



POLIS

Rescue or report?

The ethical and editorial dilemmas of crisis journalism

A Polis Report By Petra Olsson

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Introduction

Journalists usually try to be observers, but recently something has changed. We now increasingly see journalists living the story rather than just telling it. Is this good or bad news?

Discussions around journalists getting involved are nothing new. The debate was reignited during the devastating 2010 Haiti earthquake, when we saw journalists such as CNN's Anderson Cooper intervening to rescue a boy.¹ Some medical correspondents started to act as surgeons.² The BBC journalist Matthew Price found himself helping a woman who was about to give birth.

Recently, news organisations covering the 'refugee crisis', a major humanitarian story with many people fleeing from war and terror, have been surprised by the emotional toll it has taken on their journalists.³ The refugee crisis has been different in the sense that many of the journalists have found themselves reporting from a position of safety about people in very difficult circumstances in their own 'back yard'. They are not always comfortable with that.

This has sparked an ethical debate about the responsibilities of journalism and the nature of 'objectivity'. It has also shaped new ways of reporting. One of the boldest examples was the Yellow Boats (Gula Båtarna) Project, a collaboration between the media company Schibsted and the Swedish NGO the Sea Rescue Society. It began in October 2015 when the two organisations teamed up to save the lives of refugees in the Mediterranean. Over six months, two boats assisted the Greek Coast Guard in lifesaving efforts. Schibsted collected money from individuals and companies to fund the operation.

The Yellow Boats campaign stirred debate because it involved journalists stepping in to participate in the migrant rescue operations, challenging the idea of the 'impartial' observer. Here, we suddenly had a media organisation not only involved in running a life saving venture but also with their journalists pulling people from the sea.

Yellow Boats is only one example where the lines between the journalist as impartial observer and the journalist as participant is becoming blurred. This report will address the challenges that this trend presents. Do we need to draw a line, and if so, where?

The first section looks at interventions during the Haiti earthquake and describes the debate that followed. By recapitulating the 2010 debate it is also possible to situate more recent cases of involvement in a wider ethical discussion.

The second section explores how the refugee crisis in Europe presents new challenges as journalists are finding themselves reporting on people in dire circumstances from a position of safety. The scale of the crisis allowed media organisations to send a mixture of people to cover the crisis who would see tragic scenes unfold in front of them.⁴ Some reporters have found it hard to report from a position of safety and decided to intervene. The section discusses different examples and the choices being made.

The third section looks at the Yellow Boats Project. The case study is based on interviews with around 15 participants of the project as well as media ethicists and researchers. The main aim is to discuss the ethical and professional dilemmas that arise when a media organisation becomes engaged in a joint journalistic and humanitarian project. Reporting on the difficulties of the campaign and ethical concerns around consent and live coverage, are some of the issues that emerged.

Above: Journalist Carina Bergfeldt was part of the Yellow Boats rescue team.

Finally, the report discusses how involvement aligns itself with different media brands. What is at stake when you get engaged in an operation as a media organisation? What sort of responsibilities comes with projects such as Yellow Boats, to follow up in the long term? In the fourth and final section, the paper also explores transparency issues and the importance of evaluations so that experiments such as Yellow Boats can serve the journalistic profession.

This report was written by Swedish journalist Petra Olsson as part of the Polis/ Journalistfonden Fellowship under the supervision of Professor Charlie Beckett at the LSE's Department of Media and Communications with research assistance from LSE MSc student Fiona Koch.⁵



¹ Raw, Anderson Cooper rescues injured boy from Haiti earthquake riot (CNN footage), [online video], 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfoiQXnbnf8>

² Farhi, Paul. 'In Haiti, reporters who double as doctors face a new balancing act'. *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/19/AR2010011904293.html>

³ Storm, Hannah. 'Emotional toll of reporting the refugee crisis surprises news organisations'. *The Guardian*, 12 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jun/12/refugee-crisis-news-organisations>

⁴ Storm, Hannah. 'Emotional toll of reporting the refugee crisis surprises news organisations'. *The Guardian*, 12 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jun/12/refugee-crisis-news-organisations>

⁵ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/Polis/Polis%20Research/ResearchFellowships.aspx>

Executive summary

There is a history of debate around the degree to which journalists should intervene in a humanitarian crisis, most recently stimulated by the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the migration crisis following the Syrian civil war.

Boundaries between NGOs and journalists are becoming blurred as they increasingly collaborate. NGOs are becoming more professionalised while news media lacks resources.

The refugee crisis has also shaped new ways of reporting. In October 2015, the media company Schibsted in Sweden teamed up with the NGO the Sea Rescue Society to save the lives of refugees in the Mediterranean. The project stirred debate because it encouraged Schibsted journalists to participate in the migrant rescue operations, challenging the idea of the 'impartial' observer.

In 2017, the Swedish public service journalist Fredrik Örnevall and two colleagues went on trial charged with people smuggling after helping a 15-year old Syrian boy from Greece to Sweden.⁶ The intervention became a major part of the documentary *Fosterland* which was broadcast in 2015, and is an example of where an individual journalist would cease reporting and instead try to solve the situation.

What is the responsibility of journalists and media organisations when reporting on humanitarian issues? Is it possible to be part of the story while still maintaining journalistic integrity?

Trustworthy and critical journalism has an important role to play in an increasingly globalised and risky world. Responsible journalism can, at its best, inform the audience of the causes and raise

awareness and stimulate a response to humanitarian crises. The concept of voice is crucial here and ideally the journalist attempts to explain the wider story through the people that are most affected. In the hands of responsible journalists, it may be possible to do this while also being part of the story.

In recent years, we have seen foreign reporting budgets decline. This is happening at a time when we need more international coverage, explaining what is happening and why. In the future, we may see more of media partnerships such as Yellow Boats, allowing journalists to gain access to a site of crisis through a joint NGO and media house collaboration. This report seeks to address the challenges with such ventures. It is important to remember that journalism and NGOs have different responsibilities.

Recommendations

- News media organisations need to discuss when and how to include interventions by individual journalists. Small interventions can add a human element to a story, but should remain a footnote to the real story about those who are most affected. Who is the story is about – is it about the journalist who is performing the rescuing act or is it about the people who are suffering and why they are finding themselves in that particular situation? Public service journalists need to be especially careful when including interventions and only do it when it is necessary to tell the story.
- Editorial guidelines can be a support for journalists finding themselves in tricky situations where they are tempted to intervene. Media companies need to have a constant dialogue with staff about where to draw the line. These are not questions that can be handled only at a purely individual or ad hoc level.
- Before embarking on media collaborations where journalists are encouraged to get involved, it is important to discuss how involvement aligns itself with the brand. It might make less sense, for example, for a public service media organisation to be involved.
- The media organisation needs to closely scrutinize the NGO it is thinking of collaborating with. How does the values of the NGO align with the values of the media organisation? What is at stake when it comes to trustworthiness?
- The news organisation needs to plan and even rehearse scenarios, where staff will need to choose between journalism and advocacy. Those conversations should be had ahead of time. The news organisation should let the partner know what their priorities are going to be in different situations.
- Ensure that the people reported upon really feel able to say no to interviews. Introduce a rule of thumb when it comes to the timing of interviews. If necessary, consult an experienced NGO on ethical issues.
- Discussions around how to get consent, live coverage and how to handle filming should be had ahead of time. Take a step back and consider whether there are ways to tell the story without becoming heavily involved, as it may be hard to reconcile standards.
- If the partnering NGO has little experience of running international humanitarian operations, consult an experienced NGO about care of staff and crisis management plans.
- Transparency: Tell the audience how the reporting is done and articulate your approach and how your point of view impacts the information you report. Make clear how you attempt to follow up on the story in the long term. Any form of financing needs to be transparent. Allow an independent evaluator who was not affiliated with the project to evaluate it and be transparent with the results by sharing them with the audience, participants and colleagues.

6 Crouch, David. 'Do I regret it? Not for a second': Swedish journalist goes on trial for helping refugees.' *The Guardian*. 25 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/25/swedish-journalist-on-trial-people-smuggling-refugees-fredrik-ornevall>

1. HAITI: changing norms in disaster reporting

What is an intervention?

Simply going somewhere to report on a story as a journalist can be seen as an intervention in itself, as you never know how your presence is going to affect how events unfold. This is why journalists traditionally have been trained to be passive observers. But sometimes the human instinct kicks in, especially when reporting on humanitarian issues where the suffering can be overwhelming.

What should you do? Get on with the job or start to help people around you? The experienced foreign correspondent and international editor at Channel 4 News, Lindsey Hilsum, says she is prepared to cross the line:

“If I can help, I do. If I can’t, I apologise. It’s usually the latter and one does not feel good about it. Sometimes the best you can do is alert aid agencies if you find people who need help that you could not provide.”⁷

Intervening when on assignment is one thing, to include it in the coverage is quite another. Traditionally, the media industry has been cautious when it comes to including footage with reporters helping out. But during recent years we have seen more examples of journalists living the story rather than just telling it.

Interventions by medical correspondents

The reporting from the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010 sparked discussions around involvement.⁸ As Steve Hewlett of BBC Radio 4’s Media Show put it back in 2010:

“Inevitably perhaps, with a humanitarian disaster of such magnitude and the media coverage that has come with it, questions have been raised over not

just the volume but the style and the nature of the media presence of Haiti.”⁹

Had the reporters succumbed to the temptation to intervene and become part of the story themselves? With interventions by CNN’s Anderson Cooper and medical correspondents, the answer seemed to be ‘yes’. The Washington Post reported how for the first time “all of the major [US] domestic TV news networks have deployed doctor-reporters to the scene of a natural disaster, producing a dramatic kind of participatory journalism.”¹⁰

We are not simply talking about intervening to help but also about crossing the line and be an active participant in the story with the power to treat and report on patients. CBS’s Dr. Jennifer Ashton gave

first hand accounts on what it was like treating those seriously injured.¹¹ CNN’s medical correspondent Dr Sanjay Gupta was also active in Haiti, treating a baby with a head laceration in front of the cameras, and later operating on a girl who had been taken aboard an American aircraft carrier.¹²

The media ethicist Stephen J.A. Ward said he understood that offering medical assistance made for dramatic scenes, but that this has to be treated very carefully. “Emotion-based” reporting had its place, but it can become manipulative and obscure the larger picture.¹³



⁷ Email interview with Lindsey Hilsum, international editor at Channel 4 News, October 2016

⁸ *The Media Show*, Radio 4: BBC [online radio program], 27 January, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00q3kwo>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Farhi, Paul. ‘In Haiti, reporters who double as doctors face a new balancing act’. *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/19/AR2010011904293.html>

¹¹ Ashton: *On the front lines of Haiti*, [online video], 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSQ8WSYvGQI>

¹² Farhi, Paul. ‘In Haiti, reporters who double as doctors face a new balancing act’. *The Washington Post*, 20 January 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/19/AR2010011904293.html>

¹³ *Ibid.*



Left and above: The BBC's London office.

Photo: Petra Olsson

Conflicts of interest

Nancy Snyderman, chief medical editor at the NBC News at the time, also spent time treating patients in Haiti. She acknowledges potential ethical dilemmas:

"Of course, let's start with patient privacy. When you walk into a disaster there is nothing to guard a patient's privacy and what their condition is, or their face broadcast around the world. These are people at their most vulnerable. And it is an invasion that I think when done correctly can explain human pathos and tell a story. And if there has been grandstanding, or look at me, or aren't I the center of the attention, then that to me is very much crossing the line."¹⁴

Snyderman admits that normally she would agree with those critics who say that reporters should be just reporters. In Haiti, however, both her worlds collided, and when someone said to her, "you are a doctor, we need you" she felt that it would have been impossible to live with herself if she was to respond "sorry, I am just a journalist."¹⁵

As the cases from Haiti have shown, those like Snyderman who try to be both journalist and doctor may also be criticised for going back to the bureau or hotel to file a story when they could have kept working:

"But when I was able to get onto the broadcast that goes out to eleven million people, and say 'Orthopedic surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, you need to get on aeroplanes now and get here', that, to me, may have had a bigger impact"¹⁶

So Snyderman is also defending the traditional journalist justification of reporting, where the aim is to raise awareness and hope to provoke a wider humanitarian response to human suffering. However, the participatory approach in Haiti was criticised by doctors such as Steve Miles of the University of Minnesota Center for Bioethics:

"It's worse than self-promotion. It's exploiting the suffering of Haitians for the PR goals of their employers. They should not be reporting on their own work. That's a classic PR tactic: using humanitarian aid as a public relations device, in order to drive up ratings for their network."¹⁷

Public service journalists' struggle with guilt

Journalists without a medical background and the lack of skills to intervene struggle with guilt. BBC journalist Matthew Price was one of the first British journalists reporting from Haiti:

"I suppose actually what you could do is say 'Right, forget the BBC. We have been sent here at license fee payers' expense, we have been sent here around the world to do a job, but forget all that. Let's actually put down the camera, the microphone, the notepads and start helping somebody clear a bit of rubble, or, let's start helping people put a sheet up over their heads'. The hideous answer to the general point 'there is nothing I can do', actually is 'there is something you could do, you could just stop doing your job and help people'.¹⁸

¹⁴ The Media Show, Radio 4: BBC [online radio program]. 27 January, 2010. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00q3kvw0>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Schwitzer, Gary. 'An examination of the ethics in doctor/reporter involvement in Haiti'. Minnpost. 22 January 2010. <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2010/01/examination-ethics-doctor-reporter-involvement-haiti>

¹⁸ The Media Show, Radio 4: BBC [online radio program]. 27 January, 2010. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00q3kvw0>

With this conflict in mind, when confronted with questions from Haitians, such as “What can you do for me?”, Price’s initial answer would be that he is not a doctor. However, he sees real value in explaining why the job of a journalist is also valuable.

“What I am is a journalist and that I genuinely hope that by taking the interview that you have just given us and putting it out on air in Britain and around the world, that there will be people who see that, who will then be encouraged either to give money at a basic level or there will be politicians who see that, who will be encouraged to send more help from their national government, and that in turn will make a difference.”¹⁹

BBC-team careful to keep the balance

Photojournalism in particular can play an important role in conveying humanitarian crises to distant audiences. Coverage of suffering often boosts the wider humanitarian response.²⁰ But there are times when journalists have to temporarily step back from the role as observers and help people who are in a desperate situation. Matthew Price and his team found themselves in such a situation in

Haiti. They had been filming a Haitian family, and when they got back to the place in which the family was living, the sister of the man who the team had been filming with was heavily pregnant and had gone into labour. They started to walk her through the rubble when she collapsed. The producer quickly understood that the woman would have her baby soon, and the BBC team took the woman to hospital. The camera man kept doing his job, but Matthew Price made it clear that he did not want any shots of him helping the woman:

“The things that went through my mind when we got into the edit, and also when we got her to hospital, were, although

we are there and this is happening and we are not doing it to make ‘Better television’, a viewer could watch it, and think to themselves, ‘There they go, the BBC making themselves try and look like the saviours in an earthquake situation’.”²¹

The team felt that the balancing act was about not making it look like it was the BBC who had saved the woman, and still not take the reference to the intervention out entirely. In the end, the story would be about a woman trying to give birth seven days after the earthquake and in the most appalling circumstances. There was a reference to the intervention by the team, but the story would be about the woman, not the BBC, said Price.²²

Right: BBC journalist Matthew Price.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hutchison, E., Bleiker, R., Campbell, D. *Imaging Catastrophe: The Politics of Representing Humanitarian Crises*. In *Negotiating Relief: The Dialectics of Humanitarian Space*. London/New York: Hurst & Co/Columbia University Press, 2014.

²¹ The Media Show, Radio 4: BBC [online radio program]. 27 January, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00q3kw0>

²² Ibid.



2. The refugee crisis presents new challenges

Reporting from a position of safety

With the refugee crisis in Europe, journalists are finding themselves reporting on people in dire circumstances from a position of safety.²³ Phil Chetwynd, global editor in chief for Agence France-Presse explained how even experienced foreign correspondents used to covering stories in war zones have found it very hard to report on the thousands of people from beyond Europe's borders now walking through a familiar landscape:

"The thing people have found very hard is that there is no danger to you at all, yet you're watching boats being overturned and people drowning".²⁴

Jonathan Paterson, BBC World newsgathering deployments editor, says the scale of the crisis allowed his organisation to send a mixture of people to cover the crisis, from veteran correspondents to those new to foreign deployment. This was a story the BBC had never experienced before:

"The number of children, the number of families was really starting to impact people, particularly when you started to see all the drowning. So you had all those people who had never experienced it before, whether they were seasoned war correspondents or people who were fresh, they had never experienced this movement of people and they would see these really tragic scenes unfold in front of them."²⁵

In a blog post BBC Hague correspondent Anna Holligan described a case where the human instinct kicks in.²⁶ She began covering the refugee crisis for the BBC in 2015, travelling to Greece to document the huge number of people landing on European shores. She describes how the team was filming one overcrowded dinghy as it careered into rocks close to the shores of Lesbos. As the people got

out, one young Afghan man gashed his thigh and blood started oozing from an open wound. The reporter was able to tie a tourniquet. The British volunteers the team had been filming were afraid to give the man a lift, as in the preceding days locals had been arrested and accused of people smuggling for carrying refugees in their cars. After the team had filed the story – including the intervention – the BBC World newsgathering deployments editor Jonathan Paterson called back. Holligan explains:

"He understood why we'd taken the wounded refugee to hospital. But given that – by the time we'd arrived – Hassan seemed in fine spirits, our completed piece looked as though we had crossed the line."²⁷

The team edited out the intervention.

Adding interventions or not? A dilemma at the BBC

The BBC is particularly careful telling stories that would make the reporter the main focus as they have a particular editorial culture based on their status as a public service media organisation funded by the licence fee and with a duty of impartiality in all its reporting. Reporting on the refugee crisis created a discussion within the BBC as to where to draw the line. BBC World newsgathering deployments editor Jonathan Paterson says the official line is to keep a distance:

"Speaking for the BBC, I don't think we should intervene in broader issues, in terms of helping individuals make their way from point A to point B, or providing coverage on one particular charity that is doing one particular work more than any other. I think that that shows a degree of partiality which I don't think is appropriate".²⁸

Left: Jonathan Paterson, BBC World newsgathering deployments editor.

²³ Storm, Hannah. 'Emotional toll of reporting the refugee crisis surprises news organisations'. *The Guardian*. 12 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jun/12/refugee-crisis-news-organisations>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with Jonathan Paterson, BBC World newsgathering deployments editor, October 2016

²⁶ Holligan, Anna. 'Reporting the migrant crisis: Too many stories, too little time'. BBC blogs [web blog]. 23 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/1521b337-138a-41ea-8213-9b47c0baeb37>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Interview with Jonathan Paterson, BBC World newsgathering deployments editor, October 2016



BBC journalist Matthew Price still believes there is a limit to how much a journalist should make themselves part of the story but some of the experiences he had when reporting on the refugee crisis have made him reconsider.²⁹

When reporting on the refugee crisis in Hungary in September 2015, he was covering the march of migrants from Budapest railway station to the Austrian border. The team walked with the refugees for several hours along the motorway and Matthew Price was sending out on social media what was happening. A woman who was walking along was pushing a baby push chair with a baby. Her young daughter and son was walking alongside the woman when the son suddenly collapsed and said that he could go no further. Both mother and daughter broke down and burst into tears. Matthew Price reported on the story exactly as it unfolded – that the family had collapsed, showing the toll it had taken on families and that a couple of strangers had helped them:

“One had carried the boy on his shoulders and the other had helped push the push chair, and the mother held the hand of the daughter and they continued to walk until they caught up with the other refugees. And on social media I had people criticising me, saying ‘Why didn’t you intervene? What were you thinking? Why didn’t you help them?’”³⁰

In fact, the two ‘strangers’ that helped them were Matthew Price and his producer, but they did not think that the intervention was relevant to the story they were telling. To Price, the relevance of the story was the toll it was taking on families, and the end of the story was that they got some help and carried on. The incident has made Price reconsider the way you tell stories when you do make an intervention:

“The way that I interact with people on social media makes me pretty convinced that people want to hear the full story, and if you have intervened and helped somebody, or if you had a certain feeling about something, and that forms part of the report, then I think that adds to the authenticity of the reporting, and my instinct tells me that the consumers of news like that.”³¹

So what does this mean in practice? If the audience likes to see journalists telling stories about intervening, isn’t this something that we should start to see more? To a degree, yes, says Price:

“But with the caveat that it is not you, the journalist, who is the story. It is not you the journalist who is advancing with the Iraqi forces across the desert. It is not you, the journalist, who is going to pick up the refugees and help them, that is not the story. The story is always the war, or the earthquake or the refugees. If there is, at some point in the story, an intervention by a journalist, then yes, absolutely report on it in a way that we probably would not have reported it twenty years ago, but don’t let it become the story.”³²



29 Interview with Matthew Price, BBC journalist, October 2016

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.



Photo: SVT

Above: A 15-year old boy from Syria asked Fredrik Örnevall to bring him along when making the TV documentary Fosterland.

Journalist involvement – a sensitive issue

The Swedish documentary series *Fosterland* featured a dramatic case of intervention that appears to go beyond the examples given so far. Public service journalist Fredrik Örnevall went to various countries to talk to people who call themselves nationalists in order to understand their thinking. At one point in the documentary, a Syrian boy asks the team to save him from the situation he was in. The boy said he would try to get out of Greece by jumping onto a moving truck, and Fredrik Örnevall and two colleagues decided to bring the boy with them back to Sweden. The team was reported for suspected people smuggling after helping the boy from Greece to Sweden and was called for questioning by the Swedish police in March 2016.³³

The reporter felt he had done the right thing: "I know what we did and I would have done the same today. How

can you regret helping a terrified boy pleading for my help?"³⁴ Örnevall and his two colleagues were later charged with people smuggling.³⁵ In February 2017, the district court in Malmö found the three guilty of people smuggling and gave them a suspended sentence and community service. The journalist said he would appeal the ruling.³⁶

In the debate that followed Ingrid Thörnqvist, head of foreign news at SVT at the time, said that the public broadcaster had questioned the act while still understanding the actions at a personal level.³⁷

"We are all sometimes confronted with extremely difficult choices. SVT had to say, 'This is nothing that SVT can stand behind'. He [Fredrik Örnevall] didn't ask for permission either, he just did it because he felt it was something he had to do. But this also raised a discussion among other foreign reporters that would say, 'If I do not save people when I'm out and find someone in a desperate situation, what will I look like then? As a cold-hearted someone, should we do like this or not? What is our role?'"³⁸

In a newspaper article Örnevall encouraged people to become engaged and ask themselves what they could do to help refugees arriving in Sweden, using his own experience of helping the Syrian boy as an example.³⁹ When a production is being funded by the licence fee, as in this case, it is important to think about whether there are other ways to raise awareness about the issues without the journalist himself having to become an active advocate.

Fredrik Örnevall not only crossed a line, but SVT also decided to include the journey with the boy in the coverage. But the documentary has been awarded a 'Kristallen' for Best current affairs program, a prestigious Swedish tv-award.

Following the decision to include the intervention, SVT has made an offer to pay the legal expenses for the tv-team, which has created further discussion.⁴⁰ Ingrid Thörnqvist of the SVT foreign news division was not involved in the editorial decisions of *Fosterland*. She is hesitant to introduce strict guidelines for the journalists to follow, despite the legal case.



33 Kvist, André. "SVT-reportern Fredrik Örnevall kallad till förhör." *SVT Nyheter*. 15 March 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/skane/svt-reporter-kallad-till-forhor>

34 Ibid.

35 Grönlund, Erik and Backlund, Gösta. "Efter *Fosterland*: SVT-journalisten Fredrik Örnevall åtalas." *SVT Nyheter*. 17 November 2016, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/skane/efter-serien-fosterland-svt-journalisten-fredrik-ornevall-atalas>

36 "Journalist convicted of smuggling for helping boy migrate to Sweden." *Agence France-Presse*. 9 February 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/09/swedish-journalist-convicted-of-smuggling-for-helping-syrian-boy-migrate>

37 "Meg 2016 – Journalist eller aktivist?" *SVT Play* (online video). 08 April 2016, <http://www.svtplay.se/klipp/7695596/meg-2016-journalist-eller-aktivist?info=visa>

38 Ibid.

39 Örnevall, Fredrik. "Det är nu vi kan börja göra skillnad." *Sydsvenskan*. 11 September 2015, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2015-09-11/fredrik-ornevall-det-ar-nu-vi-kan-borja-gora-skillnad>

40 Grönberg, Anna. "SVT: Känner ansvar för de medverkande." *SVT Nyheter*. 10 February 2017, <http://www.svt.se/kultur/medier/kanner-ett-ansvar-for-de-medverkande>

"I know that the BBC has a lot of guidelines and that it can be a support for journalists. But I think it will be difficult to introduce detailed regulations as many different situations can arise. Instead, I think it is important to have a constant dialogue with your co-workers."⁴¹

The documentary Exodus, produced for the BBC by Keo Films, has been praised for giving voice to refugees. The team gave mobile technology to migrants for them to tell their own stories of their dangerous journeys into Europe. The journalists had instructions from the BBC not to intervene when out in the field, if it was not a life or death situation. For projects such as Exodus, editorial guidelines can be a help for the production team, who would meet a lot of people in dire situations, while also ensuring that the audience get to know the true story. Itab Azzam, co-producer at Keo Films explains:

"People need to know what is happening, and if you keep intervening, you are changing the story. We would be asked all the time if we could help people, but we had to say 'We are just filmmakers'."⁴²

'Humanitarian Orientated' Journalism

In March 2016, the British Press Awards named British journalist Ian Birrell as Best Foreign Reporter demonstrating that the media business seems to enjoy interventions as much as parts of the audience. In the Mail on Sunday article that won Birrell the prize he describes how he participated in a migrant rescue operation in the Mediterranean.⁴³

Ian Birrell had been contacted by the medical organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and offered a place to watch a rescue mission. He had no training in rescue activities before going onboard. Getting involved in the rescue had not been part of the plan. But as Birrell and MOAS spotted a boat packed with migrants, 30 miles off the Libyan port city of Zuwara, the journalist was determined to join the team. He pulled on protective clothing and soon found himself "skimming across the water on a high-speed inflatable boat":

"I wanted to get as close as possible to the story, which is what I always want to do, and when we saw a boat filled with, I think it was 414 people drifting on the sea, I wanted to get out as close as possible to the story, which was to rescue on the boat itself, rather than staying on the main rescue ship."⁴⁴

In the piece, the journalist describes the sense of panic on the boat. People were rushing and Birrell was told by the rescuers to tell people not to rush to the sides. There was now a fine balancing act between rescuing and reporting going on, and the journalist had to deal with the situation and only make notes at the very end of it, when he was safe. In the final piece Ian Birrell describes the destinies of those he had met on the boat.⁴⁵ So what sort of affect did the intervention have on the coverage? Does Birrell think it made the coverage more sympathetic towards refugees?

"I think that my articles have always been sympathetic towards refugees, I am naturally sympathetic, I am a humanitarian-orientated journalist. I believe that my job when I am abroad is to delve as deeply as possible to try and understand what is going on and then report that back, regardless of any conventional wisdoms or whatever people think".⁴⁶



Photo: Petra Olsson

Above: Ian Birrell, foreign reporter and columnist.

41 Interview with Ingrid Thörnqvist, senior foreign news editor SVT, December 2016

42 Interview with Itab Azzam, co-producer Exodus, October 2016

43 Birrell, Ian. "Voyage of the damned: Beaten into the bowels of a fetid floating coffin, just an hour from certain death – the pitiful human cargo fleeing jihad and slavery who our man helped save". *Mail on Sunday*, 18 July 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3166490/Voyage-damned-Beaten-bowels-fetid-floating-coffin-just-hour-certain-death-pitiful-human-cargo-fleeing-jihad-slavery-man-helped-save.html>

44 Interview with Ian Birrell, freelance journalist, October 2016

45 Birrell, Ian. "Voyage of the damned: Beaten into the bowels of a fetid floating coffin, just an hour from certain death – the pitiful human cargo fleeing jihad and slavery who our man helped save". *Mail on Sunday*, 18 July 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3166490/Voyage-damned-Beaten-bowels-fetid-floating-coffin-just-hour-certain-death-pitiful-human-cargo-fleeing-jihad-slavery-man-helped-save.html>

46 Interview with Ian Birrell, freelance journalist, October 2016



Photo: Petra Olsson

Left: Polly Markandya, head of communications Médecins Sans Frontières in the UK.

Polly Markandya, head of communications at MSF UK, thinks that the engaged approach probably contributed to getting the piece published:

"I think that he probably got the space in the paper because it was a first person story that had a hands-on element, and before you get too cynical about that I will just say that there is an English expression 'All hands on deck'.⁴⁷

For the last two summers in 2015 and 2016, the MSF have had rescue boats out on the central Mediterranean with beds for journalists onboard. One of the major reasons for taking journalists

is to try and draw attention to what is happening in order to generate more of a response on a policy level.

"Just putting it on our own website is not really going to do the business so bringing along media was a part of the strategy at the beginning."⁴⁸

Seeing journalists getting involved in media coverage seems to be a logical consequence of this, and perhaps also a media strategy by the MSF who would like sympathetic coverage.

"A journalist called Bel Trew who was on one of our ships where there was a big rescue and actually made it to the front of the Times and she was holding one of the patients which was very ill and dying. And that first person narrative of being part of that rescue put it on the front page

and that personal angle gave the writing a power and a strength that maybe if she would have been just an observer and not a participant it wouldn't have had."⁴⁹

Ian Birrell is well known in the UK for being critical of the aid industry, but cannot see a problem with him getting involved in work by an organisation whose work he believes in. He can, however, see a problem with journalists getting more and more reliant on aid agencies as budgets for foreign journalism decline. "The aid groups are very powerful players and we need to hold them to account just as we need to hold other players to account," said Birrell.⁵⁰

The key is transparency and openness and that the journalist is still allowed to be critical. It is important to let the reader know that one has travelled with an aid organisation for a certain report, just as one would when being embedded with the military. As journalists we have to be honest with our readers, listeners and watchers and describe the aid organisations through that prism.

3. Case study: Yellow Boats – a new form of involvement

How a team of journalists rescued refugees in the Mediterranean

Most cases of involvement discussed so far have been examples of individual journalists becoming involved when the human instinct has kicked in. Yellow Boats is quite different in that sense. Here, we had a major Swedish media organisation, teaming up with a Swedish NGO, the Sea Rescue Society, to save the lives of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean together. Yellow Boats was awarded Best Brand Awareness

Campaign by the International News Media Association in 2016.

The project took off in October 2015 when the organisations teamed up to save the lives of refugees in the Mediterranean sea. According to Schibsted, the team behind Yellow Boats soon became the first NGO to be authorized to assist the Greek Coast Guard in crucial lifesaving efforts. The two boats, provided by the Sea Rescue Society, were stationed in Samos until Spring 2016, when the migrant route changed due to the new agreement between Turkey and the EU.

During the half year long project members of the media staff of the two Schibsted-owned daily newspapers Svenska Dagbladet and Aftonbladet went to Greece to assist the Swedish NGO in the rescuing work. The journalists were instructed to focus on rescuing work first, doing journalism came secondly, raising interesting questions around ethics and trustworthiness of the reporting when journalists set out to be both.

⁴⁷ Interview with Polly Markandya, head of communications at MSF UK, October 2016

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Interview with Ian Birrell, freelance journalist, October 2016

Right: The Yellow Boats on one of its first rescue missions in Greece. The journalists onboard were confronted with the realities of doing both reporting and rescuing work.

The blurring of the lines between NGOs and journalists

When researcher Glenda Cooper first started to look into the blurred lines between NGOs and journalism ten years ago, there had been a lot of movement between the two, as many journalists became press officers for aid agencies, and had started to act as proxy 'foreign correspondents' themselves:

"We have all seen how foreign reporting has been starved of cash in recent years. Journalists would use aid agency footage, or pieces written by aid agency press officers and it wasn't always made clear to the audience that the person's byline or the person who had filmed was actually from an aid agency."⁵¹

Things have improved somewhat since then says Cooper, but now we are seeing aid agencies moving into social media as well as cooperating with journalists.

Media companies are partnering up with NGOs and aid agencies in various forms. The Guardian teamed up with the NGO African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) for a long-term development reporting project called 'Katine' where a village in Uganda became a live experiment. The Guardian also hosts a global development website sponsored by the Gates Foundation.

Charlie Beckett, professor at the London School of Economics (LSE), has addressed the problems with news media's relationship with NGOs and how they may become mutually reliant.⁵² There is always that risk that media become a marketing tool for the aid agencies.

"You partner up with them because you want to highlight an issue and you team up with them in a longer term way. Obviously there is a danger of capture. If you for example work with Save the Children and you are going to report on refugees, inevitably you will then give the Save the Children's spokesperson airtime. There is always that danger that you will be softer on them, you will see it from their point of view, and that is not always a good thing."⁵³

The Yellow Boats project – a case study of crossing the line

The image of the dead Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, lying face down on the beach of Bodrum, hardly escaped social medias. In many parts of the world people started to ask themselves what they could do, and so did staff at the news publisher Schibsted in Sweden.

Magnus Ringman, HR-director at Schibsted Publishing at the time, explained how colleagues would ask what could be done to the situation:

"A common response would be to support an organisation in the area, such as MSF or Save the Children. I have always been an admirer of the Sea Rescue Society and the work they are doing in Sweden. I was asked to call them to see whether they would like for us to put a boat in the Mediterranean and rescue lives together."⁵⁴

Left: Charlie Beckett, director of the media think-tank Polis.

51 Interview with Glenda Cooper, researcher at City University of London, October 2016

52 Beckett, Charlie and Fenyo, Alice. *Connecting to the world – how global campaigners can be more effective in engaging online audiences*. London: International Broadcasting Trust, 2012, p. 12.

53 Interview with Charlie Beckett, LSE professor and founding director of the media think tank POLIS, October 2016

54 Interview with Magnus Ringman, project leader of Yellow Boats, Schibsted, September 2016



Photo: Malin Hoelstedt/S&D

Photo: Petra Olsson

Magnus Ringman admits that they realised there would be problems and difficulties but instead wanted to look at the possibilities. With a project such as Yellow Boats, the Sea Rescue Society would be able to save lives and Schibsted would reach out to the Swedish people through their various channels.

By the end of October, 2015, two lifeboats had been driven through Europe to the port of Piraeus in Greece. Schibsted collected money from individuals and companies to be able to operate the boats. In total, Schibsted claims to have collected between eight and nine million Swedish Kronor (SEK) to the rescue operations. The operations in total would cost around 14 million SEK, according to the Sea Rescue Society. In that way the journalism that was being produced also financed the rescue operations.

By the end of the campaign the two organisations claimed to have saved over 1,800 lives. Although there was a determination to keep the campaign going, Yellow Boats had reached its final stage in Spring 2016, when the route for refugees had changed as a consequence of the agreement between EU and Turkey.

For the project, Schibsted and the Sea Rescue Society, had an agreement saying that Schibsted would work in favour for the Sea Rescue Society on the project. When the project had reached its final stage, there was also an evaluation carried out, but it has not been published.

Journalists had a basic course in sea safety

The journalists, who had been asked to participate, took a course in basic sea safety prior to the operations. According to Andreas Arvidsson, operative manager at the Sea Rescue Society, the journalists had three tasks:

"I was very clear and said that everyone's job onboard is to be part of the security crew. Number two was to participate in the rescue operations and third and lastly would be the role as reporter. And one thing that I learned early on was that journalists have strong integrity. When we would have those discussions I would say 'This will all fall in place once we are

in place', and it did. I never really saw that there ever was a conflict of interest."⁵⁵

Of the seven interviewed journalists, news reporters and photographers, a couple were experienced foreign correspondents, whereas others had little or no experience of international crisis reporting.

The Svenska Dagbladet journalist Gunilla von Hall, an experienced foreign correspondent, was one of the journalists who saw risks with blending the roles:

"I remember saying that there are risks with mixing the roles, to become a participant. What if something unexpected happens, like if you happen to drop a baby on the floor of the boat and that child dies, just because you aren't a professional sea rescuer?"⁵⁶

Others, like the foreign correspondent Erik Wiman at Aftonbladet, felt more confident:

"Personally, I don't have a problem with it. I saw my main role as being a journalist, but while being on a life boat I need to be able to step out of my role as journalist from time to time to help."⁵⁷

Erik Wiman's colleague, the Aftonbladet photographer Peter Wixtröm, had doubts:

"We were very uncertain before going. We talked quite a lot about it, how to perform and so on. But once there I felt more comfortable. You don't just stand there observing while someone is drowning."⁵⁸



Above: The rescue team caught sight of some refugees standing on a cliff away from the shore.

Likewise Svenska Dagbladet photographer Malin Hoelstad:

"I realised that it was going to be a very unusual situation for us photographers as we would have to put the camera aside. You can't hold it in your hands when you are supposed to help. A news reporter can always memorise and write it down later, whereas I as a photographer would be busy helping during the rescues. It was frustrating to think about how we would miss out on all these images."⁵⁹

The dilemma of reporting on the difficulties of the campaign

It had turned out that sufficient preparations had not been made to be able to operate the boats directly from the start. The Greek authorities questioned the initiative, and particularly the fact that journalists would be onboard, which delayed the authorisation process for the NGO.

Magnus Ringman, the project leader at Schibsted, admits that the structure of the project made the Greeks suspicious initially. "Here came a team of jolly Swedes with their boats who wanted to rescue people.

⁵⁵ Interview with Andreas Arvidsson, operative manager at the Sea Rescue Society, September 2016

⁵⁶ Interview with Gunilla von Hall, journalist at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

⁵⁷ Interview with Erik Wiman, journalist at Aftonbladet, September 2016

⁵⁸ Interview with Peter Wixtröm, photographer at Aftonbladet, September 2016

⁵⁹ Interview with Malin Hoelstad, photographer at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016



Gunilla von Hall was one of the journalists who would report on the initial difficulties. Today she feels that she kept her journalistic integrity when reporting on the project, but the experience left her feeling that it is important to protect the traditional role of the journalist when reporting on humanitarian issues:

“The project obviously gave us an access that we wouldn’t otherwise have had, but I still think it is important not to be attached to other interests.”⁶²

Discussing which pathway to choose

Kelly McBride, a media ethicist at the Poynter Institute, says that a project such as Yellow Boats shows that the the journalists and the NGO need to work out the ethics before embarking on ventures such as Yellow Boats:

“You have to plan out, maybe even rehearse what are those scenarios where those choices may become real and how do you expect the individuals to act in those choices.”⁶³

Sallyanne Duncan of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, thinks that we will see more media organisations doing interventions in the future and that the lines between NGOs and media organisations will become even more blurred:

“I would see it as an ethical contract between the individual news organisations and the NGOs. If we are having a news organisation paying for the hardware, then I think there has to be a contract drawn up, an ethical contract between the two.”⁶⁴

There was a contract between the NGO and Schibsted. The project leader at Schibsted refers to the document as an internal document, which makes it difficult to draw any conclusions around to what extent the journalists would operate independently. According to Magnus Ringman however, “Schibsted working in favour of the Sea Rescue Society”,⁶⁵ seems to have been the overriding principle.

The Sea Rescue Society did a fantastic job in convincing the authorities who finally would have confidence in the mission. Initially however, they would be sceptical about having journalists onboard.”⁶⁰

The delay in getting the operation running did however put the journalists in a difficult position. It may seem obvious that the journalists should report on anything of relevance, as their main responsibility is the one towards their readers. But the issue was not as straight forward as one might think. As one of the journalists would put it: “We asked ourselves, when are we going to write that this is a flop? No one wanted us to.”⁶¹ The situation is an example of where the journalists could not operate as independently as they would normally expect.

Below: The head office of the Sea Rescue Society just outside the centre of Gothenburg.



Photo: Petra Olsson

60 Interview with Magnus Ringman, project leader of Yellow Boats, Schibsted, September 2016
 61 Interview with journalist at Schibsted, September 2016
 62 Interview with Gunilla von Hall, journalist at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016
 63 Interview with Kelly McBride, media ethicist and vice president of academic programs of the Poynter Institute, October 2016
 64 Interview with Sallyanne Duncan, researcher at the University of Strathclyde, October 2016
 65 Interview with Magnus Ringman, project leader of Yellow Boats, Schibsted, September 2016

Rescuing or shooting? The photographer's dilemma

The first rescue mission Yellow Boats was sent on turned out to be one of the most dramatic ones. Svenska Dagbladets photographer Malin Hoelstad was onboard one of the boats and was immediately confronted with the realities of doing both roles:

"When they handed me the tiny body I put down my camera. It was impossible not to", she recalls in an article.⁶⁶

At the beginning of the operation, Malin Hoelstad found herself in a position where she actually could take pictures of the rescue. At first, they caught sight of some refugees standing on a cliff away from the shore:

"The sea around them is wild and foaming. Waves hurling towards the rock. Behind them the mountains stretch towards the sky, a clear blue sky. The other boat has already reached them and is attempting to bring them onboard. The refugees are waving towards us to continue. Over there, onward, into the bay! It is beautiful, in the midst of the unreal."⁶⁷

The boat is on its way into the bay when they see people in the water. A father and a little boy who are floating on a piece of wood, are being helped by the team. Malin Hoelstad describes how she would photograph the rescue activities. "We were enough people on the boats for me to take those images. It wasn't an issue at all and I could choose my professional role."⁶⁸

However, shortly afterwards, the crew saw how there were lots of people floating in the sea at a distance, and further away in the bay, even more people. Life vests, clothes, bags, a lot of rubble was floating around in the sea which made the team hesitant to approach the people in the sea as this could harm the engines of the boat. Instead, a fisherman would unload people onto the boat. Malin Hoelstad would take pictures as the fisherman was handing over a little girl to the crew. But when the girl is suddenly handed over to Malin Hoelstad, she puts the camera down in order to take the girl:

"Suddenly the cameras were just in the way. They were stuck in the life vest. I couldn't get them off, they were hanging and dangling. I almost felt captured by them. It was a completely chaotic situation. People were screaming, people everywhere needing me. And my role was to take care of them, to give them CPR."⁶⁹

The little girl who had been handed over to the photographer could not be saved. At first Malin Hoelstad did not want to give up and kept administering CPR. After a while, the captain asked her to stop. Afterwards, on a debriefing, Malin Hoelstad said "I could have done something more", but the captain insisted "No, you couldn't and it was I who told you to stop, no one else."⁷⁰ In this way, Malin Hoelstad felt that her agonies were released to a certain extent.

Her emotional account gained a lot of attention, and LSE professor Charlie Beckett says the testimony demonstrates how the journalists were put into situations they had not been in before:

"So that was where the journalist stopped being journalist for a moment and then being a human being and going back to being a journalist again. Now, I don't think there is a right or wrong about that. I think it is good if the journalist is transparent about it and even writes about the experience. In a way, that's wonderful emotionally-engaging journalism."⁷¹

Below: Photographer Andreas Bardell is carrying a child belonging to a group of refugees who had been drifting towards land in a small boat.



66 Hoelstad, Malin. 'The pictures I didn't take'. Svenska Dagbladet. 30 December 2015. <http://www.svd.se/the-pictures-i-didnt-take>

67 Ibid.

68 Interview with Malin Hoelstad, photographer at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Interview with Charlie Beckett, LSE professor and founding director of the media think tank POLIS, October 2016

However, Beckett thinks that the testimony also raises questions about the structure of the project. Here, the journalists are no longer standing to one side and looking at what is going on:

“They are standing next to, literally, the people who are doing the rescuing. You don’t stop being a journalism organisation, it’s just that you are now being a different kind of journalist organisation.”⁷²

Afterwards, Hoelstad realised that she did not have a lot of photographic material, emphasising how much of an effort this balancing act was. And after the rescue operation she noticed how she would only take photographs at a distance. “I have very few images from the activities. The text was shared a lot on social medias, and that was good. But that was a text.”⁷³

LSE professor Lilie Chouliaraki can see a value with the testimony. However, the dual role of the journalist who is doing both reporting and rescuing need to be explored in greater depth:

“With the rise of digital media and convergent news platforms, there is a broader ‘moral’ shift in journalism from ‘telling the news’ to witnessing the pain of victims. Such testimonies, whether they come from citizens, NGOs or journalists themselves, are of course important because they bring us in touch with the rawness and authenticity of human pain. However, when confronted with such a key change in crisis news, we need to ask the question What is lost in the process? What is it that we lose when a journalist drops the camera to help a child in need? Is journalism becoming something else when it becomes so closely attached to the realities it reports on?”⁷⁴

Becoming a different kind of organisation presents new responsibilities

After a rescue such as the one that Malin Hoelstad participated in, the NGO would have a debrief straight after says Andreas Arvidsson, operation manager at the Sea Rescue Society.

“We need it in order to recover mentally and that’s very important. It’s important to put the boat in order, the clothing in order, and get ourselves ready for the next rescue mission. It’s obviously a mental recovery also.”⁷⁵

Straight after the operation however, Malin Hoelstad had to file material for the newspaper:

“When I got to the hotel, people from the Sea Rescue Society were there and they knew what I had been through. They would say ‘Take a seat...’ And I was just like, ‘Okay, I will sit down for a minute’, but I was extremely stressed out, partly because all I had been through, partly because I knew it would take a long time to send the material to the newspaper.”⁷⁶

Arvidsson says the situation demonstrates the conflicts of interest:

“Mentally, I don’t think this was good for them, it must have been a great challenge. In the long term, I think it is difficult to combine. Perhaps you could have two reporters onboard where they would take turns in delivering material to the newspapers. Or, you could have a rule saying that the reporters need a respite, meaning that they will deliver material four hours after the rescue operation, at the earliest.”⁷⁷

The journalists at Schibsted got counselling before participating in Yellow Boats, and they were offered help once back in Sweden, in the same way that any foreign correspondent would receive support

after a traumatic assignment. But these operations need a specialist approach according to researcher Glenda Cooper:

“Media work very different from NGOs because they are very different organisations, but if you are going to appropriate some of that role it would be a good idea to go and ask a very experienced NGO about care of staff and crisis management plans. Journalist organisations are much better at recognising trauma amongst journalists and offering help than they used to be, but I think they are probably years behind NGOs.”⁷⁸

Dilemmas of ‘Live’ Coverage

GoPro cameras were attached to the boats to continually record the events. These are cameras used for filming extreme sports. In this context, they were used to document the rescues, both for debriefing and journalistic purposes. Photographer Peter Wixtröm says the idea was to increase immediacy:

“Some of the images are very close up, it’s raw reality. There’s going to be a compromise when it comes to quality, but the quality is also to a certain degree higher because you are getting so close to the people that are fleeing.”⁷⁹

Standing next to the people carrying out the rescue however seems to have made some of the journalists sensitive to ethical issues raised by the filming. Whereas Sofia Olsson Olsén, editor in chief at Aftonbladet, claims that Aftonbladet would use live coverage to show to their audience what the Mediterranean would look like at the time, photographer Peter Wixtröm instead recalls how he advised against:

“We had a discussion around broadcasting live and you shouldn’t dismiss it. Maybe we would be able to get a kind of drama without harming anyone, but there are risks with everything. We felt pretty quickly that it wasn’t a good idea. So much reporting is done live nowadays, and it can be fantastic if it’s done right, but it can be horribly bad when it goes wrong.”⁸⁰

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview with Malin Hoelstad, photographer at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

⁷⁴ Interview with Lilie Chouliaraki, LSE professor of Media and Communications, October 2016

⁷⁵ Interview with Andreas Arvidsson, operative manager at the Sea Rescue Society, September 2016

⁷⁶ Interview with Malin Hoelstad, photographer at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

⁷⁷ Interview with Andreas Arvidsson, operative manager at the Sea Rescue Society, September 2016

⁷⁸ Interview with Glenda Cooper, researcher at City University of London, October 2016

⁷⁹ Interview with Peter Wixtröm, photographer at Aftonbladet, September 2016

⁸⁰ Interview with Peter Wixtröm, photographer at Aftonbladet, September 2016

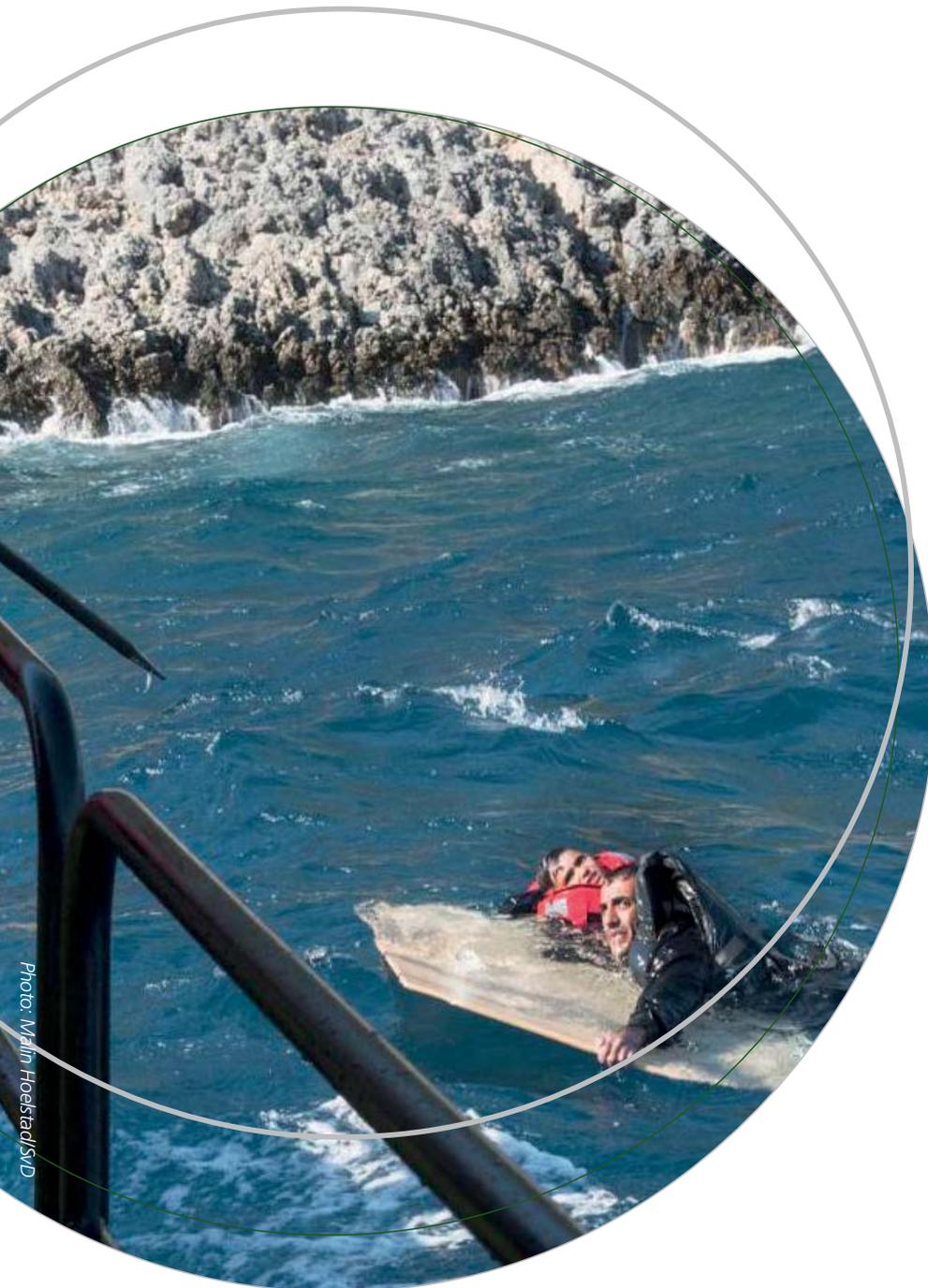


Photo: Malin Hoelstad/SVD

Above: At the beginning of the operation Malin Hoelstad could choose her professional role.

This seems to be an example of where a journalist from Aftonbladet aligned himself to the values of the NGO. Emma Forseth, press officer at the Sea Rescue Society, says that she thinks it would be unsuitable with live coverage from the operations:

“We would get children and adults onboard, sometimes without knowing if they were dead or alive. It would be incredibly wrong to film someone who wouldn’t survive. It’s very important to respect the integrity of those we help, irrespective of whether we are working in Sweden or elsewhere.”⁸¹

Collaboration raises new questions around consent

The Sea Rescue Society says that they would use the project in their promotional communications to the public. However, when collaborating with a media company, does this alter their right to use the material as publicity? They said that they would not try to put any pressure on the journalists but rather let them do whatever they wanted. But what about the vulnerable groups, such as the refugees who are the subjects of this joint journalistic/humanitarian project where the media material produced is part of the process? NGOs such as the MSF would hand out a photographers’ ‘sensitisation document’ to journalists they work with, highlighting issues for reflection and concern. The MSF would themselves be very careful

when documenting their patients. Attaching cameras to their rescue ships would be unthinkable according to Polly Markandya, head of communications at MSF UK:

“As medical providers we are really clear that we don’t have equal power relations with our patients. We are their doctors, their nurses, the givers of aid, and for us then to ask permission to take a photo, to tell a story, you have to be really careful that people feel able to say no. And that would be the same if you just had pulled someone out of the water and you had saved their lives. You know, does that person then feel able to say ‘Thank you for that, but I don’t want to talk to you about what happened to me in Libya’.”⁸²

Images are important to the MSF as they can demonstrate reality and help them put a spotlight on different problems. Gemma Gillie, press officer at the MSF in the UK, says that despite having all these media onboard their ships in the Mediterranean, if there is one thing that they will not back down on, it is the integrity and dignity of the people they are there to help and to protect and save. Flicking through a magazine with some articles from the project Yellow Boats Gillie reacted to some of the images being taken. One shows a woman who had just been rescued from the water with a weak pulse and losing consciousness:

“I think ‘How on earth could she have given consent or permission for that image to be taken?’ Unless there was a very rigorous process that happened afterwards when that woman felt better again, and that she understood how that image could be used and the fact that it can be seen around the world by anybody, otherwise for me that is a real concern.”⁸³

⁸¹ Interview with Emma Forseth, press officer at the Sea Rescue Society, September 2016

⁸² Interview with Polly Markandya, head of communications at MSF UK, October 2016

⁸³ Interview with Gemma Gillie, press officer at the MSF UK, October 2016

Right: A father and his son are being rescued by the Yellow Boats team on one of the first missions.



The journalists participating in Yellow Boats did not have any special routines around consent beyond their normal practice when reporting on humanitarian crisis events. Organisations such as MSF argues that consent is especially important when working with groups such as refugees whose families back home might be subject to persecution. MSF press officer Gemma Gillie explains:

"It's about making sure that the person that is giving you consent understands, you are very clear to them how their image might be used, where it might be used, and the fact that it goes online means that it can be seen anywhere including in their home country. In this context, when I was working in Greece, I would be very clear to the people we were talking to that this could be seen in Iraq, or Afghanistan or Syria – are you comfortable with that? And everytime when they had said initially 'Yes, sure take my picture', when you said that they would suddenly flinch and think 'Actually, no I don't like my picture to be taken'. And that's what I would prefer, I would prefer people to be genuinely safe and know that it was okay for us to take that picture and that there would be no repercussions."⁸⁴

Journalist Jonas Fröberg at Svenska Dagbladet, mentioned a situation on the boats where he photographed a woman and a couple of refugees who had just been rescued with his mobile phone. The refugees did not seem to take any notice of having been photographed. The next day, the image was published, without any names, online as well in the newspaper:

"That was a situation where I asked myself, is this really the right thing to do? If she would have noticed, could she have thought that I would take the picture in order for the Islamic State to kill them?"⁸⁵

Kelly McBride at the Poynter Institute says that the power imbalance is exacerbated when vulnerable people are in the care of the media, as in the Yellow Boats case. It is a power imbalance that is exacerbated when the journalist is participating. This makes it hard to come up with a new set of principles:

"I am not sure that I could phathom a way that you could get reasonable, informed consent. I don't think it exists in a scenario when you are so incredibly vulnerable. When you look at what informed consent really means, most of the people are not in a position to make such a decision. I would never advocate for journalists to adopt a

formal medical standard, but that is yet another reason why journalists should not be acting as rescuers or medical providers. Because the standards of consent are very different and I don't think there is a way to reconcile those standards."⁸⁶

Sallyanne Duncan suggests that there should be some sort of code of conduct drawn up between the NGO and the media company:

"Everybody might be trying to act with the best of intentions, but the end result could be that it causes harm. And I don't know how we do this, I don't know how we report news in an engaging way about horrific events without causing some harm. But I think there needs to be a little bit more care about what the refugees want. What do they want? Not what the media company wants. Not what the NGO wants. Because both, the media company and the NGO have their own agendas in this."⁸⁷

Reflections on Yellow Boats

It can add a 'constructive' element to news reporting

Seán Dagan Wood, editor in chief, of the UK-based "constructive journalism"⁸⁸ magazine Positive News finds the idea of journalists getting involved interesting. Yellow Boats was never branded as a constructive news project, but the Aftonbladet-photographer Peter Wixtröm says that a lot of the news stories that came out of the project were "good news".⁸⁹ Seán Dagan Wood can see that there is a value for the audience in seeing journalists 'doing good':

"It is fundamental human nature and we are human beings sharing a common humanity. As much as journalism needs to step back in order to question everything, it shouldn't completely step back from that human heart."⁹⁰

Scepticism at the BBC

At the BBC, there is a greater scepticism towards campaigns such as Yellow Boats, reflecting the fact that public broadcasters are generally more cautious about acting in ways that might be seen as in any way partisan says the BBC's Jonathan Paterson:

"These boats are obviously doing good work in terms of rescuing people who are at risk and that is clearly a priority. But there are criticism which has been levelled at both the military and the NGO operations that in fact they are facilitating the migrant crisis rather than easing it. We need to maintain some sort of position where we are observers rather than an active participant."⁹¹

Today, there is less of a 'universal we' in the media landscape, which is why we will probably see more initiatives such as Yellow Boats in the future.

⁸⁴ Interview with Gemma Gillie, press officer at the MSF UK, October 2016

⁸⁵ Interview with Jonas Fröberg, journalist at Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

⁸⁶ Interview with Kelly McBride, media ethicist and vice president of academic programs of the Poynter Institute, October 2016

⁸⁷ Interview with Sallyanne Duncan, researcher at the University of Strathclyde, October 2016

⁸⁸ Interview with Seán Dagan Wood, editor in chief Positive News, October 2016

⁸⁹ Interview with Peter Wixtröm, photographer at Aftonbladet, September 2016

⁹⁰ Interview with Seán Dagan Wood, editor in chief Positive News, October 2016

⁹¹ Interview with Jonathan Paterson, BBC World newsgathering deployments editor, October 2016

But we might also have media outlets, such as the BBC, that will strive to stay away from emotional ties in their reporting. "It is really important that there are voices out there that have this dispassionate view of things and I think that the BBC will probably end up surviving as a brand because of that, rather than despite of it."⁹²

How does involvement align itself with the brand?

Yellow Boats created a lot of discussion within Schibsted. Whereas the tabloid Aftonbladet already has a campaigning edge to it, journalists at Svenska Dagbladet, a classic broadsheet, would think twice before participating again because they feel their readers seems to appreciate impartial reporting, according to Fredric Karén, editor in chief:

"We saw this as a humanitarian crisis where we could save lives and also get closer to the site of crisis in a way we would not have been able to do otherwise."⁹³

The Aftonbladet editor in chief Sofia Olsson Olsén has a more positive view of interventions:

"Hopefully the reporting changed the idea of how the refugee crisis looks like in Europe and the world. I think we are much more open to discussing new possibilities to intervene, maybe there are ways that we could intervene in Sweden and really make a difference."⁹⁴

The LSE's Charlie Beckett urges media companies to think through whether the intervention aligns itself with the values of the brand:

"I don't think there are universal, strict rules about it, but there needs to be an element of consistency for each organisation. If you are the BBC for example, it makes much more sense not to be engaged, because that's your brand."⁹⁵

Ruling out full-blown collaboration campaigns such as Yellow Boats does not have to mean that journalists have to report in a detached unemotional way. BBC correspondent Matthew Price says that as a reporter you can in fact show sympathy

towards those who are suffering without having to become heavily involved:

"Reporting on the fact that people are having a miserable time and that many have lost their lives, and feeling that personally and emotionally, I would argue actually makes the reporting better, because you are empathising with people. Detached reporting never gets you involved in the story and you can't feel the empathy with the mother who has lost three children or the child that has lost its parents. I think that empathy give you a personal and, I would argue, better perspective on the story itself. But I don't think it leads you into making political calls about what is the right or wrong political response."⁹⁶

Standing next to an NGO can make journalists less critical

Lindsey Hilsum, international editor at Channel 4 News, started her career as an aid worker. The experiences gave Hilsum a rare insight into development issues, that has formed her view on the role of journalism when reporting on humanitarian issues. In her view, the journalist's task is to report on the suffering and the reason for the suffering and what is done to help, including any flaws in aid programmes, as well as the politics behind the situation:

"Aid workers often have to ignore or even lie about the political causes of a humanitarian emergency in order to get help to people. They frequently must pretend the government is helping or at least not hindering the aid effort otherwise they would be expelled from the country and fail to fulfil their remit which is to help people. But it is the job of the journalist to expose the political causes or aspects even in a 'natural' disaster."⁹⁷

When journalists are literally standing next to an NGO, as in Yellow Boats, there is more of a danger of losing that critical edge. LSE's Charlie Beckett remains sceptical about media organisations or individual journalists trying to do something that they would not normally do:

"You wouldn't go somewhere with a lorryload of water and start handing it out as a journalist. There are aid workers

that can do that much better than you. If a journalist becomes too involved in any kind of policy there is a danger that they are going beyond their competence. There is then also the other danger, that they stop doing things that they should be doing, which is being critical."⁹⁸

Yellow Boats ran for around half a year, then the rescue operation came to a halt, mainly because the situation changed in the area. The news organisations also felt that there was a sense of compassion fatigue among their readers, according to Fredric Karén, editor in chief at Svenska Dagbladet.⁹⁹ But there is always a danger of pushing a subject hard and not following up longer term.

LSE associate professor Shani Orgad says she can see a value with projects such as Yellow Boats, as we need to understand different stages of the journeys that the refugees are undertaking.¹⁰⁰ Being there on the boats with the refugees presents an opportunity to put a spotlight on the transition. Svenska Dagbladet and Aftonbladet have done occasional follow ups on some of the refugees, but Orgad would like to see more of an attempt to explain how Yellow Boats will follow up in the longer term, at different stages after the rescue. The big question, Orgad says, from an European perspective is, what happens when the people have been saved? What does the journey look like in a longer perspective?:

"Having been there, having taken the role of rescuers, what would their recommendations be of saving these lives, truly saving them, not just the bare lives, but thinking about saving lives in the deeper sense also, not just the physical."¹⁰¹

92 Ibid.

93 Interview with Fredric Karén, editor in chief Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

94 Interview with Sofia Olsson Olsén, editor in chief Aftonbladet, September 2016

95 Interview with Charlie Beckett, LSE professor and founding director of the media think tank POLIS, October 2016

96 Interview with Matthew Price, BBC journalist, October 2016

97 Email interview with Lindsey Hilsum, international editor at Channel 4 News, October 2016

98 Interview with Charlie Beckett, LSE professor and director of the media think tank POLIS, October 2016

99 Interview with Fredric Karén, editor in chief Svenska Dagbladet, September 2016

100 Interview with Shani Orgad, LSE associate professor in the department of Media and Communications, October 2016

101 Ibid.



4. Saving lives – then what next?

Transparency issues

An evaluation has been carried out on Yellow Boats but it has stayed confidential and it was carried out by the project leader at Schibsted, not an independent evaluator. Other examples of interventions by media companies show a higher degree of transparency, such as in the 'Katine Project', initiated by The Guardian.¹⁰² Yellow Boats was a smaller project but it did not reach the same level of transparency in its unwillingness to share all of the learning outcomes. An independent evaluation of the project would be of great benefit, as this probably is the first time that a media organisation became an active participant in a humanitarian intervention. This might be something we will see more of in the future, and needs to be studied in more depth.

Caution about deriving principles from Yellow Boats

Institutions like the Marshall Institute for Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship at the LSE are interested in the Yellow Boats model of NGO/news media collaboration. As it becomes harder to finance investigative journalism in the conventional way media becomes more involved in the world of philanthropy. If journalism is supported it needs to be clear who is supporting the work. According to the Marshall Institute director Stephan Chambers any form of financing needs to be transparent. For Yellow Boats to be a useful model we need more information he argues:

"If we are going to derive principles from one example we need to ask questions about what really happened. It may be that this is entirely to everyone's benefit,

Below: Image from the Aftonbladet feature "Dödens kust".



Photo: Aftonbladet

that the sponsors benefited, that the NGO benefited and that the people being rescued benefited. It is perfectly possible, but I think we should start to ask harder questions about this."¹⁰³

Participatory journalism – who benefits?

Despite initial criticism from some of its members, the Sea Rescue Society has gained a lot from the collaboration. Thousands of new members have signed up. The work with Yellow Boats has inspired them to continue with international humanitarian operations. But how has the operation benefited Schibsted? On the one hand, the collaboration gave them access to a site of crisis as well as the opportunity to rescue lives. On the other hand, the operation has demanded a lot of journalistic resources in a time when journalism already has a hard time funding its work.

How was the collaboration received by their readers? Was the reporting as independent and impartial as one would normally expect? Many people at Schibsted interviewed for this report would claim that it was. However, one of the journalists said that the articles could be interpreted as a form of marketing or press release, explaining to the readers who had donated money what the money was being used for.¹⁰⁴

As the nature of media and ownership and finance changes, we need to think about how to hold the lines between the commercial and the editorial. With Yellow Boats a new set of questions arises, because there will always be a suspicion that journalists can become captured by campaigning organisations. The BBC's Matthew Price suggests that journalists and media companies will need to have a serious discussion around where to draw the line.¹⁰⁵

"Clearly, there is nothing wrong in getting a group of journalists together with an NGO if that is really what you want. But to take an extreme example, would you push that even further, and say, 'let's get

Right: Schibsted's office in Stockholm where Aftonbladet and Svenska Dagbladet have their newsrooms. The Yellow Boats campaign can be seen in the background.



Photo: Petra Olsson

a group of journalists together and train them up by the military and send them in as a small force of commandos to rescue people from Islamic State-control in part of Syria or in part of Iraq?' Would you go that far? That would be really reporting the story, but would it be right to have that group of mercenaries go and do that? I think that most editors, most journalists, probably 99,9 % would say No, that wouldn't be right. But then rein back and say why is it right they get into a boat together, to go and rescue people? I am not comparing the two but I am saying that at some point there is a red line how far we intervene and I think that we have to be careful that we don't cross it."

¹⁰² Boseley, Sarah. "Monitor warns Katine is under-resourced". *The Guardian*, 26 March 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/katine/2008/mar/26/katineamref.katinepartners>

¹⁰³ Interview with Stephan Chambers, director the Marshall Institute for Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship, LSE, October 2016

¹⁰⁴ Interview with journalist at Schibsted, September 2016

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Matthew Price, BBC journalist, October 2016

5. Conclusion

Yellow Boats – a big leap

Perhaps the idea of the detached journalist was always a myth. Historically, the idea has been challenged, for example by photographers such as Larry Burrows, who would put down the camera to help injured soldiers in Vietnam.¹⁰⁶ In the late 1990s, former BBC reporter Martin Bell, who had been covering the Bosnian conflict, called for reporters to abandon the role of bystander and become more attached to the events they were reporting on.¹⁰⁷

Small interventions can add a human element, but they should remain a footnote to the real story – the story about those who are suffering. These issues are up for negotiation and every media brand needs to have an internal discussion as these are not questions that should be handled at a purely individual level.

Journalism is in crisis and even major media organisations today do not have the same kind of resources as before to fund reporting on humanitarian issues. As journalism has moved online traditional ways of funding and making journalism have been disrupted. In the new media landscape that is evolving, we might see more of initiatives such as Yellow Boats.

In a more diverse media landscape where the boundaries between different actors are becoming blurred, we will need to give even more thought about how to behave professionally. If we come up with new ways of doing journalism such as Yellow Boats, then we also need to come up with new ways of thinking ethically about their consequences.

With initiatives such as Yellow Boats, there is always the risk that the journalists are turned into the heroes of their own adventures, leading to a more spectacular coverage. We need to ask some hard questions before getting involved about our motivations.

Transparency is key. The reader needs to understand what is happening and how the journalism is created. But so do the journalists if they are to maintain standards and learn from the process. In the fast-changing media landscape 'transparency' is the new 'objectivity'.¹⁰⁸

News organisations might also want to consider it as part of a more constructive

approach to reporting on humanitarian issues. In a time where there is a sense that the world is burning, we might need to engage in less negative ways of telling stories, by not only seeing people who are suffering as victims but also acknowledging how people are being resilient and showing that something can be done.

When becoming the story, there is always that danger of hubris. We are used to being the ones that are criticising what other people are doing. Why isn't the aid effort better? Why aren't the refugees saved more? Can we ask those tough questions when we are involved?

With the rise of social media people have the opportunity to tell their stories directly. It is easy to arrive to the conclusion that journalists should try to become more engaged and involved themselves as a consequence of this, in order to get their stories to be shared even more. But paradoxically this abundance of informal public information and voice may also create even more of a role for traditional journalism according to the LSE's Charlie Beckett: "Paradoxically, where there is so much emotion involved, perhaps we actually need more of traditional journalism, expert reporters and analysts explaining why this is happening."¹⁰⁹

To rescue lives is of course a very good thing to do. But our interventions will not go unexamined. LSE professor Lilie Chouliaraki, says the merging that happened in Yellow Boats needs to be studied on its own terms:

Above: Svenska Dagbladet has done occasional follow up features on families who arrived to Sweden.

"I think that those convergences, new as they are and exciting as they appear, should not go unexamined. We always need to ask the question of what are the benefits, what are the costs of these new configuration of roles. If Yellow Boats incorporates the voices and stories of those who suffer, rather than just the voices of the journalist-rescuers, then this can be seen as a positive journalistic reinvention in the digital age. But if human pain simply becomes a digital spectacle showcasing journalists saving humanity, then Yellow Boats might be seen as yet another 'post-humanitarian' initiative – a self-centered way of practicing good-doing, involving the convergence of NGOs, journalists and people as benevolent donors who click on a link in order to witness the good deeds of people like 'us'."¹¹⁰

If we decide to intervene in a major way, the least thing we can do is to follow up on our interventions after the rescue, as a responsibility to ourselves, to those we rescue and our readers, viewers and listeners.



Photo: Malin Hoestad/SID

¹⁰⁶ Hoy, Anne H. *National Geographic: History of Photography*, National Geographic Society. Cited in Bersak, Daniel R. *Ethics in Photojournalism: Past, Present, and Future*. Master thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2006

¹⁰⁷ Bell, Martin. *The Truth is Our Currency*. Press/Politics 3(1), 1998

¹⁰⁸ Abbott, Kimberly. *NGO Communications in the New Media Ecology – How NGOs Became the 'New(s) Reporters'*. In *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*. Oxford: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2015, p 191.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Charlie Beckett, LSE professor and founding director of the media think tank POLIS, October 2016

¹¹⁰ Interview with Lilie Chouliaraki, LSE professor of Media and Communications, October 2016

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*The Yellow Boats Project was initiated by the media house Schibsted in Sweden. Photo: Andreas Bardell/Aftonbladet
Journalist Carina Bergfeldt was one of the journalists who performed in dual roles. Photo: Peter Wixtröm/Aftonbladet*