

# Not up for debate: U.S. news coverage of hunger in Africa

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Abstract: This paper explores how the U.S. news media construct the topic of hunger in Africa for U.S. audiences. Specifically, the paper addresses how newspapers define and delimit the relationship between U.S. citizens and foreign sufferers. Through a framing analysis and critical discourse analysis of randomly sampled newspaper stories, the author finds that while news articles covering *hunger in the United States* usually frame the problem as pertinent to the public

sphere, the victim as worthy of political action, and the reader as political agent, articles covering *hunger in Africa* frame the issue as irrelevant to the public sphere, the victim as removed from political action, and the reader as politically impotent. Interviews with journalists are used to understand why discrepancies occur.

Both journalism scholars and practitioners agree that the news serves several critical roles in a democracy, including providing citizens with information they can use to discuss issues of public importance or to monitor the actions of those who govern them. But these assumptions elide a crucial question: If the media are expected to support a well-functioning democracy in this way, what sort of information, if any, are they expected to provide regarding *foreign* affairs that have little direct connection to American citizens' daily lives, such as homelessness in New Delhi or civil strife in Somalia? In particular, this study asks, how do news stories suggest U.S. audiences *think* about the connection between the U.S. democratic sphere and foreign humanitarian crises?

As many scholars have argued, news stories teach audiences how to think about issues both by including (or excluding) certain information and by emphasizing (or ignoring) certain aspects of an issue or story. Entman (1993: 52) describes news frames as 'select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text' and as promoting 'a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and / or treatment recommendation'. He argues (1993: 53) that 'politicians... are thus compelled to compete with each other and with journalists over news frames' in order to influence public opinion. Such conceptions of framing (similarly conceived by others, e.g., D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007) assume that the impact of framing will be a particular understanding of, or reaction to, a *political* issue presented in the media. News stories can suggest ways that audiences interpret a problem, its causes, and its potential solutions, and therefore may support one particular political action, politician, or party. But how does such framing function when the issue being covered has little direct impact on domestic politics, is not receiving much attention from politicians, and therefore may not be interpreted as 'political' at

all? In this case, what do these frames look like and what function do they serve in the public sphere? Specifically, *how do news frames define and delimit 1) the relationship between U.S. citizens and foreign sufferers, 2) U.S. public sphere discussion of foreign humanitarian crises, and 3) citizens' political engagement with the issue?* These questions are investigated, in part, by looking at whether and how stories on suffering include the elements that Entman argues help define an issue for news audiences, in particular *causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.*

This is done through framing analysis and critical discourse analysis. The study then looks at why stories are covered this way, through analysis of interviews with media makers. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the potential impact of coverage.

There are many international humanitarian concerns. This paper looks at one particular genre of human suffering that has little direct effect on the average American citizen: hunger in Africa. I choose to focus on Africa, firstly, because limiting the geographic region simplifies the scope of inquiry,(2) and secondly, because several empirical studies have shown that there is an emphasis on bad news, drama, and sensationalism in developing regions such as Africa (Chouliaraki, 2006; Golan 2008; Mamdani, 2009). This paper seeks to build upon this work by exploring what ramifications this reporting has on the way political engagement is framed for American news audiences.

### **Media coverage of international humanitarian crises**

Much of the literature on foreign news coverage, including framing studies of Africa, focuses on determining what prompts coverage. Many studies show that *relevance* to the United States or to U.S. interests, such as coverage of a foreign conflict in which the U.S. is involved, or *deviance* –

things that are strange or interesting and which therefore may appeal to audiences – lead to greater coverage (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Golan, 2008).

Framing studies that focus on stories that are relevant to the United States often look at how stories create different impressions of the same or similar events, such as a ‘crime’ vs. ‘war’ frame for understanding the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (Edy and Meirick, 2007). Others have examined the way U.S. news frames wars or interventions that the United States is involved in, as in the way they support nationalism, national policy, or support for troops (Bantimaroudis and Ban, 2001; Kim, 2012).

Many studies focusing on stories that are *not* directly relevant to the United States discuss how places like Africa are described in the news. Some of this work questions the legitimacy of a focus on the deviant, critiquing the fact that media portrayals of Africa promote negative stereotypes of violence and backwardness (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Mamdani, 2009).

Scholarship on the responsibilities of media makers in covering international affairs primarily comes from research probing the ethics of global journalism. This literature largely focuses on what media makers *ought* to do, rather than what they do based on the exigencies of the media industry. It suggests that we ought to cover foreign crises more frequently, and in a way that promotes understanding, empathy, and peaceful relations (Mody 2010; Silverstone 2007; Ward 2010). Mody (2010: 355) argues that news has the power to be a ‘cross-national public educator’ and in this way can serve to inoculate us against future human rights abuses.

Mody’s (2010) analysis of the conflict in Darfur also suggests that in addition to violent, dramatic coverage of conflicts, inclusion of potential solutions to a conflict may be common, suggesting that U.S. articles on Africa may indeed be framed as political issues. While she found

that the two ‘elite’ American newspapers she analyzed (*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) focused on solutions less than European newspapers, the amount of coverage was still quite high (56% of *Times* articles, 68% of *Post* articles).

This study, to an extent, builds on Mody’s analysis by 1) looking at whether the frequency of solution coverage is the same for elite and local papers (it is not), 2) looking at whether the frequency of solution coverage is the same for domestic and foreign stories of suffering (it is not), and 3) looking more closely at the articles that do *not* include treatment recommendations, and suggesting (both through analysis of articles and through interviews with news media stakeholders) how such framing might impact reactions to suffering by American news audiences. It also seeks to extend the argument made by media ethicists by considering articles on foreign human suffering as worthy of the same treatment as other stories published in the U.S. news media. In other words, the study problematizes the notion that these stories should be reported on based on humanity and ethics by viewing these stories through the same criteria we would use to assess domestic stories: their ability to contribute to an effective public sphere through inclusion of politically actionable information.

### **The role of the media in the public sphere**

We assume that citizens have the right to be politically informed, to take part in their own governance (e.g., by voting), and to keep a watchful, critical eye on their officials. One of the most basic ways that citizens engage in these activities is by talking to each other about important issues. This is the most common conception of the ‘public sphere’ (e.g., Habermas, 1989).

Habermas's version of the public sphere consisted of a group of elite intellectual citizens who engaged in rational debate on national political issues and current affairs, based on the belief that this sort of debate would be effective in revealing the true nature of events, or, the 'nature of the case' (1989: 55), because all points of view were aired and understood. Under this framework, public sphere discussion is the only legitimate basis for law in government, because the governed should have a say in the rules that govern them. This kind of public debate is not common today, but many scholars believe that casual conversation about politics among peers is still a bedrock of American democracy (Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini, 2009).

Most journalism scholars and news media practitioners would likely agree that the media are fundamental to this process by providing the fuel for productive discussion, particularly when a problem arises that impacts citizens. In this case, what sort of information ought the media to provide? To be sure, discussion may not always be needed in order to address problems and hold leaders to account. If an investigative report uncovers a landlord who has not followed proper safety protocols in his building and has put his tenants at risk, simple exposure is likely to effect change. Since the landlord has broken a law, the proper action is obvious and will almost surely be undertaken by the appropriate authorities. This is part of the media's 'watchdog' role. However, when issues are less straightforward, simply reporting the problem may not be sufficient to bring about a corrective. News reports indicating that a large portion of Americans lack health insurance are not likely to have a substantive effect until more information is given, and debates take place about the merits of various responses, such as universal coverage or a single payer system.

Thus, if there are multiple paths to address a problem, the media are expected to include information about them. This is often referred to as the 'marketplace of ideas'. This includes,

though is not limited to: covering the cause of the problem; how it is currently being, or could be, addressed; if there are actors addressing the problem; or if there are actors that are thwarting a solution from occurring.

It is no secret that the American news media do not always live up to this ideal, nor that American news audiences may find it challenging to rationally and impartially process information on every topic. Most traditional news media outlets, however, claim that the media perform this role at least to some degree, as did those interviewed for this study.

Coverage of human suffering is an accepted, though perhaps less frequently articulated, piece of the news media's watchdog role. Watchdog journalism, in addition to exposing blatant corruption and deviance, is also meant to alert the public to institutions that disproportionately benefit from different policies, and conversely, to those who suffer from those policies (Bennett and Serrin, 2005). However, literature on the role of the media in the public sphere does not offer an accepted understanding of the role of media in covering *foreign* suffering (that does not directly impact U.S. interests). Rather, foreign suffering is assumed by most scholars to be covered because of its *deviance* from the norm or the moral anguish it elicits rather than its relevance to U.S. audiences, and the appropriateness of this practice is addressed in *ethical* arguments made by media scholars, as described above. There is therefore a gap in the literature regarding whether foreign suffering merits a particular treatment in the news based on the principles of democracy and the role of the press in a democracy, rather than on purely moral grounds. The present study begins to fill this gap by looking at how constructions of such stories map onto typical understandings of what the news *ought* to do – both in its content as well as how the producers of these stories view their role.



## **Methodology**

This study incorporates both framing analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The framing analysis parallels Entman's (1993) definition of frames as suggesting both causal interpretations and treatment recommendations. The frame analysis portion of the study looks at whether cause and treatment are addressed in news items on hunger in Africa. CDA was then used to more deeply interrogate these frames in order to better understand how these frames may impact audiences' understanding of the topic, as described below.

Both frame analysis and CDA assume that a large part of how we understand the world around us is based on the subtle and imperceptible ways we are taught to interpret language. One key difference between the two is that frame analysis tends to focus on how political issues are presented in the news or by political figures, and how audiences interpret them and form opinions about them. These are referred to, broadly, as 'issue frames', which 'shape the public's understanding of how the problem came to be and the important criteria by which policy solutions should be evaluated' (Nelson and Willey, 2001: 247). CDA, in contrast, looks more deeply at the social and cultural practices and norms that become embedded in everyday discourse (Wood and Kroger, 2000).<sup>(3)</sup> By using both here, we can see not only whether the news media, in its coverage of hunger in Africa, include politically actionable information that would allow readers to engage with the issue, but also how such framing defines us in relationship to the rest of our global social world, and dictates the relationship between U.S. news audiences and African sufferers.

### *Framing*

The definition I use here adopts the metaphor of a picture frame. This is the sense explicated by Tuchman (1978) and Entman (1993: 52), in which framing is a process of ‘select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text’. Making certain information more salient can be done by placement (e.g., what information is in the headline), quantity (e.g., how much information on a particular element is presented), repetition, or by highlighting certain associations (Entman, 1993). Others (e.g., Gitlin, 1980) also point out that elements of a story that are *excluded* (i.e., cropped out of the frame) are important in exploring assumptions and interpretations.

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

The idea of framing stems in part from the work of Goffman (1974: 27), who argued that frames are influenced by ‘primary frameworks’ – the frameworks of a ‘particular social group’ which ‘constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning... the relations of [] classes to one another...’. His concept of frame analysis – which looks not only at how issues are presented but at the interplay between that interpretation and the audience’s understanding of their place in the general order of things, their ideologies, and their values – is not the primary focus of most modern frame analyses. Rather, framing analysis is usually conducted quantitatively, based on more reliably identifiable items within a media piece, and followed by a statistical analysis of results.

CDA, on the other hand, is more aligned with concepts of culture, class, and power, and is often conducted by letting themes emerge from the text as the investigator conducts the research. It is a particular form of discourse analysis that attempts to understand how everyday discourse

constructs our social world and affects social and cultural practices (Van Dijk, 1993; Wood and Kroger, 2000). CDA thus allows for a more qualitative evaluation of the news based on how story patterns subtly and subconsciously suggest what topics are suitable for public sphere discussion and political engagement. The question explored here is not only *whether* articles on Africa address causal interpretation and treatment recommendation (which is examined through the frame analysis), but also how these notions are constructed. What does the interplay of emphasis and information with regard to causal interpretation or treatment recommendation communicate to U.S. audiences about how to engage politically with the issue, or how to understand their own position, or the position of the suffering other, in the social order of things? Because CDA assumes that meaning is ‘socially constructed’ by actors in the public sphere (Kraidy, 2009: 346), *deconstructing* those meanings reveals their inherent assumptions and prejudices, and hopefully allows us to begin to push against them.

Seeing through a text in order to understand how it shapes our social world is no easy task, given that we, as researchers, are deeply embedded in this discourse ourselves. The challenge of analyzing everyday discourse was partially simplified by *comparing* articles on hunger in Africa with articles on hunger in the United States.(4) While seeking out differences between the two types of articles is not an explicit aim of this study, examining the way we treat suffering when it occurs within our borders, compared to the way we treat suffering when it occurs abroad, is helpful in revealing whether coverage of hunger in Africa conforms to typical reporting practices. The patterns, ambiguities, and inconsistencies that arise when we compare two distinct loci of suffering put into relief the differences in how we treat ‘American’ suffering and suffering that occurs elsewhere, and thus the assumptions news producers embed within those stories about the relationship between the global other and the American citizen.

*The identified frames*

As stated above, inclusion of information on cause and / or potential solutions is necessary for public sphere discussion, and therefore political engagement, to take place. Therefore, the first step in the framing analysis was to separate those articles that provided for public sphere discussion and those that did not. ‘Public sphere-relevant’ frames were thus defined as those stories that explicated a politically actionable *causal condition* or *treatment recommendation*. ‘Public sphere-irrelevant’ frames were defined as those that did not. These are explained in more detail in the section on findings.

Critical discourse analysis of a preliminary set of the articles also revealed five sub-frames relevant to an understanding of how these articles place the reader within their social world and construct acceptable social and political reactions to hunger. For public sphere-relevant articles, whether the article placed the issues as having a *local*, *national*, or *global* solution was relevant to how the piece constructed the reader’s position. For public sphere-irrelevant articles, two sub-themes emerged. ‘Event frames’ excluded causal interpretations and treatment recommendations entirely, while ‘silent watchdog’ frames included causal interpretation and / or treatment recommendations, but framed those causes and solutions as outside the scope of U.S. politicians or individuals, rendering them un-actionable. Arguments for why these sub-frames are important and revealing are provided further on in the section on findings. The entire batch of selected articles was then coded based on these frames and sub-frames.

These five sub-frames thus represent a continuum of weak to strong connection to the public sphere, as depicted below:

FIGURE 1 HERE

*Interviews with journalists and editors*

CDA and framing analysis are not sufficient to see the whole picture of why articles on hunger in Africa are produced as they are. We also need to look at the news *industry*, and the constraints on journalists and editors in their everyday practices. Constructivist scholars recognize that neither media portrayals nor their interpretation by the public are necessarily intentional on the parts of the producers of the text. Organizing frames around particular topics, according to Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 3) organizes the world *both* for journalists and for ‘us who rely on their reports’. Studies focusing on the production of culture through the news media (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1978) have shown that media products consumed by audiences are influenced by taken-for-granted practices and processes within the news system itself, such as editorial guidelines, newsroom hierarchies, career trajectory norms, and journalistic training.

Thus, the findings from the CDA were then more deeply interrogated by speaking with the journalists and editors responsible for the stories in the sample. In all, I conducted 42 interviews with 26 journalists from 19 papers, 8 foreign correspondents, and 15 editors.<sup>(5)</sup> Nine additional preliminary interviews were conducted before the analysis began. Aside from the preliminary interviews, the journalists I spoke with were those who had written the articles that appeared in the random sample, and the editors I spoke with worked at the newspapers from which the articles were sampled.

*Sampling*

168 articles were included in the analysis, randomly sampled from 43 newspapers<sup>(6)</sup> (42 states plus Washington D.C.) between January 2008 and May 2011. There were 163 unique pieces, and five pieces that appeared more than once in the sample. 89 articles addressed domestic hunger,

and 79 addressed hunger in Africa. 28 came from the ‘elite’ newspapers (here, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*), and 140 from the major newspapers of each state(7) (what I refer to as ‘local’ newspapers).

Only 17 of the 43 newspapers had their newswire stories available online.(8) Newswire services like the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters tend to employ a different reporting style, and so it would be misleading to argue that certain kinds of frames dominate the news based on a sample that underrepresented newswire stories. So, while I use all of the news stories in the sample to describe themes and give contextual examples, I only include the 17 newspapers that provided their newswire stories on Lexis Nexis and Newsbank when I report numbers in the tables below and when I cite percentages in the text. The following is a summary of the articles analyzed:

#### TABLE 1 HERE

The tables and percentages presented are meant to provide a general idea of the characteristics of the articles analyzed. They should not be interpreted as representative of U.S. news in general. For one, the total number of articles (particularly when only the papers with newswire articles available are included) is small. Secondly, this project was inductive, based on my own systematic and in-depth analysis of the articles, not on a multi-coder content analysis.

### **Findings**

Topics of public importance *should* have a mix of frames in the totality of media coverage. It is not necessary or desirable for every story to address causes and solutions. Stories with a more emotional bent can provide an alternative perspective for readers. As Jason DeParle, a journalist for *The New York Times*, described it to me:

It's possible to write a story that would have nothing to do with policy. You could conceivably write a story about one poor child looking forward to lunch in school and it would just focus on the kid... but you might have another piece that has no poor people in it at all – it only has policymakers. But if all of your coverage only had policymakers and didn't have the people in it, you would say there's a problem with that. And if you only had anecdotes and nothing else, and didn't look at the policy with the picture beyond an individual's experience, that would be lacking as well.

I therefore use these five sub-frames to indicate where the totality of coverage is lacking, and to highlight how newspapers tend to frame stories for news audiences. The distribution of these five frames in the sample is depicted below:

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Note the highlighted cells in the table above, which indicate the total numbers of public sphere-relevant and -irrelevant frames for U.S. and Africa coverage. We see that, while Africa stories were almost evenly split between stories that were relevant / irrelevant to the public sphere, no domestic stories were public sphere-irrelevant.<sup>(9)</sup> This provides some initial evidence that the American news media, at least to some degree, construct their news audiences as political agents, capable of discussing the issue of U.S. hunger in the public sphere, and domestic hunger victims as worthy of public sphere discussion. This was typically achieved by including information about how the issue might be addressed (albeit, as can be seen above and as will be discussed, almost exclusively at a local level).

*Public sphere-irrelevant frames*

Within the overarching frame of public sphere-irrelevant articles, two sub-frames – ‘event’ and ‘silent watchdog’ frames – emerged as shaping how the meaning of the event was constructed for readers and defining the relationship between the reader and the foreign sufferer.

*1. Event frames.* Event frames refer to articles that focus on the description of a problem only. They may include anecdotes, dramatic descriptions of events, or data and statistics regarding the event. They include little or no reference to ways that the audience, nation, or world can respond politically to the issue, and often little or no reference to outside actors at all.<sup>(10)</sup> These articles took one of two forms: they either did not address causes or solutions that could be used for U.S. public sphere discussion or political engagement, or they did address such solutions, but indicated that the solutions were not actually feasible.

Articles that excluded causes and solutions completely came almost exclusively from the newswires and the national papers. The main theme of these articles was simply that ‘hunger is happening’. The stories may have included a brief reference to an NGO or to the UN, but usually only as sources, and were usually used only to verify that ‘hunger is happening’. If the article did discuss how these actors might address the issue, they did so minimally – a sentence appearing well into the article. Overall, the underlying message of these articles is that any potential solutions to the problem, if they exist, come from Africa, and there is little or no role for the United States or the international community to play. Articles that describe the problem without following up on how it might be addressed by the international community, or imply that it can only be addressed by the country in question, frame the problem as not being appropriate for public sphere discussion in the United States, and therefore define the reader’s relationship to the



problem and to the victims of hunger. They suggest, by exclusion, that there is no political debate to be had, and there are no political options to be discussed.

One could argue that framing a problem as one that needs to be addressed by the country itself, not the United States, *is* a potential argument to be made in the public sphere. This argument would be that the United States *should not get involved*, which is, of course, a valid point of view. However, these articles do not present information regarding *why* the United States should not get involved; the conclusion is assumed. Such assumptions obscure the argument itself by denying the reader the chance to *decide* whether or not they think the United States has a political role to play.

When a five-year-old is told that Santa Claus brings toys to boys that eat their vegetables and coal to boys that do not, the five-year-old considers the debate to be whether or not it is worth it for him to eat his vegetables, *not* whether or not Santa Claus exists. That debate is obscured for him; Santa Claus's existence is taken as given. Likewise, when articles consistently emphasize what is being done, or not being done, in the country experiencing hunger itself, the argument that the mechanism for change can only be found in the country itself is obscured, and taken as given. These articles could be part of a wider debate about when it is appropriate or not to intervene, but only if that wider debate is set up by the news media.

One article in the sample, for example, discussed hunger in Sudan (Straziuso, 2010). The article begins with two paragraphs describing emaciated children. This is followed by three paragraphs that describe the situation and which also state that the UN increased aid to the region earlier in the year, to little effect. The next section of the article discusses some of the causes of the hunger: drought, intertribal violence, civil war, and the global recession. The rest of the article includes more description of the problem, more statistics regarding the number of hungry,

and even a short list of NGOs at the end of the article that the reader can go to for additional information. It would be considered, by most measures, a well-written and informative article from the Associated Press. However, while the NGO websites at the end might signal that there are ways for global citizens to respond, the description of the problem and the causes listed do little to suggest solutions, as most would be hard-pressed to garner from the text of the article solutions to drought, civil strife in Sudan, or the global recession. Thus while Entman's 'moral evaluation' is strongly emphasized in the article, in particular through the provided list of charities, actionable causes and solutions are absent.

Some domestic stories covering hunger similarly elided solutions, but it was rare to see a problem described with no indication that anything was being done to ameliorate it. Articles that focused on the problem of hunger discussed, at least to some extent, what the local or national government was doing to address it, where it was falling short, or what legislation was being put forth to address it. No articles explained the problem and then simply ended. In one piece, for example, that began with a description of the state of hunger in the United States (DeParle, 2010), the author went on to frame the debate as one between conservatives and liberals, with the former accused by the latter of 'ignoring the problem's depth'. A federal increase in food stamp benefits is then discussed. Areas of high hunger are also identified in terms of congressional districts – an implication that representatives of those regions might be held accountable for the suffering of their constituents. One article in the *Idaho Statesman* (Lamay, 2008) addressed the fact that there were more Idahoans than ever struggling with food because of the economy, but focused discussion on a federally funded program, WIC, that was helping them make ends meet; a similar article in the *Salt Lake City Tribune* (Lyon, 2009) reported that Utahns were using more

food stamps than ever, but followed up by saying that because of this the state had authorized an increase in food stamp eligibility.

A second type of ‘event’ frame that dismissed the public sphere and constructed the reader as incapable of taking part in a discussion of the problem was by reporting on solutions, but then for all intents and purposes disqualifying those solutions by saying why they would not, or had not, worked. In this way, one could say, reporters create a ‘marketplace of impractical ideas’. Articles that indicate that solutions are not feasible or sustainable will likely not offer the reader much fuel for public sphere, or internal, debate. The article mentioned above on Sudan, for instance, appeared twice in the sample. In the second case the article was longer (the practice of editors cutting down articles is discussed further on) and goes on to say that donated food aid faces two problems: 1) it causes hunger victims to travel to cities where food aid is available, thus leaving their farmland and abandoning food production, escalating the cycle of hunger; and 2) food aid is being stolen and sold on the black market. While these facts are undoubtedly true, the conclusion the reader is likely to come to is that food aid may not be the best solution to this problem, and no other solutions are put forward to replace it. Again, this information could be used to support an argument that the United States should not provide food aid, but this debate is not set up, and so the assumption that U.S. aid cannot work is implicit, and treated as an immutable given.

This type of story construction would strike the reader as odd in the U.S. context. It would be equivalent to reporting on a food bank and the fact that it is providing food to the needy, but then adding that it is not in a good location, no one can access it, and there are no other feasible locations. (These constructions do exist in domestic coverage, but they are rare.)

One might argue that we are comparing apples and oranges. If there is no equivalent government body in these countries addressing the problem of hunger, how can it be covered the

same way we would cover a U.S. food bank? Or, again, we might argue there *is* no role for the United States to play. However, the point here is not (yet) to say how the news media *ought* to cover crises, it is simply to observe and show that stories in the two different loci suggest two very different things about the role of the American citizens and their relationship to victims of hunger in Africa.

2. *'Silent Watchdog' frames.* Silent watchdog frames stem from the notion of watchdog journalism. Watchdog journalism, broadly defined, reports on a particular actor or group and their relationship to a problem. The actor – an individual, government, organization, etc. – may be causing or exacerbating the problem, or may be actively trying to address it. The media's efforts to cover these actors are often referred to as their 'watchdog' role.

*Silent* watchdog frames, rather, focus exclusively on *foreign* political actors. When an article reports, for example, that Robert Mugabe's policies are increasing hunger in Zimbabwe, it does not usually suggest that any action is presently up for discussion or debate by the U.S. public. While stating that an elected *U.S.* official is presenting some kind of hurdle to reducing hunger implicitly suggests a way to deal with the problem (not re-electing that official), stating that Robert Mugabe is a hurdle to reducing hunger in Zimbabwe does not carry the same inherent prescription. It does not provide information for U.S. public sphere discussion unless U.S. citizens are aware of ways that they themselves can hold Mugabe to account, since they cannot vote him out of office (of course, unfortunately, neither can Zimbabweans). These frames put the 'watch' in watchdog, as the watchdog is not actually barking, or communicating in a way that would help us confront the problem.

Stories on Africa that did not include information that could lead to political engagement or solutions *but* included information on an actor who was either causing the problem or addressing

the problem made up about one quarter of the articles on Africa. Sometimes the ‘actor’ was not even human. When human causal agents are left out of the story and causal agents are described as something abstract – a drought, tribal history, or even something so vague as ‘hardship and tension’ (Polgreen, 2008), it is difficult to read those agents in terms of how to address them.

### *Public sphere-relevant frames*

Within the category of public sphere-relevant frames, three sub-frames emerged as important: *local frames*, which discuss how hunger can be dealt with at a local or regional level, or through the private sector, such as through a food drive; *national frames*, which discuss how hunger can be dealt with at a national level, such as through U.S. domestic policy (e.g., food stamps) or foreign policy (e.g., humanitarian aid), or how U.S. policy or leaders might be causing or addressing the problem; and *global frames*, which do not explicitly discuss the United States or the U.S. role in addressing hunger abroad, but talk about the role of global bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, or the ‘global community’ or how these entities might be causing or addressing the problem.

3. *Global frames*. Some stories covered the way the international community was involved or connected to the issue, such as those that discussed international bodies or organizations that were addressing hunger, including the United Nations, the World Bank, and NGOs. These made up a small number of the articles on hunger in Africa (about an eighth) and were spread relatively evenly across the local papers, national papers, and newswires.

Presumably, readers understand that the United States is part of the United Nations, and so understanding the role of the U.N. in a crisis may indicate to readers that this is something they can engage with in the public sphere as a member of the global community. Whether true or not,

journalists think of these international entities as being connected to the American reader; one reporter stated that when he covers U.N. relief during a crisis, he believes readers know that they can donate to the U.N., such as through the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP) or the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Shashank Bengali, foreign editor and reporter for *McClatchy News Services*, 2012).

4. *National frames*. Some stories covered the role (potential or actual) of the United States in the problem, and therefore qualify as addressing the reader as a member of the national public sphere. The articles, at least to a minimal extent, provided information on how U.S. policy would directly or indirectly affect the problem. These frames made up about a third of the articles on African hunger, and came mostly from the elite national newspapers (*New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*), which are more likely to cover policy. When they were not, they were generally pieces by the editorial boards or in the opinion pages of local newspapers.

5. *Local frames*. Local frames gave audiences information on how they could engage with the topic of hunger in Africa on a very local level, such as by taking part in a food drive, or in a walk to raise money. These frames made up a large chunk of both coverage of domestic and African hunger, but were the chief frames used for domestic coverage.

In stories about hunger in the United States written in local papers, hunger was most frequently framed as a problem with local solutions, affecting citizens of the local community, and to be addressed by the local community. These stories rarely acknowledged that the problem was occurring on a national scale. Stories in the elite newspapers, less surprisingly, rarely focused on the local. Stories on hunger *in Africa* that were written in the local press were framed as local issues as well, to be dealt with on the local level, again through food drives, fundraising efforts, and the like. This is significant for thinking about how Americans interpret their

relationship to foreign suffering on the whole, given that more Americans read local papers than national papers: 50% vs. 17% (Purcell et al, 2010).

*Interviews with journalists: Explaining the differences between domestic and foreign coverage*

How can the difference between coverage of domestic and African hunger, and between local and newswire / national papers, be explained? Interviews with journalists conducted for this study, as well as past studies of journalism, suggest three primary reasons: 1) journalists have different ideas about why it is important to cover domestic vs. African hunger, such that information on addressing the issue is frequently considered an important element of the story for domestic stories, but not for foreign stories; 2) coverage of issues is dictated by actions and discussions within Congress; and 3) journalists *do* include such information but it gets cut from the story by editors with limited newspaper space, and who therefore include a description of the problem only.

*1. Different ideas about journalists' role: covering the issue versus covering the solution.*

Journalists reporting on U.S. hunger described their role very much as we would expect. They maintained that it was not only important to cover human suffering but also to tell the public what can be done to fix things. Solutions to issues, for many, was an 'essential' part of the story. Cathleen Falsani of the *Chicago Sun-Times* stated that 'the job of journalists is to let people know when something is going wrong with the system and how it can be or will be fixed'. Many of the journalists and editors I spoke with covering domestic news held this perspective. However, journalists covering Africa often described their role as that of informing people of what was going on in the rest of the world 'full stop' without making assumptions as to what people might do with that information. It is not their job, they argue, to tell their readers the

possible solutions to a crisis or to suggest policy options; such an angle is beyond the remit of their role. This was especially true for newswire reporters, who to an even greater degree believe that their role is primarily to inform readers, as one AP reporter put it, of ‘just the facts, ma’am’.

This was the most common explanation for why solutions were so frequently excluded from articles. When pressed as to why they could not *also* include solutions in addition to ‘the facts’, the repeated refrain was, in essence, that no one wanted to hear them. A frequent lament was that getting readers to read about, and care about, what was going on in the rest of the world was enough of a challenge, and if they were able to make the average reader more informed about foreign affairs or make them think ‘even for three minutes about a place that’s very far away and foreign to them’ (Adam Nossiter, 2012) then they had succeeded in their job. As two interviewees stated:

My agenda was just getting readers to read [the articles]... It’s very difficult to stay plugged in with all that people have to deal with in their daily lives. So I just focus on trying to get people to read it. (Shashank Bengali, 2012)

[The story] could be important to the public. I mean, unfortunately, in real terms, it isn’t. You know, I hardly get any responses, frankly, most of the time, from the stories I write from Africa, in contrast to the stories that I was writing in the U.S. where I would get loads of reader e-mails on almost everything I wrote. When I’m writing from Africa it’s very different; a few people respond, mostly people don’t. Africa is just not on the map for Americans. (Adam Nossiter, *New York Times*, 2012)



2. *Solutions only covered when they are on the congressional agenda.* When pressed as to why journalists would not include policy options or opinions, journalists had two reactions besides that described above. First, they stated that Africa was not ‘high on the list’ of Washington’s agenda (Shashank Bengali, 2012), and so covering possible policy solutions did not usually make sense. Here, the assumption is that it only makes sense to cover policy if a particular policy is being debated in congress. This echoes Bennett’s (1990) theory of indexing – that the opinions and options put forward in the marketplace of ideas tend to echo those being put forward in Congress, because government institutions are often one of the main sources used by journalists. In this case, if there is no debate within congress, ideas about how to address the problem rarely surface in the public sphere.

A second explanation was that foreign correspondents are very far removed from Washington. They are on the ground, and do not have access to information about what policymakers are thinking. However, other journalists and editors said that this was not a legitimate reason for excluding policy *if* there was policy being debated. For the major newswires and newspapers, at least, both journalists and editors said that editors should work to connect the reporting of two authors – one in Africa and one in D.C., for example – to match up action on-the-ground with any potential policy being debated in Washington.

3. *Stories get trimmed to fit needs of newspapers.* Sometimes journalists do frame stories in a way that addresses readers as part of the public sphere, but institutional forces are against them. Stories on foreign suffering, especially newswire stories, are often written long, so that newspaper editors can trim as needed to fit the space available. For example, an AP story about Sudan’s expulsion of aid groups from Darfur in 2009 (El Deeb, 2009a) (briefly) discussed a meeting in Washington regarding U.S. efforts to ‘get the government of Sudan to reconsider its

decision'. The story was picked up by two newspapers in the sample – the *Commercial Appeal* in Tennessee and the *Virginian-Pilot* (El Deeb, 2009b; 2009c). Both reprints cut this section from the story. Similar cuts were found in other pieces.

As to why local stories on hunger in Africa were less likely to include policy solutions than national papers or newswires, this seemed to be partly because the journalists covering these stories were not experts on hunger – they were often food writers, local events writers, religion writers, or even sports writers, who had been given the story to cover. A local food drive for children in Darfur, for local papers, is seen as local news. It is *not* seen as tied to a larger national policy debate about foreign aid.

## **Discussion**

Schudson (1997) argued that the aim of effective public sphere discussion needs to be 'problem-solving'; Dewey (1927: 208) argued that *the* problem of the public is the need for the 'improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion'. Public sphere theorists and those that study democratic deliberation usually assume that public discussion occurs in the form of a debate or argument – where there are two or more sides to an issue that people rationally discuss until a consensus is found.

The evidence described here indicates that norms for reporting hunger in Africa therefore do little to frame the issue as one worthy of public sphere debate, and, in fact, remove the issue from the public sphere. When no solutions are included, when a debate is nowhere to be had, this structure *does* frame the argument – but it does so through omission. By *excluding* solutions and debate, these stories define the public sphere by saying that this is not a topic for public sphere discussion, implying there is no problem-solving to be done. They frame the U.S. reader as unfit

for political engagement with the topic, and the hunger victim in Africa as ill-suited to political response.

Previous analyses of foreign coverage have concluded that coverage of Africa is superficial, negative, and at times immoral. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that such styles of reporting veer significantly from what we expect the news industry to provide for politically engaged news audiences, so that they may participate in public sphere discussion and hold their leaders to account. This stems from the fact, as the interviews described here show, that journalists covering Africa and the United States do not have the same understanding of their role as journalists.

Seeking ways to nurture, expand, and strengthen the public sphere continues to be an aim of those studying the intersection of the public and politics, as casual conversation about issues of public importance is still considered to be a bedrock of democracy (Jacobs, Cook and Delli Carpini, 2009). Understanding how foreign suffering fits into this framework, however, has not been addressed in the literature, and has remained the exclusive purview of media ethics. As a result, U.S. news articles covering hunger in Africa often lack the most fundamental items necessary to provoke public sphere conversation.

In other words, while coverage of the topic of *domestic* hunger may not offer a bountiful marketplace of ideas, the marketplace of ideas presented in the mainstream newspapers, when it comes to suffering in Africa, often suggests that there are no solutions to the problem at all, or, if there are solutions mentioned, that they are impractical or ineffective. Of course, scholars often critique the media for being too debate-oriented – for seeking out talking heads, and conflict, rather than truly looking for a solution (Jakubowicz, 1998). But citing two sides of an issue is at

least a crude way of creating the foundation for a debate in the public sphere. It is a baseline. Without this minimal structure of a debate it is hard to get the discussion off the ground.

What American citizens are left with, then, is a public sphere that not only does not nurture a productive discussion on solutions to extreme poverty and suffering in Africa, but makes the discussion itself seem outside the geographic scope of relevant public sphere-appropriate issues for American news audiences. This construction of the news lets the U.S. government off the hook when it comes to the role of U.S. foreign policy in alleviating suffering in Africa, and denies American citizens the ability to judge for themselves how they think U.S. policy ought to reflect, if at all, the existence of suffering elsewhere in the world. My contention is that U.S. citizens have the right to weigh in on their government's role when it comes to foreign affairs just as much as they do when it comes to domestic affairs. This may seem obvious, but the analysis reveals that this notion infrequently comes across in the attitudes of mainstream journalists or in the news they produce.

## Endnotes

1. In one sense I use the term 'citizen' here to describe anyone living in the United States with a stake in the survival and success of the nation, including those without formal citizenship. However, those with voting privileges have a unique role in the public sphere, because they have the ability to hold leaders to account by voting them out of office or voting a particular candidate into office. I use the term 'citizen' as shorthand to refer to both groups, while recognizing that the formal definition has a special significance because it offers the ability to be represented in political decision making.
2. Obviously, by 'limiting' the area of analysis to a continent that is roughly three times the size of the United States, comprising over 50 ethnically and culturally diverse countries and about 15% of the world's population, I do not mean to imply that Africa is homogenous in its problems regarding hunger, or that all of Africa is beset by problems of hunger. However, considering the limited coverage of the continent overall in American news media, and the acknowledgement by many scholars that African countries are often insufficiently distinguished from each other in western coverage, the geographic choice seemed appropriate.
3. This is not to say that framing studies never take into account ideology or culture. Nationalism, for example, has frequently been a theme of frame analysis (see, for example, Billig, 1995).
4. Hunger in the United States and in Africa in many ways are beyond comparison, as hunger in Africa is frequently far more extreme, and often occurs in the form of a national or regional crisis. However, hunger is also a real and devastating issue in the United States, where one in seven Americans deals with hunger on a daily basis ('Hunger & Poverty', 2011) and where, in 2009, the USDA reported that 23.2% of all children living in the United States were living in 'food insecure households' ('Hunger data', 2010).

Therefore, despite important differences between the two loci, the comparison was useful for helping the themes emerge.

5. There is some overlap here, as some journalists also had roles as editors.
6. 48 newspapers were included in the search, but five did not produce any results.
7. This was limited by availability on Lexis Nexis and Newsbank. Preference was given to the top newspaper available (based on circulation numbers) regardless of site. Almost every paper included was either first or second in its state's circulation, though some newspapers' rankings changed between the start of my research and the March 2012 Audit Bureau of Circulation figures.
8. For my purposes, the category 'newswire' also includes syndicated news services, such as the New York Times syndicate and the McClatchy-Tribune news service.
9. There were event frames, and more national frames, in the sample for U.S. stories, but these appeared in newspapers that did not have their wire stories accessible online, and so were not included in the table.
10. The event frame is similar to Iyengar's (1987: 14) 'episodic' frame. I make the distinction here because I am emphasizing the difference between describing an event and describing the actors and policies that might address to the issue. Iyengar's study focuses on describing the difference between an isolated event and any article that covers the issue in a more in-depth manner (including describing causes).

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**Tables and Figures**

Table 1. Breakdown of articles used for analysis, by domestic vs. foreign focus

	<b>U.S. (89)</b>	<b>Africa (79)</b>	<b>Total (168)</b>
National / local	3 / 86	25 / 54	28 / 140
Editorial / non-editorial	19 / 70	29 / 50	48 / 120
Newswire available / not available	31 / 58	59 / 20	90 / 78

Figure 1. Public Sphere Frames

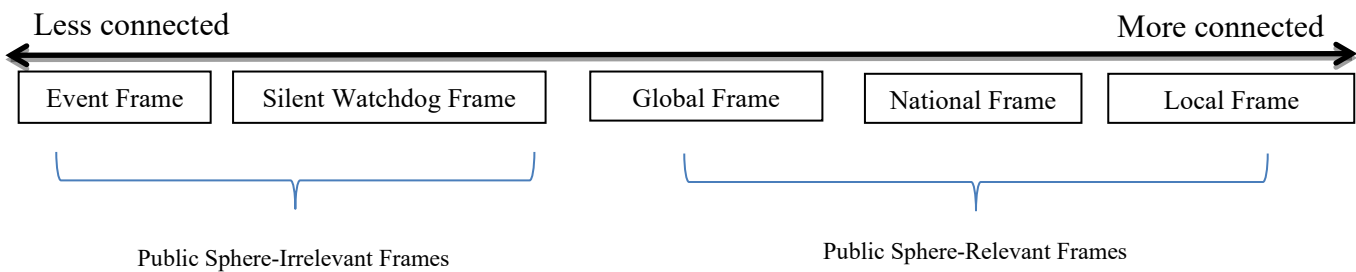


Table 2. Frames Found in U.S. Coverage\* (n=39 for Africa stories; 25 for U.S. stories)

	<b>Frames (in %)</b>						
	Public Sphere-Irrelevant			Public Sphere-Relevant			
	(PSI)			(PSR)			
	Event frame	Silent watchdog frame	Total PSI	Global	National	Local	Total PSR
Africa	7	10	17	5	11	6	22
U.S.	0	n/a	0	0	1	24	25

\* Table only includes papers for which newswire articles were available, and does not include articles in the opinion pages