Human Rights Journalism: Advances in Reporting Distant Humanitarian Interventions
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Human Rights Journalism: Advances in Reporting Distant Humanitarian Intervention aims to fulfill many gaps in the literature regarding the role of the media (and journalism) in protection and promotion of human rights. It is the first book which “focus[es] exclusively on the conceptualization of human rights journalism on the basis of the reporting of physical, structural and cultural violence within the context of humanitarian intervention” (Shaw, 2012:1). The book is based on the modern understanding of human rights shaped by the international human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A holistic understanding of human rights is presented in the book that cases related to both civil and political rights and economic social and cultural rights are given equal weight. The book suggests that human rights journalists “have to accept responsibility to report all kinds of human rights violations”, not only forms of direct physical violence such as genocide, torture and arbitrary arrests and detention but also indirect forms of cultural and structural violence such as racism, poverty and corruption. The
central argument presented in the book is that “if the indirect forms of structural and cultural violence... are managed proactively by human rights journalism, the direct forms of physical violence...would be minimized or altogether prevented” (Shaw, 2012-2013).

The first part of the book deals with the theoretical implications of human rights journalism. Shaw suggests that dominant mainstream journalistic practice -what he calls “human wrongs journalism” -“favours and reinforces the agenda of the ruling class as well as the corporate conglomerates” (Shaw, 2012: 39). For him, this journalism is similar to “war journalism” since it is more oriented towards making news about “societal imbalances in terms of direct physical violence than of indirect structural and cultural violence” (Shaw, 2012: 59). In the current media environment, “[h]uman rights journalism is therefore seen as the only way forward to rescue journalism from losing its real sense or purpose” (Shaw, 2012: 40). According to Shaw, human rights journalism “is the panacea to the problems of mainstream reporting because, among many other things, it emphasizes both the ‘news as it is’ and the ‘news as I see it’, with special emphasis on or bias towards the marginalized and vulnerable voices who from the bulk of victims of human rights abuses” (Shaw, 2012: 58-59).

Shaw uses the term “human rights journalism” to refer to a counter-hegemonic journalism praxis (Shaw, 2012: 11) as it “challenges, not reinforces, the status quo of the powerful dominant voices of society against the weak and marginalized ones in the promotion and protection of human rights and peace.” (Shaw, 2012: 46). Despite having similarities with human rights reporting, for Shaw, human rights journalism is “more than reporting of human rights violations” as it covers “indirect structural/cultural violence” in addition to direct physical violence (Shaw, 2012: 58-59). According to him, human rights journalism is a strand of and complements peace journalism and as alternative paradigm, human rights journalism addresses the shortcomings and limitations of alternative models of journalism as well as mainstream journalism (Shaw, 2012: 70).
Human rights journalism, as formulated in the book, is a normative account of journalism. It is based on four values: humanitarianism, empowerment, holism and truth (Shaw, 2012: 66) and adopts five principles of rights-based approach to journalism, “namely, linkages to human rights standards, participation, accountability, non-discrimination and empowerment” (Shaw, 2012: 64). Shaw argues that by embracing these principles, “professional journalism’s internal goals of fairness and accuracy would be reinforced (Shaw, 2012: 79-80).

Informed by such a normative framework, Shaw places many expectations on journalists performing this kind of journalism. According to Shaw, “[t]he human rights journalist...has the moral responsibility to challenge...the existing individual, local and global imbalances (Berman and Calderbank cited in Shaw, 2012: 66). He emphasizes the role of human rights journalists in providing accountability, indicating that human rights journalism has a potential to “narrow the divide between the many pledges of human rights principles made by world leaders and what happens on the ground” (Shaw, 2012: 26). For Shaw, human rights journalism “uses human rights based limitations instead of political and market manipulations” (Shaw, 2012: 35). Although these appear to be very good aspirations, human rights journalism will not be performed in a vacuum, as this work acknowledges. Therefore, the question that begs for an answer is how such a journalistic practice will be realized in a non-ideal media environment shaped by the state and the market. Although the writer partly answers these question by pointing out Indymedia as an example of human rights journalism and by suggesting innovative projects to improve collaborative working between the mainstream media and the alternative media, it is still questionable to what extent such journalism would be sustained outside the alternative. In addition to these, according to Shaw, “journalists should contribute to human rights discourse” because they have a “privileged access to news media sources” and “professional ability to communicate [and]... to deconstruct the news and add more in depth analysis”
(Shaw, 2012: 38). However, journalists’ capacity to perform these actions does not really account for why they are morally obliged to contribute to human rights discourse.

The book examines human rights journalism within the context of humanitarian intervention. According to Shaw, “the link between human rights journalism and humanitarian intervention is based on the premise that, if news consumers, including political class, are provided with a better understanding of the structural reasons of various acts of violence by having the problem explained rather than sensationalized, they are most likely to empathise with the suffering of people and hence to call for humanitarian intervention in order to end or prevent it” (Shaw, 2012: 23). Putting aside the question of desirability of humanitarian intervention in the form of military intervention, it can be said that more empirical evidence (audience reception and more) is needed in order to demonstrate whether news showing structural reasons of acts of violence would cause news consumers’ empathizing with the suffering of individuals.

Shaw grounds his theoretical conceptualization of HRJ with some cases studies. The second part of the book focuses on the media representation of direct physical violence, drawing on case studies from Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Somalia and Rwanda. It analyses the role of the media in the success or the failure of humanitarian interventions in these countries. It concludes that “in the case of Kosovo, the media coverage was helpful, placing a good deal of emphasis on the empathy/critical frames over those of empathy distance frames to call for a sustained military intervention by NATO forces to prevent the ethnic cleansing of the Albanian Muslims by the Orthodox Serbain Christians, and thus, preventing genocide (Robinson, 2002b)...but they failed to the same in the case of Rwanda and Somalia, or in that of Sierra Leone”. Shaw claims that, “distance empathy news frames informed the ‘I don’t care’ attitude of the international community in general.” (Shaw, 2012: 120). Although Shaw emphasizes role of the political, economic and cultural factors, which inform both empathy/critical frames and empathy distance frames of “Western Media”, he does not consider the impact of the ownership structure of the Western
Media on the production of such news frames. An in-depth analysis of relationship the media outlets, states and capital is required to understand the issues at play in the production of such news frames. In addition to this, more empirical evidence is needed to show the direction of relationship between news frames and the international community’s decision-making process.

The third part of the book deals with media representation of indirect cultural and structural violence drawing on case studies from Africa, the USA and the UK (Shaw, 2012: 21). In the first section, Shaw explores the case of Independent Media Channel (Indymedia) at the Seattle demonstrations against the WTO in 1999 (Shaw, 2012: 174). He shows that “silencing and excluding the concerns and voices of protesters against trade ministers attending the November 1999 WTO summit in Seattle” is an example of human wrongs journalism where as the emergence of the Seattle IMC, providing a counter hegemonic discourse to the mainstream media constitutes a practice of human rights journalism (Shaw, 2012: 174-179). According to him, “the practice of human rights journalism based on media activism can provide tremendous support to critical social movements in exposing and challenging, through non-violent channels such as peaceful protests and industrial action…the structures of economic injustice that perpetuate global economic equalities and extreme poverty” (Shaw, 2012: 180). In the second section, the quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis of the African, British, French and the US media on the historic Africa-EU Lisbon Summit of 7-9 December 2007 demonstrated that news frames were dominated by issues of national interest and pretentious human rights more than concerns of global partnership for development (Shaw, 2012: 201). In the last section of this part, Shaw examines the media representation of refugees in the UK. He shows the media representation of asylum seekers and the refugees as “the other” and “not worthy of being part of the mainstream or of chosen people” (Shaw, 2012: 202) constitutes cultural violence (Shaw, 2012: 202) and an example of human wrongs journalism.

Case studies shows that making news about political violence cannot be alone considered as human rights journalism and such a
journalism should involve making news about structural and cultural violence by emphasizing the context of the issue at stake. Since the human rights journalism is considered in terms of the humanitarian intervention or “rights of the others” in the book, the analysis is mostly based on the Western Media representation of these groups. Therefore, the book overlooks the role of the “national/local” media in the promotion and protection of human rights, except a few examples including the media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain. Although case studies point out global political-economic imbalances, it is not considered how the ownership structure and institutional limitations of the media outlets shape news production and therefore, media coverage.

In brief, Shaw skillfully engages with relevant human rights literature as well as communication literature and point out future directions for human rights journalism. Since the research in the field of human rights is dominated by law, Shaw’s contribution to gradually emerging literature on communication and human rights, by highlighting the vital role of the media for the promotion and protection of human rights, is significant.

Reference