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**UNBALANCED IMAGES AND INAPPROPRIATE
RESPONSES : HOW THREE WESTERN NEWSPAPERS
MISREPRESENTED THE 1992-3 SOMALIAN FAMINE**

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ABSTRACT

There is widespread agreement among media analysts that the media in capitalist societies, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom, present "news" in particular ways which favour certain readings of events over others. Whether this is an explicit or implicit act is open to debate. Regardless, the portrayal of events in the developing world, such as the tragic famine in Somalia in 1992-3, are not quarantined from this process. Consequently, the images of the developing world created in the West by the mainstream media are often highly distorted.

This situation has serious ramifications as it is influential in determining the type and extent of development considered appropriate by the West for the developing world, and the assistance and aid provided. If Western understanding of the events and issues in the developing world is based on the one-sided images transmitted by the media, then this knowledge is incomplete and decisions taken on the basis of this knowledge will not meet the needs of the societies concerned. Therefore, it is not surprising that the history of Western aid for the developing world has been one of incompetence, errors and inappropriate responses.

This thesis provides a critical insight into how and why the Western media works explicitly to shape the "news" we see by analysing how three newspapers, two from the United Kingdom and one from the United States, presented their coverage of the 1992-3 Somalian famine. This analysis, it is hoped, will deepen the reader's understanding of the role of the media in development matters, will alert the reader to the need to adopt a critical approach to media treatment of these matters and will provide the reader with knowledge and resources to assist in the development of such an approach. The adoption of a critical approach to media stereotyping and manipulation will be beneficial in that it will lead to a better understanding of developing world societies and more meaningful interaction between these societies and the West.

PREFACE

In 1986, after completing a BA degree in my home town of Sydney, Australia, I obtained a journalism cadetship on a daily newspaper, the now-defunct *Sun*. I entered journalism with ideals which I presumed would be held by all reporters, namely a commitment to accurately reflect and report on the events and issues in society. Shortly after I commenced work, however, an incident occurred which shocked me.

I had been posted to the finance desk of the *Sun*, and mainly reported on financial matters, my work including interviews with many representatives of industry and commerce. After two months, I decided to write an article about foreign ownership of Australian companies. An important component of my story was an interview with a professor of economics, Ted Wheelwright, of the University of Sydney. I submitted my finished copy to the finance editor for checking, as per the norm in daily reporting. Imagine my consternation, then, when the editor shortly afterwards began raging about the "commie" quoted in my story. Unlike all my other stories, this one did not appear in the *Sun*. While it was acceptable to quote representatives of industry and commerce, including many from the far right of the political spectrum, it was not acceptable to quote anyone left of centre, even those such as Professor Wheelwright with impeccable credentials. I soon learned that it was pointless to write stories which detoured from what was an obviously pre-set editorial line.

From that day, I have had a fascination for the intricate workings of the media in capitalist societies. My entire working life in the media, including reporting and sub-editing on newspapers and magazines in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, has confirmed my view that the media do not present a "balanced" picture of society but, instead, through the explicit choice of stories, by style, placement, emphasis, omission and exaggeration, actively distort the "real". Nowhere, I believe, is this distortion more blatant than in reporting about the developing world.

I base my argument as to this final point on a unique experience that I was fortunate enough to undertake. In May, 1987, I quit the *Sun* and set out on a personal journey of discovery that would last until December, 1993, and take me to many of the world's "developing" areas, including Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. I also travelled and worked in North America and Europe. During this time, I was socially and politically awakened to the vibrant and resourceful nature of the people of the developing world, as well as to the issues of colonialism, neo-colonialism and multinational penetration, which I concluded served actively to depress development in these areas. Accordingly, I became concerned at the contribution of Western media coverage to the poor and negative perception of most Westerners regarding the issues and events of the developing world. A particularly compelling catalyst in awakening me to the media's distortions was the coverage of the 1990-1 Gulf War. I had spent two weeks travelling around Iraq in May-June, 1990, six weeks before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and thus had some experience of Iraq and its people. The subsequent media misrepresentation of the affair, particular the marginalisation and treatment of the Iraqi people, appalled me. The systematic bias in reporting of the Gulf War, coupled with my readings of works by Noam Chomsky, Edward S. Herman and John Pilger, convinced me of the importance of raising awareness of Western media distortions so as to counterbalance the negative portrayals of the developing world contained in their presentations.

Hopefully, then, this thesis will provide readers in the West and elsewhere with the knowledge and tools to approach their interpretations of Western media coverage of the developing world with a much more cynical and critical eye. In doing so, Western attitudes to the developing world, including the nature and structure of global economic, social and political relationships, can be challenged - a significant step towards eradicating global inequality and underdevelopment.

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