanistan became the focus of global attention. But there was a dreadful irony at work; for years the impoverished state deep in the heart of Central Asia had been the center of the world’s largest humanitarian crisis. But the international community, disillusioned with a seemingly insoluble problem in a region, which had once hosted ‘The Great Game’ between imperial superpowers, had increasingly chosen to ignore it.’ (Wilkinson 2001: 6)

Consequently, this paper suggests that the media coverage of the Afghan refugee crisis was ‘collateral’ to the World Trade Center attacks of September 11 2001. The coverage of the Afghan refugees was not exactly accidental, nor was it intentional. The refugees were caught, as it were, on the sidelines of the World Trade Center story. It was a humanitarian crisis that had existed for years, yet attracted only minimal coverage. However post 11 September, the refugees became important players in a sub-plot of the lead world story that traced the US reaction to World Trade Center attacks.

The events that followed rendered their plight impossible to ignore. This is not to say that before 11 September the media had disregarded the crisis, but during an interim period: after the dust had settled and before the onset of military action (the bombing of Afghanistan began on Sunday 7 October); media attention turned to Afghan refugees. However, as military action increased (towards the end of October), they faded from the news:

DARREN JORDAN, (BBC TV Studio)

Fergal, do you think with the start of the ground offensive . . . or the start of the war, the spotlight’s been taken off the refugees and the refugee crisis - in a way?

FERGAL KEANE, (Quetta)

That’s war. I’ve never covered a war yet where the rights of refugees or the human beings who are not combatants are the thing at the top of anybody’s agenda - that’s not how it works. Military priorities will take priority for the moment. It is afterwards we will only be able to assess the full scale of the damage done to human beings who had no actual part in this.

BBC News 24, 27 October 2001, 8.50.

This paper concentrates on the three-minute ‘special reports’ shown on BBC Television News during the year 2001. Examples from other television channels, for instance satellite television’s Euronews, are also discussed for purposes of comparison and contrast.

BBC News was chosen for two reasons. First, as Britain's public service broadcast station, a particular sense of responsibility is expected in reporting world news. As such one would expect it to be less constrained by commercial factors than the independent sector. Second, it appears that UK television audiences maintain confidence and a loyalty to BBC News. This is evident in Deans' analysis of the audience ratings for the coverage of the World Trade Center attacks on 11 September 2001. He concludes, "overall, the old adage that people turn to the BBC in times of crisis was born out, with BBC1 taking a 33.3% audience share across all hours yesterday - up from 26.4% last Tuesday" (Deans 2001).

Over the past 15 years we have experienced an increased emphasis on the significance of the visual image in the news media (Wright 2000; Wright 2001). This trend was particularly noticeable in the coverage of the World Trade Center. Despite the tragic nature of the disaster, it produced an extensive range of visual imagery (Davies 2002).³

On 11 September, the extraordinary drama, witnessed by millions on live television, was followed over the next few days by pictures of heroism, which then gave way to atmospheric, almost contemplative, images. When interviewed about their movements, thoughts and actions on 11 September, those involved in the media coverage of the World Trade Center attacks for British independent television placed special emphasis on the nature of the visual imagery (Brown 2001):

I knew it was a massive story, involving a landmark building, with dramatic pictures, and it was happening in the most TV-friendly city in the world. We were on air and I was in a taxi going back to the office when the second tower was hit. We went all through with news to 7 pm ... concentrating on the pictures... All the adverts were dropped. We went for the footage, rather than analysis. On the day we wanted people to see what was happening - it was not the time for Middle East politics, or trying to take the story forward: let the BBC do the discussions.

Steve Anderson
Controller, news and current affairs, ITV network

We are used to Hollywood disaster movies, but this has been far worse, for real. You never thought you'd see a plane slam into a building, or keep seeing the image played from so many different angles.

Trevor McDonald
Independent Television News (ITN) presenter

The subsequent coverage of the Afghan refugee crisis was not only exceptional, but also contingent upon the World Trade Center. Nonetheless, as news items the two tragedies hardly bear comparison. Refugee crises rarely reach a dramatic climax, and the media

³ So dramatic were the images that avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen was tempted to describe the World Trade Center attacks as 'the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos' and consequently brought about a media outrage. See Carter, B. and F. Barringer (2001). In *Patriotic Time, Dissent is Muted*. The New York Times. New York.

treats them more like an insidious encroachment (hence the well-worn adjective ‘flood’ is used to describe growing numbers of refugees).⁴

Nor do they produce action-packed pictures. As images they are more similar to religious paintings (Wright 2000). In April 1999, a report on the Kosovan refugee crisis in the UK’s daily newspaper *The Independent* made explicit this analogy. Accompanying a front page ‘exodus’ style photograph of a landscape peopled by a colourful mass, headlined “Like an oil painting of hell”, part of the copy read:

Through the river mist at dawn it looked like an oil painting of hell, with the added dimensions of smell and sound. The colours came from the clothing of the densely packed human flotsam that filled the wide valley as far as the eye could see... As the rising sun of Good Friday started to reveal this awesome panorama, the image of Golgotha, the hill at Calvary, came easily to mind. (Dalrymple 1999)

An evaluation of a terrorist attack, on the one hand, and a refugee crisis, on the other, produces more contrasts than comparisons. For example, in his article ‘Shaking the Foundations’, BBC TV News presenter and reporter George Alagiah compares the television coverage of the World Trade Center with his experiences in Somalia and Rwanda.

On September 11th ... the attacks happened so quickly and when virtually everything was witnessed live on television around the world. In Somalia and Rwanda the question of whether we would see the suffering millions hung on the decisions of news editors - to send TV crews or not. The deaths in Africa took place in the shadows, behind the convenient sanctity of national borders; in America they happened under the full and penetrating gaze of the TV cameras. (Alagiah 2001: 38)

It could be argued that the World Trade Center received greater media attention because it occurred in the world’s media capital: the city that occupies the central focus of America’s attention, if not the entire Western world’s. Two years before the attacks, Moeller not only expressed succinctly the US attitude to world news, but she did so with an uncanny degree of foresight: "One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans" (Moeller 1999: 22).⁵ In order to place a contemporary global perspective on Moeller’s observation, three hundred and forty-three New York fire-fighters lost their lives as a result of the World Trade Center attack.

Apart from emphasising the pre-eminence of the visual image in the reporting of the World Trade Center, Anderson’s audacious decision to go “all through with news to 7 pm ... concentrating on the pictures ... All the adverts were dropped” (*op cit*) points to one

⁴ We find a catalogue of aqueous metaphors: a ‘trickle’ of refugees which ‘stream’ over the border; ‘floods’ of refugees that ‘swamp’ neighbouring countries; and this is only ‘the tip of the iceberg’!

⁵ In the previous decade William C. Adams (1986:122) had come up with a different set of figures: "The globe is prioritized so that the death of one Western European equaled three Eastern Europeans equalled 9 Latin Americans equalled 11 Middle Easterners equalled 12 Asians".

of the main dilemmas in the news reporting of disasters: the financial cost. For the commercial channels dropping the adverts means loss of revenue.⁶ Even so, there may be a dramatic increase in viewing figures and newspaper circulation. Seen by 9.4 million viewers, the BBC1 News at 6.00 p.m. on 11 September experienced double the figures of the previous evening.

The two main terrestrial channels (BBC1 & ITV) had an audience share of 16 million - over 70% of all UK television viewers (Deans 2001). On the other hand, editorial budgets had to be expanded to cope with a demand for news that called for UK reporters to be posted to the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Israel and a variety of European countries. Foreign news is expensive and this is set against a background where recent years have witnessed an overall decline in foreign stories on television.⁷

However, it has been reported that covering the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks cost BBC News £1 million a week. In November 2001, Greg Dyke the BBC's Director General, set aside an extra £10 million to cover the war (Hodgson 2001), while ITN (UK's Independent Television News) was spending an extra \$200,000 a week. For the independents, the financial burden was made all the heavier by a general reduction in advertising revenue before 11 September in addition to further cut-backs by advertisers after that date. As for the US media, according Wall Street sources, for the period 11 September to the end of October 2001, the networks had overspent by \$100 million (Anderson 2001).

'Numbing down': reporting disasters

As for the Western countries that had once been so interested in Afghanistan's fate when the Russian invaders were there, they preferred to forget all about it now. Afghanistan was no longer a Cold War battleground, so it had ceased to matter. It was left entirely on its own. (Simpson 2001: 108)

Like many Third World countries, Afghanistan only appears in the British media as an adjunct to British/US concerns except when the scale of a disaster is so great that it is impossible to ignore. The current Afghan refugee crisis can be traced back to 1978 when the communist regime, which had recently come to power, introduced land reforms that resulted in destabilising the rural population. The next year saw the Russian invasion: an attempt to prop-up the communist government. By 1981 there were 1.5 million refugees; by 1986, five million (Ruiz and Emery 2001).

If invasions and political upheavals were not enough, Afghanistan had seen more than its share of natural disasters.⁸ For example, on 11 February, 1999, an earthquake measuring

⁶ It is estimated that running without adverts post-September 11 cost the US commercial TV stations \$300 million in lost revenue (Randall 2001).

⁷ This is to be part of a general trend in British terrestrial broadcasting. In monitoring non-news/current affairs factual programmes in 1989-90 there were 10137 hours, in 1998-99 there were only 728.6 hours Stone, J. (2000). *Losing Perspective: Global Affairs on British Terrestrial Television 1989-1999*. London, Third World and Environment Broadcasting Project (3WE): 31.

⁸ Looking back over the last 10 years there was an extreme cold wave that coincided with an earthquake, in February 2001. This was preceded by a drought in April 2000 following earthquakes in

5.8 on the Richter scale hit the village of Shaikhabad south of Kabul. The casualties were relatively light: 70 people were killed, many left their homes having experienced a tremor that preceded the main quake. Yet 30,000 were left homeless.

The year before another earthquake (6.9 on the Richter scale) occurred in the northeast of the country on 30th May (only three months after a 6.1 earthquake had hit the same region killing 4,000 people). There, 45,000 were made homeless. The inhospitable terrain and the poor infrastructure of the mountainous regions compound such problems. It should be added that these factors do not make the country particularly attractive to journalists and news crews and add to the cost of media coverage.⁹ Even the CIA, who had been especially attentive during the period of the Russian occupation, appear to have lost interest:

In contrast to politically motivated disasters, natural disasters are subject to different priorities. The relevance to Western concerns is not so important. Rather, will it make 'good television'? In her comparison of the Mozambique floods (of February 2000) and India's Orissa cyclone (October 1999), Eaton, a former BBC Newsnight producer, notes that although Orissa suffered ten times the number of deaths of Mozambique, the disaster only raised £7 Million in aid in comparison to Mozambique's £31 million (Eaton 2001). Naturally, there are (the aforementioned) geographical reasons for the media's selectivity. Such factors as availability of access and communications contribute to the decision-making process as to whether a disaster is covered or not (Sanger, Endreny et al. 1991).

In this specific case, the unequal coverage can be put down to the fact that it was relatively easy for journalists to get to Mozambique and news crews experienced less of a time difference than they would in India. This widened the possibilities for live broadcasts to coincide with the prime-time news slots of the European media. Also, in the Mozambique region, there are not only better facilities and access to media technology, but also the availability of more comfortable hotels as well as R & R pursuits for off-duty news crews. In yet another location, Carruthers (2000: 225) not only indicates the logistical and organisational obstacles that confronted the journalists covering the Rwandan crisis of 1994, but quotes one member of the press who felt the place to be out of the way and 'boring'.

Despite these considerations and the 'creature comfort' attractions (or lack of them), Eaton believes it was the power of the visual images that were the overriding factor. The dramatic pictures from Mozambique had made the major contribution in generating donations to the disaster funds. It was a photogenic disaster featuring helicopter rescues, dramatic aerial shots of floods and sensational stories such as a baby born in a tree. This is in accord with the view of Mark Austin, reporter for UK's Independent Television News (ITN):

When our television footage was broadcast, it had an immediate impact. Finally, the world took notice of the scale of the disaster.

1991, 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000 and flash floods in 1992. In addition, mudslides have caused further damage and destruction to homes and have contributed to the spread of disease.

⁹ Maximising on resources, CNN made two special reports documenting the difficulties they experienced in getting their news crews to remote areas of Afghanistan once military action had started.

Aid agencies issued appeals and western governments were forced to respond, albeit slowly. It is perhaps Mozambique's good fortune that this is a telegenic catastrophe. With no dramatic rescues, no riveting footage, would the world have noticed? (Austin 2000)

As for the Orissa cyclone, the population suffered because their tragedy was not particularly photogenic. According to another ITN reporter, Mike Nicholson:

Pictures are everything, and it's well nigh impossible to convince the viewer of the scale of the disaster when the only pictures we can show are unsteady shots of people casually wading knee-deep through a flooded rice field. (Nicholson 1999)

This type of material confirms Dave Marash's 'TV Codes'. According to Marash (an ABC News reporter), the code for 'hurricane' comprises images of 'Palm trees bending to the gale, surf splashing over the humbled shore, missing roofs, homeless people showing up in local gyms. You see it once or twice most years' (Marash 1995). He continues by citing "storm of the century", Hurricane Andrew that hit Florida in 1992.¹⁰ Because the news reporting of Andrew conformed so closely to the stereotypical television coverage, nobody noticed: 'the pictures are the same, and so is the response.

Even in a well-wired White House, with independent additional sources of information, it was days before it dawned that people in Florida were afraid and angry because they knew what had hit them but no one in authority seemed aware. Even though they could see it on television.' In essence, the repetitious use of TV codes and the reporting of disasters according to predetermined formulae has a numbing effect on the audience. If Marash's theory is correct, despite the audience ratings, they may still be watching, but mentally they have switched off.

Refugees as wallpaper

In viewing the Afghan crisis, 'TV codes' are evident. For example, BBC Breakfast Television interviewed Clare Short (the UK's International Development Secretary). During the interview the visuals cut to non-specific footage of refugees at the Pakistan Border. Without introduction, sundry displaced people wandering around in the middle distance appeared on screen.

Later in the programme the technique was used again during another live interview, this time with Ron Redmond of UNHCR in Geneva. The interview visuals cut to two women in burkhas, followed by a shot of a group of refugees, two close-ups of children and finally a crowd shot from above. The purpose of cutting to this imagery during the interview's broadcast was most likely to have been illustrative: providing images of the

¹⁰ According to the National Hurricane Center, 'Andrew' was the most expensive disaster in US history causing \$25 billion of damage. Such was the scale of the hurricane that the following year it became the subject of a low-budget feature film *Triumph over Disaster* (1993). The story, based on 'real events', employed actual news footage of the aftermath to support a tediously wooden account of the human struggle against forces of nature.

emerging humanitarian crisis. Yet the relation of the image to the commentary was arbitrary. In fact one wonders whether Redmond was even aware of the images broadcast to accompany his responses to questions.

The ‘non-specific’ imagery comprising a variety of ‘TV codes’ is usually referred to as a *compilation sequence*. Returning to Swain & Swain (quoted on page 1 of this paper), while “a picture may begin with a ... sequence of dramatized action designed to hook audience interest”; would-be scriptwriters are advised to “... follow it with a compilation sequence which introduces the film’s topic and emphasizes its scope ... go to a second compilation sequence which establishes the broad outlines of a particular locale ... move on to a continuity sequence which pinpoints a bit of dramatic action in that locale ... and so on”.

In feature-film circles, the *compilation sequence* is also known as a *newsreel sequence*. Individual shots are edited together bearing no relation to the following action. More concerned with topic than with continuity, they are often used to refer to disasters, though not exclusively: “Often you’ll see it in coverage of a flood, a tornado, a travelogue, a tour of a factory, or the like.” (Swain and Swain 1988). One of the problems in running this imagery during studio interviews is that the connection between sound and image is unplanned so it introduces a random factor as to the meaning of the images that become associated with (what is in effect) an *ad hoc* voice-over commentary.

If, as media theorists suggest, the viewer makes the mental connection between sound and image, the ‘third meaning’ created in the mind of the viewer becomes subject to what the interviewee just happens to say. In addition, the use of this formulaic imagery to represent extraordinary events has the end result of reducing humanitarian and environmental disasters to a kind of ‘visual wallpaper’. The images just happen to be there, possibly to provide some relief from ‘talking heads’, but with no specific intention.

The television news technique of talking over the visuals is becoming increasingly common. For example, on Sky News, while an ‘in studio’ discussion was taking place, we saw images of a war-torn Kabul. A man carrying a bundle was shown walking along a road with ruined buildings in the background. This image was accompanied by the headline “Afghans are fleeing Kabul after military strikes”.

There was some discussion about the cause of the damage shown on screen and when the images were taken. The scene changed to Peshawar in Pakistan and the discussion turned to Pakistan’s political role in the conflict. We saw protesting crowds. The police moved in, the crowd was on the run, tear-gas was used and people panicked. Meanwhile the discussants made a brief reference to rioting and continued to talk about the overall political situation.

The scene reverted back to Kabul, this time at night. We saw anti-aircraft fire, a man operating a pump, an outdoor kitchen, and a man leading a donkey cart. The possibility of shooting down cruise missiles was discussed and the Western journalists still operating in Kabul were listed. At the mention of the missing British journalist Yvonne Ridley, the visuals cut to images of a war-torn Kabul. A man carrying a bundle was walking along a road with ruined buildings in the background and we realised we were in a film loop. The only difference being we had a new headline: “Taliban hold emergency cabinet meeting

on crisis". The whole Kabul in daylight sequence was shown again and then we were back in Peshawar.

Although we saw the same images the re-fashioning of the headline had changed the picture of the man carrying the bundle from a refugee image to an image that acted as a backdrop illustration for Kabul, as the location of the Taliban government. Apart from this and the few direct references to the images there was a sense of the gratuitous use of video footage leaving the impression of images for images' sake.¹¹

On the same Sky News broadcast, some 10 minutes later, the man with the bundle made a further appearance. This time it was in the context of a live report from Keith Graves in Washington, USA. The subject of the report was Washington's reaction to events in Pakistan. The man appeared yet again, 18 minutes later to illustrate a studio interview on the subject of the effects of the bombing on Afghanistan and speculation as to whether bin Laden was still alive.

The visuals featured a number of stereotypical refugee images: for example, the man with the bundle of possessions heading along the road, passing ruined buildings (to an uncertain future); and the 'Flight into Egypt' style image of the man leading a donkey cart. In addition, there were media stereotypes of Islam: angry faces and clenched fists (other images have included veiled women and turbaned sheikhs - symbolising religious rigidity) such stereotypes are discussed by Hafez (1999) and Said (1981).¹² Apart from the refugee riot at the Pakistan border, which in any case did not feature the above ingredients, the stereotype of Islamic anger has not been used in the media representations of Afghan refugees. Expressions of anger or forcefulness are not commensurate with the image of 'the victim'.

While stereotypes can provide a shorthand frame of reference to indicate a particular group, they can limit understanding to a fixed set of concepts. Needless to say, this is state of affairs commonly exploited in fiction film:

Arab terrorists, okay, the movie proceeds, whereas if you have a worked out a story simply about a murder or love triangle or revenge, well you've got to know something about the people and invest some time in knowing what makes them tick. This is easy. They've got a turban, we don't need to know what's going on under that turban, just proceed with the story.

Steve de Souza
(Screenwriter of films *Die Hard I & II*)

For the news reporter, a way of overcoming such limitations is to interview individuals. However this raises the problem of ascertaining who is typical or representative of the

¹¹ The overall effect is similar to the pictures of the World Trade Center attack with the near perpetual repetition of the same shots of the planes hitting the towers.

¹² ' . . . if the Iranian crisis is regularly rendered by television pictures of chanting "Islamic" mobs accompanied by commentary about "anti-Americanism," the distance, unfamiliarity, and threatening quality of the spectacle limit "Islam" to those characteristics; this in turn gives rise to a feeling that something basically unattractive and negative confronts us. Since Islam is "against" us and "out there," the necessity of adopting a confrontational response of our own towards it will not be doubted.' (Said 1981: 44)

general state of affairs. As noted by Kracauer: 'it is precisely the task of portraying wide areas of actual reality, social or otherwise, which calls for "typage" - the recourse to people who are part and parcel of that reality and can be considered typical of it' (1960: 99).¹³ The 'wallpaper' refugee images we have seen attempt to provide a general representation that does not allow the viewer to get close enough to the individual behind them. To some extent this changes with special news reports where we are introduced to individuals as representatives of the general situation, though they still remain constrained by the 3-minute narrative framework.

The reports tend to follow a standard narrative pattern and closely conform to Nichols' analysis of television news in his chapter 'The Documentary Film and Principles of Exposition' (1981: 170-207). Nichols uses the CBS evening news as his example. For the purposes of this study we might consider the role of the anchor person - a familiar reliable public figure who can 'command belief and thereby gain credibility' (Nichols 1981: 174). The news is also constructed as a 30 minute dramatisation (see Wright 2000: 20) and the anchor person signs-off at the end of the news with resignation and reassurance about states of affairs in the world. For the viewer the actual event is reached via anchor to reporter to interviewee to the event itself in the form of a two or three-minute story.

The anchor provides a brief synopsis of the story and turns to the reporter to substantiate (by means of an on-the-spot demonstration) that which has just been stated and support for this is sought from the interviewee(s). When we cut to the location, we find that the reporter is often situated in front of one or more of Marash's (*op cit*) TV codes. In refugee crises we often see the reporter in the foreground, facing square-on to the camera, in front of a crowd of people.

Having done the main 'piece to camera' the reporter will angle him/herself to the interviewee who (unlike the anchor or the reporter) is never allowed a square-on address to the camera. The interviewee's words must be directed towards the reporter who deflects them to the camera/viewer. The reporter acts as our guide: following a long literary tradition, which depends upon a guide who escorts the traveller through strange lands, inhabited by strange beings. The guide is usually a marginal figure with a foot in both camps maintaining a safe distance between observers and observed: a pivotal figure, who has a place in 'our world', yet also displays familiarity with the world we are visiting (Wright 2002). This has been used to good effect in Sorios Samura's documentary 'Exodus' where, as a refugee himself, he takes us back to West Africa and on to Europe following the refugee trail he had taken years earlier.

In the case of many foreign stories the viewers' familiarity with the reporter is considered to be so important that household names are 'parachuted' into the disaster area. One

¹³ This also highlights a characteristic of film as a medium of cultural representation. When using the written word one can generalise as can be found in the 'classic' ethnography: "Nuer are very largely dependent on the milk of their herds . . . Their carcasses also furnish Nuer with meat, tools, ornaments . . . Women are more interested in the cows . . . Men's interest in the cow is, apart from their value for breeding, rather for their use in obtaining wives . . ." Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1956). *Nuer Religion*. Oxford, Clarendon. In contrast a photograph or a film has to deal with specifics and the shot has to concentrate on the individual: not the Nuer; but this Nuer, whose name is *x*. We can see his photograph representing a 'class' of people in Evans-Pritchard's ethnography on Plate XIV titled 'Leopard-skin priest': certainly an individual, yet in this context he remains un-named..

could say that the number and calibre of these correspondents provide a good indication of the disaster's magnitude. Stephen Hess (somewhat cynically) describes the parachutists as "reporters of no fixed address whose expertise was in dropping in on people trying to slaughter each other. This was an economical way of news gathering and one guaranteed to make the world appear more dangerous than it is. (Hess 1996: 4) However it would be fair to say that not all of the 'parachuting' special correspondents could be described as generalists. Some, Fergal Keene and Matt Frei for example, have made humanitarian disasters their 'speciality'.

What's in a story?

A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both. This response to the new situation leads the story toward its conclusion. (Riceour (1984: 150, paraphrasing Gallie's notion of a story)

According to Eaton, television news stories of natural disasters follow a predictable pattern:

- Day 1. Disaster strikes. Description of the destruction, numbers of dead and injured. Appeals for international help.
- Day 2 Search and rescue, hopefully involving a child/old person being plucked from the rubble by relief workers.
- Day 3. The Western aid effort is underway. Pictures of planes loading up at British air bases. May also include something about the corruption/inefficiency of the government in the country concerned.
- Day 4. The threat of hunger and disease.
- Day 5. The final miraculous human interest story. Someone rescued after days in the rubble, a baby born in a tree, etc.

She adds: "Once this familiar narrative has been played out, there is nothing new to report" (Eaton 2001: 29). This narrative pattern seems to have been applied to the World Trade Center attack - one reason why (after the post-rescue discussions and speculation had died down) the focus shifted to the Afghan refugees.

The writer and critic Gustav Freytag (1908) devised the notion of the pyramid to illustrate the five-act structural basis of dramaturgy. It is a pattern of story-telling that can be found from the plays of Shakespeare to the Star Wars movies. Eaton's five days of news

coverage conforms closely (if not exactly) to Freytag's scheme of things. In the typical five-act play we find each act falls respectively under the categories of Exposition, Development, Climax, Resolution, Dénouement.

Briefly, the *Exposition* establishes equilibrium in the state-of-affairs of the drama that is about to unfold. The *Development* disrupts the equilibrium, gives the story a direction and sets the narrative in motion to reach its *Climax*. The *Resolution* provides the action to bring about the narrative's conclusion in the *Dénouement* where the plot is unravelled and a new state of equilibrium is achieved, sometimes accompanied by the hint of a new beginning. At this point we might recall Ignatief's notion of the genre of the news story where he states "News is a genre as much as fiction or drama" (Ignatief 1998: 26).

In one of BBC Television News broadcasts from Afghanistan, Matt Frei's report of 17 February 2001 shows clear evidence of the five-act structure.

1. *Exposition*. Frei introduces the subject, establishes the location and the general state of affairs. That the reporter is flying over Afghanistan in a UN plane enables him literally to give an overview of the situation. He comments on the hostile environment as we see him looking out of the window onto the desolate landscape.
2. *Development*. The story is given its initial momentum and is set off in a direction. He indicates what we can't see from the air which cues a ground shot of the refugee camp where we see figures partly obscured by clouds of dust. We are given details of the crisis with close-up and medium-shots of refugees. We are introduced to the problem of the distribution of blankets together with an expression of the refugees' frustration.
3. *Climax*. Then follows a catalogue of 'case study' disasters each time stepping-up the scale of the crisis with a growing number of voices. Firstly, the refugee Sirijillin who shows us his son's grave. S explains that the lack of blankets was responsible for the death. Secondly, seven month-old motherless child Marjula. And finally the Mohammed family who have just lost two children and a third is dying. We are reminded that nightfall is looming, temperatures will drop, there is overcrowding in the available shelter and that more people are arriving. The building-up of more and more people echoes the narrative reaching its climax.
4. *Resolution*. Two ways of solving the situation are proposed: one in form of intention, the other through action. A Taleban representative tells us that crisis is so bad that he is prepared to break the regime's strict rule on visual images, and will talk to the camera to alert people to the suffering. Then we see sacks of food aid being moved by three Afghan men.
5. *Dénouement*. The unravelling of the plot takes place in Frei's final piece to camera where he points to the irony that UN sanctions

have contributed to the crisis, while UN agencies are providing the aid.¹⁴ As we are left to ponder this dilemma, the report cuts to a shot of the setting sun. This not only indicates nightfall (we have already been told that this is when temperatures drop), but also symbolises the passage of time, leaving the viewer to ponder what state of affairs will be revealed when the sun reappears.

In Frei's second report of 20 November 2001 (on this side of 11 September 2001), the basic format remains the same, though there are changes in content. As US bombing had commenced the Taleban are no longer treated as reluctant informants, but more as if a strange tribe. The reporter's privileged eyewitness view remains. Curiously though, instead of the reporter looking down onto the location from a plane window, the exposition features the Taleban peeping over a wall 'cut off from the outside world' and climbing trees 'to get a better look' at the film crew who 'were such a novelty'. The development, while reminding us of our privileged view, takes us to the Sheikh Rashid refugee camp 'out of sight until today'.

As with the report of 17 February, the piece reaches its climax by way of three 'case-studies' in ascending order of tragedy: Mohammed who 'can barely walk'; Abdul Mallick who 'can't find a doctor to cure his one-year old daughter'; and bin Mohammed who 'can't feed his two babies' and who suffers from crippled hands. Worse still, 'the doctors who were treating him also fled the bombing'. The resolution offers us a general view of the camp, panning to a 'piece to camera'.

We are offered two possible causes for the thousands of Afghans internally displaced: the American bombing and (during two cutaway shots) the drought. The dénouement brings us back to the role of Taleban, with a low angle shot (that increases the stature) of a soldier, who 'have dreadfully misruled this country, but removing them from power' – cut to a medium shot of another soldier with wind strewn refugees in middle distance – 'also has its price'. On this final shot/dilemma, the reporter signs off.

In another of Frei's reports the narrative structure remains (Appendix 3). In this case we might consider the context in which the report is framed. Following an in-studio item on the post-World Trade Center investigation, the focus shifts by means of a circuitous route to the Afghan refugees:

A delegation of religious leaders from Pakistan have said the Taleban regime had no intention of handing over the terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden. They've been meeting Taleban officials in the Afghan city of Kandahar in a last ditch attempt by the clerics to strike a compromise deal. Also in Afghanistan the Taleban authorities say they've arrested a British journalist in Jalalabad. Yvonne Ridley who works for the Sunday Express has been accused of entering the country illegally. Over the border the Pakistan government has warned that the refugee crisis caused by millions of people trying to flee Afghanistan could become one of

¹⁴ There are resonances here with Aristotle's notion of *anagnorisis* the moment when a character moves from ignorance to knowledge, realises their tragic error, *hamartia* – ignorance or mistaken judgement: the 'tragic flaw'.

the most miserable chapters in human history. One of the worst affected areas is Quetta, where our correspondent Matt Frei sent us this report...

This shows how a refugee crisis is framed within Western concerns. The connections made to the US and Britain through the general narrative almost act as justifications for the refugee story. The World Trade Center investigation leads us to Afghanistan (via Pakistan) where the suspected perpetrator may be found. And with a brief glance towards Britain in the context of the arrested journalist, we are taken to the refugee crisis.

The actual report focuses on the Hazara, an ethnic and religious minority in Afghanistan. While their current plight is covered, there is no mention of the prejudice they have suffered from the majority population. Originally from Mongolia, they had settled in Afghanistan around 1300 AD. As a disparate group, they have been despised by other Afghans and are often forced to take menial occupations. Not only have they suffered because they belong to the Shi'a Muslim sect (in contrast to the Sunni majority), but their mongoloid features set them apart as targets for discrimination. This type of information might make viewers more aware of the diversity of an Afghan population that cannot be so easily stereotyped.

As for the shots themselves, the camera is surprisingly static. In this report there are four pans (two across, two down) and one zoom, but most of the shots amount to a series of stills as if in a 'slide show' sequence displaying minimal movement of the subjects. The content and composition of the images provide the types of information that contribute to the standard narrative pattern. For example, a long-shot to establish the location supports the *exposition*, close-ups for the individual case studies build-up to the *climax*, and the zoom shot accompanied by the commentary "... help is on its way. The West is keen to show that it can care for Muslim refugees and destroy terrorism" rounds off the *dénouement*.

There are ten portraits - one old man, the rest women and children. Children usually receive one special mention in news reports and then are shown in the context of narratives covering more general issues. It is not directly stated, but implied that children in particular will be affected by the current state of affairs. The statutory 'piece to camera' draws the narrative to its conclusion and acts as an authentication device giving authority to the reporter as witness to events - as if to say 'I am really here!'

It could be argued that this is the way that all news reports are structured. However it is this style of news reporting structure that serves refugees poorly. In contrast to other minority groups, refugees (especially when on the move or recently displaced) are unable to provide a media-skilled authentic voice to put forward their case. Granted in the news reports, refugees are 'interviewed', or are invited to make statements to camera, but in these *vox pop* interviews, they can speak about their own personal experience, but are unable to provide a refugee voice that commands a view on the overall picture or the broader political situation. They have to rely upon the media skills of members of the aid agencies, which places the refugees in a child-like state, seemingly unable to stand up for themselves.

"No comment": alternative approaches to the news story narrative

Marash points out, that on occasions extraordinary events can leave the reporter unable to abide by the conventions of television news. Here he cites a report from Rwanda. “The crowd of refugees was too vast for the eye, much less the camera, to comprehend. Their terror, stench, *need*, could not be seen”. As the reporters used words to describe their experience of the crisis “they communicated it better than pictures could, in part because the lack of pictures said, ‘Listen closely’” (Marash 1995 op cit).

From the refugees’ point of view, it is not only a matter of attracting media coverage to your crisis, but also hoping the style of reporting makes people sit up and listen. Perhaps it was the image/voice-over combination in reporting the Ethiopian famine that generated the public response - for example, Michael Burke’s use of the adjective ‘biblical’ to describe the scene.¹⁵ Perhaps innovatory and audience grabbing in its time, but now it has become a stock phrase (Matt Frei has used it in two separate news reports from Afghanistan as if ‘biblical’ is a quantifiable level on the scale of disasters: “This is a famine of *almost* biblical proportions” [my italics] (see Appendix 1).

In contrast to the mainstream television news format, the Euronews satellite television channel provides a 24-hour news-stream in six languages. The immediate noticeable difference is that it features neither anchorperson nor visible reporter, only a constant stream of pictures and interviews accompanied by anonymous voice-overs, which provide translations when appropriate. This allows the same visual material to be shown throughout Europe without incurring additional front-of-camera costs, yet placing a heavy reliance on the continuity of images and visual narrative. This is most evident in its “No Comment” section, two minutes of news from around the world with no commentary accompanying the pictures shown.

One of these broadcasts, on 26 November 2001, showed refugees in an observational documentary style with little contextualisation. The editing style is non-intrusive, we see people engaged in everyday activities such as bread-making, talking, undertaking household duties, etc. We over-hear people in conversation, but their words remain untranslated. As such it offers a different perspective to the ‘standard’ news story. Although it is evident that a process of editorial decision-making has taken place, ‘No Comment’ has a sense of being less mediated than the usual presentation of the news.

Nonetheless, the lack of commentary and contextualisation should not be taken to imply that the footage has neither narrative nor context - there is a strong visual narrative underlying the piece. While the refugee ‘No Comment’ has a beginning, middle and end, it has no climax. There is an *exposition*: the opening pans and zooms from a wide-shot of a desolate landscape to buildings on the horizon. A shot of a sign indicates the location “Welcome to New Shamshatoo Camp”. There follows a series of compilation sequences (without obvious rationale for their sequencing). Though, in contrast to the BBC Special Reports, the camera is very active: it pans round the refugee camp, zooms-in to close-ups on individuals and follows their passage through the camp.

The piece concludes with a figure walking into the sunset, which can be identified as the dénouement as the image conforms to the refugee stereotype of heading towards an

¹⁵ Michael Burke’s special report from Ethiopia stimulated the massive Live Aid public response. Live Aid was watched by 1.4 billion people worldwide in over 170 countries. The event raised donations of £70m.

uncertain future (see the analysis of Xavier Koller's feature film "Journey of Hope" Wright 2000: 14). This may be designed to leave the viewer to question what the future holds for the refugees.

Elsewhere alternative strategies have been adopted for the portrayal of refugees. For example, Norwegian artist Andrea Lange's *Refugee Talks* (Lange 1998). Filmed in an Oslo reception centre, Middle Eastern refugees were asked to sing to the camera.

The power of the piece rested not in our understanding of the meaning of the songs that were being performed, but in registering the profound contrast between the tonalities of the voice and the tawdry texture of the sofas on which the refugees sit, the beckoning turns of their hands and the fading surfaces of the walls behind them, the generosity of spirit that is so evident in the eyes of asylum seekers and the meanness of the rooms in which they were confined. (Paperstergiadis 2002: 85)

But only a limited specialised audience receives the experimental presentations of such 'art works'. In returning to the broadcast media, the Channel 4 documentaries *Exodus* (part of Sorios Samura's *Africa* series) and *Refugee Tales* (both screened in 2000) possessed the most striking features that they enabled refugees to speak for themselves, without the mediation of a third-party and showed both the causes and effects of forced migration.¹⁶

However, in fairness to the news reporters, these programmes enjoyed the benefit of documentary format that enables a far more comprehensive account of a refugee crisis, not limited to the severe time constraints of news. The three minute news slot operates more like an advertisement for the crisis and primarily is concerned with grabbing the audience's attention and getting a simple point across in the given time frame. Another approach that stands out of is Newsround, BBC 1's children's news. As it is produced for children (and is often about children) the coverage of Afghan refugee children achieves an innovative reporting style.

Conclusion

Many of the issues discussed in this paper are not limited to the portrayal of refugees. Rather they are symptomatic of the ways the media presents the world to its viewing public. However in the coverage of refugees, these issues become particularly inflated.¹⁷ An additional problem with these discrete news reports is that they rarely have the scope to extend beyond the immediate issue and logistically the wider implications cannot be addressed. For example, the viewer is left to connect the internally displaced in

¹⁶ A more comprehensive discussion of television documentaries is out of the scope of this paper, but it will form the subject of future research in recognition of the importance of the 'media mix' in which television news, newspapers and magazines, documentaries, feature films and art works all contribute to the public image of 'the refugee' (see Wright, 2000).

¹⁷ In the attempts of visual anthropologists to document 'other' cultures, the logistic and ethical issues encountered by the more general documentary filmmaker become considerably exaggerated Wright (2002).

Afghanistan, to the refugee story of the Norwegian ship Tampa (Housden 2001) or to the Sangatte refugee camp, near the Channel Tunnel.

There are three main constituent factors that contribute to the likelihood of effective media coverage of a particular refugee crisis. Firstly, in order to attract Western press coverage it is necessary for the crisis to be of such a magnitude that it cannot be ignored; or it is necessary for it to have some obvious connection with Western concerns. Second, the story will gain airtime if the nature of the crisis is such that it produces dramatic imagery - pictures with impact. Thirdly, if the style of the media coverage is sufficiently innovative it will stimulate interest in the viewers.

The television news format does not serve refugees well. The very fact that they are displaced often means that they are not able to supply authentic expert voices with first hand experience in addition to a overall perspective of the situation. This limits the news reporting of the refugee experience to anecdotal accounts - the expert knowledge is usually provided by representatives of the aid agencies. The voice of the refugee remains at the end of a chain of 'framings': contextualised by the anchorperson, reporter, NGO representative, and (perhaps) translator.

As for the future coverage of the Afghan refugee crisis, the media have a central role to play in the efforts to rebuild the country and to achieve political stability. For Afghanistan, the tasks involved include: disarmament, establishing peace and security; providing food, healthcare, education for the population; reviving the economy; repairing the infrastructure; establishing an independent judiciary; creating a new political environment; and so on.

Such activities do not necessarily make 'good television' nonetheless the need remains to maintain the interest of the western world. As the country moves from receiving short-term relief to building up long-term development, it would benefit the country in future if the western public remain informed, thus concentrating the minds of politicians to retain their interest. In addition positive coverage of the country may help win back members of the Afghan diaspora whose professional skills are needed to aid the process of rebuilding.

Appendix 1:

BBC TV news report, No. 1.

Afghanistan, probably the most difficult place on the planet to survive in and now completely cut off from the outside world by sanctions the only planes permitted in belong to the aid agencies.

What you can't see from the air is the mass migration of people across the frozen wastes.

But you can here in the Lamasla camp: a home in the dust for 40,000 refugees from cold and hunger.

They've walked for days to get here, forced to flee their villages - for the worst drought in 30 years has killed their harvests ... and now their children.

First priority – food and blankets. The official at the desk decides who gets what.

One man can't wait. He pleads for help, only to be turned away.

The crowd is on the edge - an orderly uses a whip to keep them at bay.

Someone wants to speak to us.

"He's lost his son"

"Yes, five years old"

Sirijilinn took us to his son's grave in the saddest corner of this camp.

Most of these piles of rock and mud are the graves of children – over 150 in the last two weeks

"t night, you know, we had no blanket and no quilt so we could not keep him warm - but we tried to keep him warm - he was shivering."

We are strangers here, but now everyone wants to tell us their story.

Margula is seven months old, her mother died last night and her father doesn't know where to get her milk.

We're taken to meet what's left of the Mohammed family. Since Monday she has lost two of her children to hunger and cold.

"We haven't eaten for days," he told me.

And inside their mud-hut, it is their eldest son who lies dying - gestures of despair.

There's only one hour of daylight left, then the temperatures here drop to well below freezing.

Today sixteen people share this tiny hut, tomorrow it may be 50. Time to hunker down for the night and hope for the best.

Everyday there are new arrivals, waiting for a tent by the roadside.

Such is the crisis ... that the Islamic Taliban regime that normally shuns the outside world is breaking some of its own taboos.

Afghanistan is the only country in the world where television is not allowed, but this senior official felt the need to address a camera:

"I am violating my own law - I'm doing it because the need and I want to help my people. I want to convey their feelings and their suffering otherwise we don't allow pictures here."

Aid is now arriving. These sacks of wheat have come from the arch-enemy America, but sanctions have also battered the local currency, doubling the prices of most basic goods.

After decades of drought, warfare and now the bitter cold. This is a humanitarian crisis of almost biblical proportions but it is also one laced with an irony. While UN sanctions have made the plight of these people a lot worse, it is also UN aid agencies which are providing the basic needs here.

Matt Frei, BBC News, in the Lamasla camp, West Afghanistan.

Appendix 2

BBC TV news report, No. 2.

In his last remaining fiefdom Taliban man is still stuck in a time-warp, resolutely cut off from the outside world.

We were such a novelty that some scaled trees to get a better look.

Penned into our compound we were allowed out only once, with an armed escort.

On the way, a soldier, his Kalashnikov draped with confiscated audio tape - here music is still forbidden.

This is what they wanted us to see: The Sheikh Rashid camp – a tent city in the desert.

The humanitarian crisis the UN had warned about - here it is. Out of sight until today, behind Taliban lines.

Two months ago this camp didn't even exist.

We met Mohamed. He can barely walk, he's starving and despite appearances, he's only 50. I asked him why he was here.

“The Americans bombed us in Kandadhar,” he told me, “I lost 3 members of my family.”

There are many reasons why people flee their homes here: drought, bombing, civil war – take your pick.

Abdul Mallick can't find a doctor to cure his one-year old daughter. Bin Mohamed can't feed his two babies – their mother is too ill to produce breast milk.

His hands were crippled by a land-mine, but the doctors who were treating him also fled the bombing.

This is the refugee crisis which the world has not been able to see yet.

Tens of thousands of Afghans - displaced in their own country, and everyone we spoke to here today told us they fled their homes because of the American bombing. If it's not the bombing it's the drought - not a drop of rain in three years.

Both man and nature have conspired against Afghanistan

The Taliban are still in charge. They have dreadfully misruled this country, but removing them from power also has its price.

Matt Frei, BBC News, Kandahar province

Appendix 3

BBC TV news report, No. 3.

This is a place where nature conspires against man...

...and especially against refugees. They haven't seen a drop of rain in five years, hence the dust.

When it vanishes, it's the sun's turn to punish.

Midday - almost one hundred in the shade, but there's hardly any for these Afghan refugees.

They arrived three days ago and the best they can do for shelter is a mosque without a roof.

This is the story of one abandoned village in Central Afghanistan. They are members of the Hazara tribe and they started walking three months ago.

In search of food and in fear of the Taleban.

They headed for Pakistan when they heard America might bomb.

Ten mothers and fifty children, but where are all the men?

"They don't have their husband, their husband has died"

"All of them?"

"Yes, all of them. They have been killed"

Killed by sickness, they tell us, and by Taleban grenades. These people have nothing.

Mariam, mother of six, produced her supply of food. "This much only, she has"

The bread is a hand-out from a passer-by. A genuine starvation diet – one piece to be shared by all of them.

In just over one hour from now, the sun will rapidly disappear behind the mountains and for those without adequate shelter the scorching heat of day will be replaced by the bitter cold of night.

And this is just the beginning, because in one month from now winter descends on Baluchistan and the temperatures drop to well below freezing.

The moon is already out.

And on the mountain the shadows are now menacingly long.

In the mosque without a roof the refugees settle down for another miserable night on their bed of dust. They need everything here, not just blankets.

But help is on its way. The West is keen to show that it can care for Muslim refugees and destroy terrorism.

Matt Frei, BBC News, Quetta

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