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The International Committee of the Red Cross Managing Neutrality in an Increasingly Public, Media-hungry World

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**The International Committee
of the Red Cross**

**Managing Neutrality in an Increasingly
Public, Media-hungry World**



Honors Thesis

Mercedes C. Ramsey

Department: Political Science

Advisor: Joel R. Pruce, Ph.D.

April 2018

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Abstract

One of the oldest humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has long been a cornerstone around which all other humanitarian NGOs are built. The ICRC conforms to strict principles regarding their behavior and practices so that they can provide aid to those who need it around the globe. As NGOs began using both traditional and social media to their advantage to promote certain causes, the media and public began to push back, pressuring humanitarian NGOs to adopt some causes or speak out on others. Through analyzing ICRC media communications during both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, this research project intends to answer the following question: How has the ICRC's response to media pressures shifted the perception of humanitarian neutrality for both NGOs and the public?

Dedication or Acknowledgements

A special thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Joel R. Pruce, for fostering my curiosity in humanitarianism while making sure I kept the finish line in sight.



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Introduction

Turning on the news can make the world seem like a very bleak place. Images of death and destruction, hatred and anger, are broadcast day and night around the globe, informing the members of society who watch about what is going on both far away and nearby. Technology has allowed humans to connect on a level that had never been imagined before, and the advent of the age of the internet has only served to increase that connectedness. Before television, the news was relegated to print sources, such as newspapers and magazines, which could be read at a person's leisure. Pictures that illustrated sorrow and loss, happiness and triumph were all limited to the relatively small amount of space allocated to them to accompany articles in papers and magazines. The press had a phenomenal amount of power over the national and international conversation because they controlled, to an extent, the public's exposure to and consumption of ideas and issues.

The introduction and popularization of television in the mid-twentieth century expanded the possibilities of human connectedness by expanding the audience and scope of news programming. Television added a method of communication that did not really exist previously. While radio spread information through spoken broadcasts and news reels in movie theaters spread information about national and international affairs through narrated moving pictures, television introduced a potent blend of the accessibility of radio and the imagery of news reels. The immediacy of TV introduced an urgency to society's consciousness with regards to world issues. Perhaps the most famous example of the power of television is during the Vietnam War, where Americans saw, for the first time, live images of the brutality of war broadcast into their living rooms every night after they

ate dinner. The nightly news became an American tradition as people sat down every evening at around six o'clock to allow themselves to be educated about what was going on in the world at the moment.

Finally, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the proliferation of the news has been revolutionized by the advent of social media. Companies like Twitter and Facebook led the way by putting the news at nearly every person's fingertips at all times via smartphone apps and notifications. People no longer have to wait for print newspapers to hit newsstands or for the nightly news broadcast to inform them what happened around the world. Now, people everywhere are notified of events as soon as they happen. Even traditional print newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post have online papers and apps that appeal to the generation of people who grew up getting information from the internet and not from the TV or print media, such as papers or magazines.

Social media has intensified the culture of immediacy surrounding the news in a way that no other mode of information communication really had prior to this era. People are able to curate their own newsfeeds based on their interests, but at the end of the day, the ubiquity of trending hashtags make it increasingly difficult to not have at least a passing knowledge of what is happening in the world. Additionally, social media has made images of human pain, suffering, joy, and blessing significantly more accessible on a global scale. Where such pictures and videos were before reserved to the front pages of newspapers or a five minute blurb in the news, now those photos are front and center on people's social media newsfeeds all the time.

As the media landscape shifted in the last century, so too did society's consciousness. Due in part to the increasing connectedness brought about by the globalization of the media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the humanitarian spirit of society as a whole has become more apparent. While at times still ignored, large scale human suffering has at other times been met by large scale human kindness, often in the form of aid from a humanitarian non-governmental organization. The number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in existence has greatly expanded since the turn of the twentieth century, which is particularly the case with humanitarian NGOs. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was founded in 1863 by Henri Dunant, is widely considered the first humanitarian NGO. Working for several decades in relative obscurity, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ICRC became the touchstone of humanitarian NGOs.

Founded on seven core principles, including most importantly neutrality, the ICRC has a long, historically complex relationship with the media. Their dedication to remaining neutral during conflict in the face of extreme misery often caused by another party in the conflict makes it extremely difficult to navigate how the public is made aware of the issues with which the ICRC deals. This difficulty is not limited to the ICRC, but rather is a problem that many other humanitarian organizations share. Since the ICRC is the baseline for humanitarian NGOs, neutrality has become a defining characteristic of humanitarian NGOs in general. How each humanitarian organization interprets that principle in spite of the changing media landscape is, in part, what sets them apart from each other.

The ICRC's history with the media is long, complex, and, in places, well-criticized. All of the organization's choices with regards to media have to do with how the organization interprets neutrality in the context of the conflict and the media landscape. How the ICRC interacted with the media in the beginning of the twentieth century is different from how the organization interacted with the media in the mid-twentieth century, which is different from how the organization interacts with the media in the present moment. By studying how the ICRC works with the media during conflicts, one can learn a lot about how the organization interprets neutrality, and whether the perceptions of that principle has changed over time.

The Holocaust most significantly shaped the way the ICRC manages how its principles influence the organization's interactions with the media. The ICRC's strict neutrality and consequent silence led to criticism after World War II when it was revealed they knew about what was going on in Hitler's concentration camps but did not do anything to stop the Holocaust. Considered by the organization to be its biggest failure, the ICRC felt bound into inaction by its tradition of neutrality, Swiss background, and lack of legal basis for action.¹ Deciding not to speak out on the Holocaust is consistent with the founding ICRC principles, but perhaps not with the intentions of the organization. The ICRC's principle of neutrality dictated that aid workers go about their jobs of protecting the victims of violence as best they could in any given situation, which, in the case of the Holocaust, was not very reassuring. ICRC volunteers attempted, "to improve the conditions in the labor and death camps (whatever that might mean, in this

¹ "History of the ICRC," *International Committee of the Red Cross*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/eng/who-we-are/history/overview-section-history-icrc.htm>.

context).”² For an international community that demanded the Nuremberg Trials – a series of military tribunals with the specific purpose of punishing the Nazis for their war crimes – attempting to improve the conditions of concentration camps was not a satisfactory response to the knowledge of their existence.

However, as a 1948 ICRC booklet stated, “For the Committee to protest publicly would have been not only to outstep its functions, but also to lose thereby all chance of pursuing them by creating an immediate breach with the government concerned.”³ This quote demonstrates that the ICRC believed that neutrality was essential to the organization’s ability to do its work because without neutrality, especially in Nazi Germany, the organization would not be allowed to enter the country. This indicates a sort of humanitarian political calculus wherein the ICRC determined that it would be more beneficial for the victims of violence to have a neutral organization that would not speak out about the atrocities it witnessed to ensure its helpful presence in the country than for the victims of violence to have a non-neutral organization that was kicked out of the country and therefore not allowed to provide aid because it shed public light on the atrocities it witnessed. In the case of the Holocaust, the ICRC decided that that calculus proved wrong; however, that does not mean that they believe the system is broken. It indicates that they should have made a different decision in that specific situation. In response, the organization did not radically alter their principles, but rather adjusted how they interpret those principles with regards to reporting on humanitarian crises in the media.

² Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 136.

³ Quoted in Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 136.

The Holocaust marks the moment that the ICRC moved away from the black and white, strict, and classic conception of neutrality and towards the fine line between maintaining the principle while also informing the media and the public about world conflicts. The more involved the ICRC gets with the media, the finer that line becomes. Through studying the ICRC's mission during the Nigerian Civil War in the 1960s, the ICRC's current mission in Syria, and their relations with the media during both conflicts, I will argue in this paper that increasing media pressure over time has contributed to the shifting of the ICRC principle of neutrality, in practice if not in fact.

Overview: Humanitarian NGOs and the Media

The goal of all humanitarian NGOs is the same, regardless of their name or affiliations. Humanitarianism, at its core, deals with providing aid to those in need. How that aid gets distributed varies from organization to organization, but the most important thing to remember about humanitarian NGOs is that their end game is always to help people. Humanitarianism has evolved over time, meaning that there are multiple ways to possibly define and understand the term. In the early days, the term was defined solely based on the ICRC understanding of the concept, as they were the only organization of that type that really existed. According to the ICRC definition, humanitarianism is, “the impartial, neutral, and independent provision of relief to victims of conflict and natural disasters.”⁴ As the ICRC was the first humanitarian organization founded, their definition set a precedent, not only for other humanitarian organization, but for the concept of humanitarianism itself. The ICRC definition of humanitarianism became the

⁴ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 10.

widely-accepted version, still used today in many books on humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention.⁵

The problem with this definition is that it has remained stagnant since its inception, despite tremendous changes in world politics, culture, and warfare. The tightening of the international community under the umbrella of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) as well as the increasing numbers of humanitarian organizations have changed the culture of humanitarianism itself. For example, the UN created the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in order to efficiently respond to international crises, whereas traditionally organizations would have been expected to coordinate their response on their own. Such shifts in humanitarian culture require that the definition of humanitarianism shift so that it better suits the international community as it looks today. Humanitarian organizations argue amongst themselves as to what the definition should look like, normally along a spectrum that allows for, “any form of intervention against any form of human suffering,” on one end, and the ICRC definition on the other end.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I will operate under a definition that is somewhere in the middle, arguing that humanitarianism, “aspires to keep people alive, to expand their opportunities, and to give them greater control of their fate,” by providing assistance across borders with an eye to protecting and improving humanity.⁷ This definition distinguishes humanitarianism based on the goal of

⁵ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 10.

⁶ Johnathan Moore, *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1988), 16.

⁷ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 10-11.

an organization rather than the ICRC definition, which distinguishes itself based on the methods an organization uses to provide aid.

Humanitarian NGOs often work together to achieve a common goal in conflict zones or issue areas, from issues as general as autonomous weapons bans to warzones as specific as the current conflict in Syria. Different humanitarian organizations, such as the ICRC and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), come together to promote a cause and provide aid, despite their differences. That the vast community of humanitarian NGOs collaborate with each other is unsurprising, especially considering the proximity of their connections.⁸ As the first humanitarian NGO, the ICRC has in one way or another inspired the creation of most, if not all, humanitarian organizations that have arisen in the century and half since. Humanitarian NGOs form a network of organizations that, while operating independent of one another, are most successful when they work together. An important function of networks is the generation of information that helps everyone, including governments and other institutions that are not part of the network.⁹ Typically in advocacy networks, the largest, most central organization determines the direction of the network's conversation.¹⁰ As the oldest and largest humanitarian NGO, the ICRC is the most central hub of the humanitarian network. Therefore, the ICRC is perhaps the largest issue gatekeeper in the community and, thus has the most power when it comes to selecting issues that the community will address.

⁸ Pamela Aall, Daniel Miltenberger, and Thomas G. Weiss, *Guide to IGOs, NGOs, and the Military in Peace and Relief Operations* (Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000), 114.

⁹ Margaret E. Keck and Katherine Sikkink, *Activists Among Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 194.

¹⁰ Charli Carpenter, *"Lost" Causes: Agenda Vetting in Global Issue Networks and the Shaping of Human Security* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 31.

The ICRC's centrality in the humanitarian network and, consequently, its importance as a gatekeeper increases the relevance of the organization's methods for interacting with the media. The most central organization in the network not only wields the most power within the network, but also typically wields the most power outside the network, as centrality gives the organization credibility, which is an extremely important form of currency in the larger international community.¹¹ The more credible an organization, the more likely that an issue pushed by the organization will be brought to the attention of the international community, and hopefully the rest of society. Humanitarian organizations build their credibility by cultivating trust and consistency. In terms of NGOs, the trustworthiness and consistency that build credibility require, at least in part, that the organization follow through on its mandate and maintain its principles while doing so. A key principle that must be upheld to build a humanitarian NGO's credibility is neutrality.

Neutrality, a central principle to not only the ICRC but also other humanitarian organizations, is defined as avoiding acting in favor of one side or another in any conflict.¹² Neutrality is important because, in theory, it keeps the humanitarian workers out of harm's way. Through not favoring any side, organizations attempt to secure protection from both sides. Additionally, neutrality is important because it appeases the governments of the countries in which the organization operates. Remaining neutral in times of conflict allows the organization to maintain the trust of all fighting parties, which allows them to greatest opportunity to fulfill their mandate. Without neutrality,

¹¹ Carpenter, *"Lost" Causes*, 29.

¹² Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 2.

humanitarian NGOs would be more likely to either lose the permission of the host country to operate in the country or would not gain entry into the country in the first place. Should that happen, the people to whom the humanitarian organizations were trying to provide aid would go without the much needed aid.

The definition of neutrality is not particularly contentious, at least not in the same way that the definition of humanitarianism is. What makes neutrality a source of conflict is the weight or priority given to neutrality over helping people. For example, the ICRC's code of silence, predicated on neutrality, clashes with MSF's principle of *témoignage*, which reserves MSF's right to report on the atrocities that their volunteers witness. Different humanitarian NGOs balance their desire for neutrality and their mandate to provide aid differently, and tensions arise when those discrepancies occur, particularly in situations where NGOs are collaborating with each other. Additionally, neutrality is contentious in the international community because the principle, aimed in part at protecting aid workers, has not been working. Humanitarian organizations have been dealing with frequent attacks on humanitarian space and aid workers, which are supposed to be protected because of the existence of the principle of neutrality.¹³

The operational definitions of humanitarianism and neutrality are crucial because they directly influence how humanitarian NGOs interact with the media. The media is a crucial source of connection between specialized agencies and organizations and the rest of the society. Humanitarian NGOs are funded through donations, and so public opinion matters to those organizations, which strive to, "generate and sustain media attention," to

¹³ Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 79-80.

convince, “donors that their donations are going to worthwhile causes.”¹⁴ Through the media, citizens of all different countries can keep track of what is going on in the world. The expansion of media platforms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has created a system so extensive that it is often broken down into two different types – the traditional media and the new media. Traditional media includes platforms such as television, radio, and printed materials. New media includes platforms based around the internet such as blogs, websites, and social media.

In order to keep up with the global media climate, NGOs have had to adjust how they interact with the different forms of media and monitor how those different forms of media interact with them. Different media types have different agendas, which all require different responses from NGOs. For example, journalists typically seek to uncover the truth and inform the public, with a tendency to be more formal. That formality allows NGOs to control the story by determining which facts to release and how to frame those facts. Social media, on the other hand, is a form of communication where the public interacts directly with the NGOs. The direct and instantaneous nature of social media makes it harder for NGOs to control the story. The advent of the internet and social media broke down, “limitations of time and space, effectively reconfiguring our perceptions of place, community, and belonging.”¹⁵ NGOs get bombarded daily with messages on platforms like Twitter, where the public demands action and asks questions. Where before questions regarding action, inaction, and decision-making came exclusively from members of the press corps who asked their questions during press

¹⁴ Aall, Miltenberger, and Weiss, *Guide to NGOs, IGOs, and the Military*, 100.

¹⁵ D. Robert DeChaine, *Global Humanitarianism: NGOs and the Crafting of Community* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005), 14.

conferences or through formal inquiries, since the popularization of social media, anyone with a working internet connection could ask any question at any time. How humanitarian NGOs respond to those demands reveals information about their principles and practices.

NGOs use both traditional and social media to spread their agenda, at times choosing issues based on their marketability or choosing issues which already had significant, “expert, media, and celebrity attention.”¹⁶ Choosing abstract issues to bring to the attention of the world is an important part of the mission of some humanitarian NGOs, but that does not truly test the principles of the organization the way decision-making in conflict zones does. Maintaining neutrality is at its most difficult and crucial for humanitarian NGOs in conflict situations where humanitarian aid is necessary. At times, humanitarian workers witness brutal acts, but because of the principle of neutrality, they are not allowed to speak to the public or the media about their experiences. This implicit, neutrality-bred code of silence has led some workers to argue humanitarian NGOs should report the atrocities they see, such as the ICRC doctors who became so disillusioned by the organization’s silence that they broke away and founded another humanitarian NGO, which became MSF. The tension between when to stay silent, when to report horrendous acts, and how to remain as carefully neutral as possible while reporting the most horrendous acts has always been a difficult, fine line that humanitarian NGOs must walk. When humanitarian space is targeted in attacks, the line

¹⁶ Carpenter, “*Lost Causes*”, 43.

becomes even finer as humanitarian organizations speak out to protect civilians and volunteers.

In both the Nigerian Civil War and the current conflict in Syria, which are the cases treated in this thesis, the ICRC has had to deal with numerous attacks on humanitarian space, such as hospitals and aid convoys. The intentional targeting of humanitarian space represents a significant challenge to humanitarian neutrality, and NGOs have developed three general approaches for dealing with such attacks, each of which require varying levels of speaking out.¹⁷ During the Nigerian Civil War, the method the ICRC utilized when it needed to speak out was press releases, as that was the most effective way to communicate with the public at the time. Throughout the conflict in Syria, the ICRC has used a mixture of traditional and new media to interact with the public, combining press releases and tweets to create a complex, mixed media presence designed for a more public and diverse media climate. A careful analysis of ICRC press releases from both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria as well as tweets from the Syria era illustrate that the ICRC chooses to speak out with the strongest force in traditional media formats, like press releases, where the organization maintains a larger measure of control over their message. Nevertheless, regardless of the media method that is used, speaking out, “erodes perceptions of neutrality.”¹⁸ The subsequent sections of this paper will observe how the ICRC walked the line balancing neutrality and speaking out during both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, and analyze the impact their careful balancing act has had on the definition and practice of neutrality.

¹⁷ Jennifer Leaning, “The Dilemma of Neutrality,” *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 22, no. 5 (September-October 2007): 420.

¹⁸ Leaning, “The Dilemma of Neutrality,” 420.

The International Committee of the Red Cross in the Nigerian Civil War

In 1967, after two political coups in as many years, fighting broke out in Nigeria between the Nigerian Federal government and the secessionist state of Biafra, which was located in the eastern part of Nigeria. Most European countries believed that the skirmishes would simply result in a ten day conflict in Nigeria and that the Federal government would force Biafra to rejoin Nigeria. Instead, what resulted was a nearly three year war that left thousands of Biafrans dead of starvation. The media broke the news of the man-made famine with photographs of gaunt Biafran children while the ICRC struggled to come up with an adequate, organized response under the pressure. Ultimately, the relatively short Nigerian Civil War, sometimes referred to as the Biafran Civil War, led to a significant change in the culture of the media, the culture of humanitarian aid, and how those two cultures interact.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the ICRC retreated into itself, limiting its activities during significant conflicts to their most traditional, least resource demanding programs – detainee visits and providing support to the National Red Cross and Crescent Societies.¹⁹ The fact that the ICRC took a step back in terms of the types of aid it provided after the Holocaust debacle is understandable. It makes sense that the organization would want to scale back its programs and take some time to evaluate the criticisms they received in the wake of World War II. However, the tempered approach

¹⁹ Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps, “‘Organising the unpredictable’: the Nigeria-Biafra war and its impact on the ICRC” *International Review of the Red Cross* 94, no. 888 (Winter 2012): 1412.

the ICRC took in the years between the end of World War II and the Nigerian Civil War dramatically impacted the organization's preparedness for the relatively large-scale conflict in which it found itself engaged in 1967. Thus, as early as 1945, the negative media attention that came as a result of the ICRC's decisions during the Holocaust began to impact how the organization looked at their principles and the NGO's ability to act effectively in the future.

The Nigerian Civil War and the subsequent famine in Biafra came to the attention of the world through the traditional media, which publicized the conflict in a way that had not quite been seen before that moment. The Nigerian Civil War itself, a conflict steeped in centuries-old ethnic and religious tensions exacerbated by British colonialism, went largely unnoticed by the public until the newspapers and other forms of print media began circulating pictures of emaciated Biafran children. Unlike during the American war in Vietnam, which was heavily impacted by the proliferation of television broadcasts, news of the famine in Biafra was spearheaded by the written press due to the difficulties and intricacies of filming in Africa.²⁰ Those images brought the Nigerian Federal government's blockade of Biafra to the forefront of the public's consciousness and, for perhaps the first time ever, the media was used to combat a manmade famine.²¹

The media broke the news of the famine to the international community in the summer of 1968.²² After its introduction to the public, concern for the Nigerian Civil War only grew. In 1969, the Nigerian Civil War was such a large story that John Lennon

²⁰ Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer, *News Out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid* (London: Hilary Shipman Limited, 1986), 33.

²¹ Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, 38.

²² Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, 28.

returned his membership in the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) to protest the British involvement in the civil war on the side of the Nigerian Federal Government. The interest in the Nigerian Civil War can be seen in the dramatic increase of ICRC press releases regarding the war between the first mention of the conflict in 1967 to the end of 1968. In 1967, the ICRC published only six press releases regarding their action in the Nigerian conflict. In 1968, that number spiked to forty-five press releases, forty-one of which were released in July or later. The intense media attention that surrounded this particular conflict subjected the ICRC to deeper media scrutiny than it had faced since the Holocaust, and it is clear the ICRC responded to that scrutiny in one way or another through increasing the frequency of their communication with the media through press releases.

The first mention of the Nigerian Civil War in ICRC press releases occurs on July 11, 1967. In it, the ICRC briefly mentions that it has sent, “two standard assortment of medicines and bandages,” to Lagos, “at the request of the ICRC delegate general of Africa, Mr. Georg Hoffman,” however it does not mention any action that was occurring in Nigeria or Biafra at the time.²³ The focus on the ICRC response rather than the actual events of the civil war illustrates how the ICRC attempted to maintain the principle of neutrality in the beginning of the conflict. Rather than focusing on what the two sides were doing to each other, the ICRC merely reported that it was sending supplies to provide aid. By avoiding discussing the conflict itself, the ICRC manages to stay away from any mentions of the politics of the conflict, which keeps the organization neutral in

²³ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “The ICRC and the Nigerian conflict,” press release no. 843b, July 11, 1967.

the eyes of not only the public, but also the Nigerian Federal Government and the Biafrans.

The tone of the press release is carefully maintained and pointedly neutral, using as few words as possible to describe the ICRC action. Because of the ICRC's strict policy of neutrality, one of the best ways to decipher how the organization is thinking of a certain event or action is through analyzing the tone of official documents. Often the language and subsequently the tone that an organization uses to describe an event or decision can reveal more information about the event or decision than the words that they use to describe it. The simple statement of fact and relatively modest shipment of supplies in this first press release relating to the Nigerian Civil War indicates, first of all, that the ICRC, much like the rest of Europe, did not anticipate the conflict to be a long one. Secondly, the brevity of this press release illustrates how carefully the ICRC maintained their neutrality during this period. The organization did not want to be perceived as taking sides in any conflict, particularly this one that was not supposed to last longer than a fortnight. They kept their message short and to the point as a way of avoiding any semblance of taking a side in what most of Europe considered another simple African skirmish.²⁴

The issue that complicated the Nigerian Civil War in the eyes of the West was that Biafra was made up of one ethnic group – the Igbos. Centuries-old cultural, religious, and ethnic tensions existed between the Igbos and the other ethnic groups in Nigeria, and the end of British colonialism served as the hot coals that would set those

²⁴ Michael Gould, *The Struggle For Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War 1967-1970* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012), 71.

tensions on fire and led to Biafra's secession from the Nigerian Federal Government in 1967. During colonialism, British missionaries, who brought with them their Christian religion and Western education, were very successful in the Igbo-populated southern region of Nigeria.²⁵ The northern region of Nigeria was predominantly Muslim, and so the British used a hands-off approach to colonizing northern Nigeria, forbidding Christian missionaries to enter the region, thus cutting that area of the country off from Western religion and education.²⁶ When the British exited Nigeria, the better educated Igbo people migrated from the south to the north to fill the positions left open by the British colonizers. This mass migration caused significant resentment amongst Northerners, and the violence rooted in that resentment led to the Igbo people relocating en masse to Biafra, where they proceeded to secede from the Nigerian Federal Government. Because the manmade famine during the Nigerian Civil War targeted only the Igbos, the press who broke the story to the public labelled the effects of the Nigerian Federal Government's blockade of Biafra a genocide, which caused an international uproar.²⁷

In all of its press releases regarding their mission during the Nigerian Civil War, the ICRC never once refers to the blockade or the famine as genocide, which illustrates their dedication to neutrality. To label either the blockade or the famine as genocide would be, in essence, to choose a side, which would be partial. Genocide is a crime against humanity, and as such when any government or group is accused of genocide, they are justifiably punished for their actions. If the ICRC were to have publically declared the Nigerian Civil War a genocide, then they would have condemned the

²⁵ Gould, *The Struggle For Modern Nigeria*, 12-16.

²⁶ Gould, *The Struggle For Modern Nigeria*, 11-13.

²⁷ Gould, *The Struggle For Modern Nigeria*, 79.

Nigerian Federal Government and taken Biafra's side in the war. In the same way that the ICRC did not discuss genocide during the Holocaust, the organization refrained from using that very heavy word during the Nigerian Civil War.

However, the ICRC learned a lesson from the criticism of their silence after the Holocaust. While they never declared the Nigerian Civil War to be a genocide despite media pressure to do so, the organization published many press releases during the war that challenged classic conceptions of neutrality. In 1968 and 1969, which is when the ICRC responded to the bulk of media pressure, the organization published 109 press releases regarding the Nigerian Civil War. Seven times in the span of those two years, the ICRC issued more than one press release in a day, and more often than not, they published press releases about the Nigerian Civil War on consecutive days. Issuing 109 press releases in the span of two years indicates the organization's shift from silence to speaking out despite their claim to value classic neutrality. The ICRC's neutral silence had gotten them in trouble during the Holocaust, and they were not going to repeat the same mistake again. However, by adopting a more vocal posture during the Nigerian Civil War, the organization opened itself up to the potential for more media scrutiny and more opportunities to make a mistake regarding the maintenance of their neutrality during the conflict.

Part of the media pressure on the ICRC was sponsored by Biafra itself. Colonel Ojukwu, the leader of Biafra, hired Markpress, a Geneva-based marketing company, to promote their cause outside Nigeria.²⁸ Markpress, which also held the Chrysler account

²⁸ Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, 22.

at the time, was an extremely talented agency that had incredible success promoting Biafra in Europe, bombarding Britain with over 700 press releases throughout the course of the war.²⁹ When he hired Markpress, Ojukwu made a shrewd decision that gave Biafra a Cyrano-esque voice in the West. The information Markpress was releasing aroused public opinion in favor of Biafra, which indirectly put pressure on the ICRC. The goal of any good public relations campaign, which is essentially what Markpress was running on behalf of Biafra, is to sway public opinion. When Markpress succeeded in broadening the audience who sympathized with Biafra, that audience protested against the injustices done unto the Biafrans by the Nigerian Federal Government. As the largest humanitarian NGOs engaged in the conflict, the ICRC responded to the pressure generated from the massive upswing in public interest and investment in the Nigerian Civil War by focusing its media presence almost solely on the civil war for the duration of the conflict.

A fairly significant number of the ICRC press releases reveal the amount and type of humanitarian aid that the ICRC provided to both Nigeria and Biafra during the war. More press releases announce the visits of high ranking ICRC officials to the conflict zones. While at first glance, those types of press releases do not compromise the principles of the ICRC, they still indicate something about the ICRC during this time period. The organization reminded the world throughout the conflict that they provided support to those who needed it in both regions. While that in and of itself does not breach neutrality, the constant reminders of ICRC action call back to the backlash the ICRC received in the wake of the Holocaust, where they were rightfully accused of not

²⁹ Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, 22.

saying anything about the genocide.³⁰ During the Nigeria conflict, the ICRC made sure that no one would be able to accuse the organization of not providing aid or keeping the world updated on the situation.

However, some people within the ICRC believed that the organization was still not properly balancing its mandate with its principle of neutrality. The grisly images of the effects of starvation in Igbo children and adults were overwhelming for some doctors, who resented the ICRC's commitment to neutrality when the Nigerian government was so clearly responsible for the atrocities the doctors were now seeing firsthand.³¹ The final straw for a group of those doctors was an attack by the Nigerian army on a medical clinic. Unsure of what to do in light of the oncoming army, the doctors radioed the Red Cross headquarters only to be told that they needed to leave the clinic and the villagers while the doctors moved on to safety.³² Enraged by even the idea that they would leave innocent civilians to an advancing army, the French doctors disobeyed the command and stayed long enough to witness the soldiers slaughter the villagers.³³ Those doctors went on to found MSF, where they created the principle of *témoignage* to allow MSF workers and volunteers to speak out against the atrocities they witness in a way that the workers and volunteers from the ICRC are not permitted.

The ICRC faced several challenges as it attempted to provide humanitarian aid through the blockade, the most frustrating of which was the bombing of Red Cross

³⁰ David P. Forsythe and Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flannagan, *The International Committee of the Red Cross: A neutral humanitarian actor* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16.

³¹ Dan Bartolotti, *Hope in Hell: Inside the World of Doctors Without Borders* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books, 2004), 43.

³² Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 143.

³³ Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 143.

hospitals and aid flights by the Nigerian Federal Government. The protection of humanitarian spaces, such as hospitals and flights marked with the Red Cross symbol is one of the core tenants of the Geneva Conventions.³⁴ As the ICRC reminded Nigeria in a press release, as a signatory to the Geneva Conventions, the government was bound by international humanitarian law to protect humanitarian spaces, particularly hospitals clearly marked with the Red Cross symbol of humanitarianism.³⁵

The first press release regarding the bombing of Red Cross space comes on August 20, 1968. A total of two short paragraphs, the communication reports that, “the ICRC has been informed by its delegates in Biafra that the neutralised airstrip placed under its control...has been bombed on August 20 by aircrafts of the federal armed forces of Nigeria.”³⁶ The strict retelling of facts in this case again highlights the ICRC’s reticence to appear to favor one side or the other. The language they use in this press release is carefully guarded, and they make a point of saying that they contacted the Nigerian federal government about the bombing and are, “awaiting an urgent clarification from the Federal Military Government of Nigeria.”³⁷ Allowing the Nigerian Federal Government to respond to the attack is a symptom of ICRC neutrality. They do not want to accuse the government of attacking humanitarian space because an accusation based only on the claims of one side of the conflict could be construed as taking a side.

³⁴ Beryl Williams Epstein and Sam Epstein, *The Story of the International Red Cross* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963), 43.

³⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross, press release no. 925b, December 12, 1968.

³⁶ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Statement By The ICRC”, press release no. 900b, August 20, 1968.

³⁷ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Statement By The ICRC”, press release no. 900b, August 20, 1968.

The ICRC's cautious optimism that the Nigerian Federal Government would be able to explain what happened with the bombing of a neutral airstrip indicates the cautious optimism and disappointment inherent in humanitarianism. The way humanitarian organizations speak in times of crisis indicates that they believe that countries in the international community will respect and protect their citizens and their rights, but the NGOs exist in the case that some countries violate those rights. Consequently, press releases for humanitarian NGOs like the ICRC are laced with language that indicates disappointment while trying to avoid implicating any of the parties to the conflict in order to respect those countries' sovereignty. Walking the fine line between general disappointment at the situation and an implied accusation against one party to a conflict is difficult, and the more the ICRC suffers losses, the less patient the organization becomes and the more accusatory and frustrated the language of those communications becomes.

As 1968 drew to a close, ICRC press releases reveal that the head of the delegation in Biafra reported the Nigerian air force bombing of the Red Cross hospital called Awo-Omamma.³⁸ The release indicates the time of the attack and then hints at the Geneva Conventions by clearly stating, "The hospital was clearly marked with several red crosses. Moreover, the hospital is far from any military objective and there were no troops in the region."³⁹ The veiled reference to the Geneva Conventions trends throughout all similar Red Cross press releases, focusing attention again and again on the

³⁸ The International Committee of the Red Cross, "Red Cross Hospital Attacked in Biafra," press release no. 925b, December 12, 1968.

³⁹ The International Committee of the Red Cross, "Red Cross Hospital Attacked in Biafra," press release no. 925b, December 12, 1968.

fact that the warring parties are not respecting an international agreement to which Nigeria, at the very least, is party. This time, the ICRC goes so far as to report that they, “immediately protested to the Nigerian authorities against this violation of the Geneva Conventions.”⁴⁰

While not indicting the Nigerian government for the action, the length and language of this press release is stronger than that which discussed the bombing of the neutralized airstrip. After already appealing to the Nigerian Federal Government once regarding the Geneva Conventions, they patiently refer to it again in this press release. However, in this case, the use of the verb “protest” indicates a slightly stronger response on the part of the ICRC. A protestation against an act connotes not only blame, but also more explicitly implies that the ICRC has a problem, specifically with the comportment of the Nigerian military in the conflict. Such a distinct complaint against one, specific party to the conflict leans toward a breach of neutrality. Thus, this press release reveals how the ICRC attempted to bend their own rules in order to fit the demands of the public during the Nigerian Civil War. They acknowledge to the public that there was a military attack against a protected group of civilians in a humanitarian space, as well as their displeasure with that military attack. During the Holocaust, such a claim would have been a breach of neutrality, but the organization’s willingness to make that claim during the Nigerian Civil War illustrates how principles shifted due to the public criticism after the Holocaust.

⁴⁰ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Red Cross Hospital Attacked in Biafra,” press release no. 925b, December 12, 1968.

Finally, as what was expected to be a ten day dispute dragged into its second year, the ICRC became incredibly frustrated. The organization could never get the Nigerian Federal Government and the Biafran authorities to agree to a formal system to for getting relief into the country, which was an implication of ICRC neutrality that left the organization struggling to fulfill its main function during the conflict.⁴¹ Beginning as early as January 1969, the diction of ICRC press releases becomes progressively sharper, impatient, and pointed.

On January 7, the ICRC reported that the hospital at Awo-Omamma was attacked by Nigerian aircraft again, this time leading to four deaths and two seriously wounded. Again, the organization highlights that the hospital was clearly marked with the Red Cross symbol. The four paragraph long release ends with the simple, but powerful sentence, “This is the second time within a month that this hospital has been deliberately attacked by Nigerian aircraft.”⁴² “Deliberate” is perhaps the strongest word in both this communication and the communications prior. “Deliberate” removes any doubt about the guilt of the Nigerian military. In the beginning, the ICRC left room for the Nigerian Federal Government to explain itself and their reasons for the attack. By 1969, the ICRC placed the blame directly on the Nigerian government without any chance for explanation. The classic ICRC definition of neutrality should not allow the organization to publicly shame one party during a conflict for their actions the way the ICRC does when it blames the Nigerian government for continuously violating the Geneva

⁴¹ David P. Forsythe and Barbara Ann J. Rieffer-Flannagan, *The International Committee of the Red Cross: A neutral humanitarian actor*, 64.

⁴² The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Bombing of an ICRC Hospital in Biafra,” press release no. 940b, January 7, 1969.

Conventions. Public shaming would count as partiality toward the side that is not being publicly shamed. However, the ICRC dispensed with that technicality and instead chose to label the Nigerian military attack on Awo-Omamma as “deliberate”, in spite of what that word insinuates in this context.

Ultimately, the ICRC’s vocalism during the Nigerian Civil War, which was revolutionary for the organization at the time, became the new norm for managing neutrality during conflicts. The increasingly sharp, pointed language the organization began to use as the conflict drew on functioned to keep the media updated, but it did not fit nicely into the spirit of neutrality. Additionally, the organization struggled to raise the funds necessary to provide the required aid in the region. Though in the end the ICRC ceded control of humanitarian aid during the Nigerian War to different agencies, they had already begun to the process of expanding their interaction with the media beyond the confines of the classic definition of neutrality.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Conflict in Syria

The Nigerian Civil War taught the ICRC that it needed to make structural changes, and in 1970, the organization began to do some self-reflection and updated its structure to better serve the ever-expanding demand for aid. However, even as this structural shift occurred, the organization did not change its principles. The founding tenants of the ICRC remained the same, and the ICRC continued to operate with neutrality just as it had before Biafra. While the ICRC did not formally update its definition of neutrality, the operational definition, which began to shift during the

Nigerian Civil War, continued to shift as media pressures changed and increased with the introduction of television and the new media, including the internet and social media. In the present day, the ICRC continues to do its work in war-torn areas in what it believes to be a neutral silence, as evidenced by their actions in Syria during the on-going war. In reality, however, the way the ICRC operates in the present day is incongruent with the classic, strict denotation of neutrality that the ICRC still technically maintains.

The current war in Syria began in 2011 with revolts against Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, inspired by the Arab Spring.⁴³ As the conflict in Syria descended into civil war with Western powers and terrorist organizations such as ISIS taking sides, the ICRC entered the country to provide its typical, but much needed, humanitarian services. The nature of the conflict in Syria, aided by the modernization of war in the decades following the Nigerian Civil War, rendered Syria an urban war, where soldiers and rebels are attacking and sieging cities populated by civilians. In the seven year span of the war in Syria, over fifty percent of the population has been displaced, and over 465,000 Syrians have been killed in the crosshairs of conflict.⁴⁴ Despite its strict neutrality, the ICRC dealt with increasingly common attacks on hospitals, warehouses, and resource convoys, a problem that continues to plague the humanitarian efforts in Syria as the civil war enters its seventh year. The attacks affect not only the civilians who require the medical supplies, food, and water provided by the ICRC, but also the aid workers

⁴³ "Syria Profile – Overview," *BBC*, September 30, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703910>.

⁴⁴ "Syria's civil war explained from the beginning," *Al Jazeera News*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>.

themselves. As long as hospitals and convoys are being bombed, aid workers are in the line of fire, which the ICRC has long tried to avoid by remaining strictly neutral.

While the print media broke the news of the famine in Biafra, news of the conflict in Syria was never really broken in the same sense of the phrase due to the nature of the twenty-first century media climate. At the turn of the century, the media was on the cusp of a rather abrupt, profound, and transformative typological shift. The internet revolutionized the way the media works, in a way that had never happened before. Some may point to the television coverage of Vietnam as a moment that revolutionized the media, but even that moment did not cause as intense a shift as the internet. Television coverage of the war in Vietnam forced TV into the forefront of media consciousness, but the traditional media adjusted to accept TV without significantly changing the overall media culture. Television provided added the element of video to the media, which broadened what the public got to witness, but it did not change who was shaping the media agenda.⁴⁵ Formal news outlets worked with governments and NGOs to report what was happening in the world. This dependent relationship allowed governments and NGOs a measure of control over how their stories were being told, and reports often came hours or even days after the event occurred because it took time for the news to travel through all the sources.

Conversely, the advent of the age of internet changed how the media agenda got shaped as well as who shaped that agenda, which is why the internet marks the shift from traditional media to new media. The internet is an instantaneous form of communication

⁴⁵ Harrison and Palmer, *News Out of Africa*, 72-75.

that is open to anyone who has a connection, which does not seem that spectacular in a world that is accustomed to it; however, in the first decade of its existence, it was a revelation. It connected not only individuals around the world, but also groups of people across the globe that otherwise might not have interacted. Those connections, through social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram, make it possible for people to share their own stories with each other without the intercession of traditional media outlets.⁴⁶ With the liberalization of information channels comes increased pressure from the public on individuals, governments, and NGOs. Social media gives the public at large a forum where they can instantly share their thoughts and displeasures on a certain issue in the news in a way that never truly existed before. People take full advantage of their ability to share their opinion on social media platforms like Twitter every day.

This forum pressures organizations, particularly humanitarian NGOs, to respond to events and issues. Humanitarian organizations like the ICRC tell the world that their mandate is to help people who need it, and because of social media, the public has the ability to see first-hand the instant people need help without waiting for the traditional media to inform them. In turn, the public can see when the ICRC is fulfilling its mandate as well as when it is not. When the ICRC is not acting quickly enough, individuals can use social media to criticize their perceived inaction. Public opinion matters to the ICRC because the organization is sustained through donation. The popularization of Twitter has forced the ICRC to respond much more rapidly and frequently than in the past.

⁴⁶ Joshua Braun and Tarleton Gillespie, "Hosting the Public Discourse, Hosting the Public: When online new and social media converge," *Journalism Practice* 5, no. 4 (2011): 390.

The ICRC official account, @ICRC, tweets to its 2.27 million followers at least three to four times a day, varying across issues and events. ICRC satellite accounts, such as @ICRC_sy (the ICRC delegation in Syria's account) or @ICRC_dc (the ICRC account for the regional delegation for United States and Canada) tweet a further three or four times a day on average. All those accounts work together, retweeting and favoriting each other's tweets to spread any given message to a wider audience. More often than not accompanied by pictures or videos, the text of the tweets are strong and succinct. By its very nature, Twitter does not grant organizations the space to qualify their statements. Limited at first to merely 140 characters until the website expanded to 280 characters in 2017, Twitter's brevity forces organizations like the ICRC to condense a very careful and considered opinion into a sentence or two, all the while maintaining the classic definition of neutrality.

The ICRC's choices on Twitter in the context of the Syrian Civil War illustrate how the organization's operational definition of neutrality has shifted, even as their classic definition has not. As with the press releases during the Nigerian Civil War, the ICRC's first tweets regarding the conflict in Syria simply report on ICRC supply shipments. The first ICRC tweet regarding Syria, in fact, refers to the ICRC's plan, "to facilitate transfer of 10,000 tonnes of apples from occupied Golan to Syria."⁴⁷ The simple, straightforward nature of this tweet mirrors the language found in the early press release from the Nigeria conflict, and illustrates that, regardless of the decades that had passed, the beginnings of ICRC engagement in conflicts remain the same.

⁴⁷ ICRC (@ICRC), Twitter post, February 26, 2010, 8:19 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ICRC/status/9684670939>.

As the conflict progressed, however, the language in the tweets becomes more frustrated and outspoken, particularly surrounding attacks on civilians and humanitarian space. In August 2013, a sarin gas attack killed hundreds of civilians in the suburbs of Damascus.⁴⁸ The possession and use of chemical weapons is strictly forbidden under the Chemical Weapons Convention, which entered into force in 1997. The nerve gas attacks in Damascus, according to Western powers, “could only have been carried out by Syria’s government, but the government blamed rebel forces.”⁴⁹ Since chemical weapons are banned and therefore not easy to come by, it makes little to no sense to believe the Syrian government claims that the sarin used in the attacks belong to rebel forces. President Assad of Syria seemed to corroborate this basic logic when he agreed, after US military pressure, to the, “complete removal and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal.”⁵⁰ Such an agreement can, and perhaps should, be considered an implicit admission of guilt on the part of the Syrian government. A government as unstable as the one run by Assad would not agree to give up an important, albeit illegal, part of the military arsenal unless they seriously feared an attack by a foreign superpower. And Syria would not seriously fear such an attack unless the government knew they were guilty of that which they were accused.

On August 29, 2013, the ICRC tweeted five times. Two of the tweets informed their followers about the International Day of the Disappeared on August 30th. The other three tweets made statements, with varying degrees of specificity, on the sarin attacks in Syria and the resulting precarious humanitarian situation. The first tweet of the day,

⁴⁸ Lucy Rodgers, David Gritten, James Offer, and Patrick Asare, “Syria: The story of the conflict,” *BBC News*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>.

⁴⁹ Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, and Asare, “Syria: The story of the conflict.”

⁵⁰ Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, and Asare, “Syria: The story of the conflict.”

published at 5:59 AM Eastern Standard Time, simply reads, “100,000 people have reportedly been killed. Hundreds dying every day. Suffering in #Syria has reached unprecedented levels. No end in sight.”⁵¹ Short, sweet, and to the point, this tweet lays out the death toll in Syria while perhaps hinting at the sarin attack. The language in the second and last sentence of this tweet are particularly powerful, although not so much that they are outside the realm of what has come to be expected of the ICRC, especially after the Nigerian Civil War. The use of the word “suffering” indicates the ICRC’s use of a pathetic appeal, targeting the empathy of its followers. Readers are meant to feel outraged by the humanitarian problem in Syria. The phrase “no end in sight” serves to add to the outrage. Worded rather ominously, “no end in sight” tells followers not only that there will be continuous human suffering at the hands of other humans far into the future, but hints that the ICRC must remain engaged in the conflict in order to do its best to alleviate the suffering. If there is no end in sight with an ICRC presence in the country, how much worse would the civilians in Syria be without the humanitarian organization there to provide aid?

The second tweet of that day, published at 6:26 AM Eastern Standard Time, refers directly to the sarin attacks, saying, “We urge all parties to the conflict in #Syria to never, in any circumstances, use chemical weapons. These are strictly prohibited under #IHL.”⁵² Such a rapid response to the attacks illustrates the pace at which the ICRC and other organizations must respond to world events because of social media. The world knew of the attacks rapidly, and thus the ICRC felt pressure to respond equally as rapidly.

⁵¹ ICRC (@ICRC), Twitter post, August 29, 2013, 5:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ICRC/status/373067303291604992>.

⁵² ICRC (@ICRC), Twitter post, August 29, 2013, 6:26 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ICRC/status/373074207829409792>.

Before social media, the organization would have perhaps a day to craft a comprehensive and carefully worded statement regarding any sort of conflict, and they would most likely have had time to gather a little more information of their own. In contrast, the existence of the ICRC Twitter account means that as soon as the world knows about an issue, the ICRC is accessible and should be ready to respond. In this case, the ICRC issued a pretty standard response, tempering their language to make sure that they are not prematurely blaming one side or the other for the sarin attack, but instead referring all parties to international humanitarian laws regarding chemical weapons.

Attached to the third and final tweet about Syria from that day is a video, the caption of which read, “Watch our official statement on the alarming #humanitarian situation in #Syria...#media.”⁵³ By linking their video to their tweet, the ICRC circumvents Twitter’s essence of brevity. In so doing, the organization indicates that though Twitter is a useful space to raise awareness for issues and organizations as well as interact directly with the general public, the platform is not truly conducive for the type of message the ICRC needs to release in the wake of a great and complex humanitarian strategy.

The video itself is only a little more than a minute long, opening with a line full of strong language regarding the “human tragedy with alarming consequences,” in Syria. After the first sentence though, the ICRC spokesperson goes on to repeat almost verbatim the tweet from earlier in the day about the “unprecedented” levels of suffering with “no end in sight.” Later in the video, she again repeats almost verbatim the second tweet

⁵³ ICRC (@ICRC), Twitter post, August 29, 2013, 8:32 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ICRC/status/373105953274859520>.

regarding the illegality of chemical weapons under international humanitarian law. The most telling part of the video comes in the middle, when the spokesperson mentions that there are several areas of Syria which have been sealed off for months, and to which the ICRC had not been granted access. The way the video is structured makes it seem like the fact that they've been shut out of parts of Syria is secondary to the warning against the use of chemical weapons. However, the organization has already reminded the parties to the conflict not to violate international humanitarian law. The real point of the video, then, should be that the ICRC does not have access to some parts of Syria. The isolation of those parts of Syria, much like the blockade during the Nigerian Civil War, was ultimately the fault of the Syrian government. While the ICRC cannot directly blame the Syrian government for the humanitarian crisis in those regions, the fact that the organization is calling attention to that abuse of power illustrates a way that they can undermine the choices of the Syrian government while still technically maintaining neutrality.

The war in Syria has been plagued not only by attacks on civilians, but also by attacks on humanitarian spaces and workers, and it is in those moments when the ICRC becomes the most outspoken, towing the line of neutrality. On September 20, 2016, the ICRC published a press release regarding an attack on an aid convoy travelling into Aleppo carrying resources such as food, water, and medical supplies intended to help the citizens in the war-torn, rebel-held city that is one of the main targets of air strikes. The press release is worded very strongly, stating the organization was, “outraged,” and, “devastated,” by the deaths of the twenty civilians and one ICRC worker who were killed

in the attack and condemning any further attacks on humanitarian spaces as violating international humanitarian law.⁵⁴

Mirroring the situation in Biafra, the ICRC stressed the importance of upholding the Geneva Conventions and protecting its aid workers in this press release when it said, “Failing to respect and protect humanitarian workers and structures might have serious repercussions on ongoing humanitarian operations in the country.”⁵⁵ The use of the phrase “serious repercussions” in that sentence is particularly noteworthy, as it imparts an ominous and almost threatening tone, which is uncommon for the ICRC. The organization informing the international community, particularly the parties responsible for the attacks, that the ICRC will not tolerate attacks on humanitarian aid workers and humanitarian space, to the extent that it would exit the conflict and leave the civilians who need aid is astonishing and unprecedented. Whether or not the organization would actually leave the conflict in Syria remains to be seen; however, even the threat of such an action seems to counter the most basic mandate of the ICRC, which is to provide aid to the people who need it most.

The ICRC Twitter account opened the day on September 20, 2016, by tweeting a link to that press release regarding the attack on the humanitarian convoy. Included in that tweet is a close-up image of a destroyed box of supplies bearing the famous Red Cross symbol as well as a Red Crescent symbol and the word “ICRC” in both English and Arabic. The box is riddled with holes, covered in sand and dirt, with bottles of

⁵⁴ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Syria – Attack on humanitarian convoy is an attack on humanity,” news release, September 20, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-attack-humanitarian-convoy-attack-humanity>.

⁵⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross, “Syria – Attack on humanitarian convoy is an attack on humanity.”

medicine falling out of the broken sides of the box.⁵⁶ The imagery of destruction is an important tool for the ICRC. They can show the bombed out houses, hospitals with walls collapsing, and sad, tired children, and evoke an understanding of tragedy in the viewers without having to even use words. The ICRC expects the public to take those images and the carefully, yet strongly, worded messages in the tweets and the press releases and pressure governments into following international humanitarian law.

This expectation presupposes an understanding of who is causing the suffering. If the public doesn't know where to put pressure, then their outrage will be ineffective. While not explicitly violating neutrality themselves, the ICRC is still, in a sense, calling out the different parties to the conflict and asking the public to hold them accountable for their actions. The ICRC points out only the effects of a certain party's action without mentioning the party; however, it is impossible for that party to not know that the ICRC is criticizing them. The public's access to information via both traditional and new media means that it is more likely than not that the public also knows who the ICRC is criticizing, even if the organization does not name names. The immediacy of social media makes it easier for the general public to make connections between news of an attack and the party who perpetrated the act, as well as what the ICRC had to say about the attack itself. The operational line between violating neutrality and maintaining the principle, then, has gotten thinner.

⁵⁶ ICRC (@ICRC), Twitter post, September 20, 2016, 5:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ICRC/status/778204803382046720>.

Analysis and Conclusion

Through analyzing the ICRC's media communications during the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, some trends emerge regarding how the ICRC manages its principles through shifts in the media climate. The ICRC's continued media use indicates that it believes its actions are within the bounds of neutrality; however, those actions do not line up with the classic definition of that term. What the ICRC means when it talks about neutrality today is very different from what the organization meant when it was founded. The undeniable impact of the post-Holocaust criticism is felt throughout ICRC communications, eliminating strict silence from the operating definition of neutrality without introducing that change into the classic definition.

As evidenced in press releases for both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, the ICRC is most likely to speak out in situations where humanitarian space is being threatened or attacked. I highlighted specific press releases regarding a hospital bombing during the Nigerian Civil War and an attack on a humanitarian convoy during the conflict in Syria, but the ICRC consistently uses similar language in press releases regarding attacks on humanitarian space. The desire to protect humanitarian space and humanitarian workers was one of the reasons that the ICRC instituted the policy of neutrality in the first place, and the fact that the ICRC is most willing to toe the line of that principle when it is not successfully protecting humanitarianism is noteworthy.

The trends that appear from analyzing the language of ICRC communications suggest that the media form in which the ICRC is most consistently outspoken is press releases. In both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, the ICRC's use of

language in press releases pushes the boundaries of neutrality farther than the classic definition would seem to allow. During the Nigerian Civil War, the ICRC's press releases implicated the Nigerian Federal Government in attacks on humanitarian space, and during the conflict in Syria, the strongest language of disappointment and threats can be found in press releases rather than social media. Press releases give organizations significant control over how their story is presented to world media agencies, which in turn grants organizations like the ICRC some security while pushing the boundary of neutrality, as they have the time and the space in press releases to temper the strongest language just enough to ensure that the organization remains just on the right side of operational neutrality.

Unlike press releases, new media forms, particularly social media, are characterized by the public's response to statements, a response that is both unpredictable and uncontrollable.⁵⁷ Just as it is easier to safely push the boundaries of neutrality when there is time and space to temper the language of a statement, it is more difficult to safely push the boundaries of neutrality when there is neither time nor space to temper the language of a statement – or Tweet. Consequently, it is easier for humanitarian NGOs like the ICRC to craft relatively cautious statements for shorter, uncontrollable Twitter and save the truly pointed, outspoken statements for longer, controllable press releases.

The brevity and omnipresence of social media draws the ICRC closer to the tenuous line between maintaining neutrality and informing the public about their actions in a conflict, particularly when ICRC actions respond to attacks by a certain party against

⁵⁷ Braun and Gillespie, "Hosting the Public Discourse, Hosting the Public," 383.

humanitarian space. The omnipresence of social media makes it significantly easier for organizations like the ICRC to promote their causes, but it also projects ICRC statements around the world immediately for public consumption and comment, which makes the ICRC's margin of error with regards to neutrality that much smaller.⁵⁸ Any statement with overly strong language would be sent around the world instantly, and once something is said on social media, no amount of clarification can make the world forget that it was said. The ICRC should always be wary of saying something that accidentally or unintentionally crosses the fine line between neutrality. Once that line is crossed on social media, it will be extremely difficult for the organization to step back again.

Strong language and an increasingly active media presence highlight the ICRC's shift from the formal, classic definition of neutrality upon which the organization was founded and towards an informal, operational definition of the principle. Evidenced by the ICRC's silence during the Holocaust, the classic, formal conception of neutrality demanded an independence that the ICRC ultimately realized was impractical for a non-profit, non-governmental organization which depends on donations to sustain itself. As sometimes the only link to the general public in serious humanitarian conflicts, the public indicated after the Holocaust that part of the ICRC's mandate in helping those who needed it should be to inform the public so that the world can also know what is going on and properly support the organization.

Throughout the media communications in both the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, one can see the ICRC bend the classic definition of neutrality to better

⁵⁸ George Lazaroiu, "The Social Construction of Participatory Media Technologies," *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice* 6, no. 1 (2014): 107.

fit their operations during the conflict. During the Nigerian Civil War, that meant introducing strong, suggestive language into press releases to deal with the increased media attention from the proliferation of images of starving children and claims of “genocide”. At times, the ICRC went as far as to implicate the Nigerian Federal Government in attacking humanitarian space. Under the classic definition of neutrality, neither the language the organization began using nor the implication of the guilt of one party would be acceptable, as those statements could be considered partisan and thus not neutral. However, the media scrutiny against the ICRC after the Holocaust, the media attention on Biafra, and the nature of the civil war created a situation in which the ICRC’s classic definition would not suffice, and so the organization stretched the terms of that definition to fit the operation. The same has occurred during the conflict in Syria. The classic definition of neutrality does not fit in with the immediacy and brevity of social media or the nature of modern warfare in Syria, where everyone, civilian or otherwise, is a potential target. Adapting their already tailored definition to fit new media styles and specific situations indicates that, in practice, the ICRC holds on only to the spirit of neutrality, and interprets the principle in the context of the current situation.

The ever-increasing attacks on hospitals and humanitarian convoys illustrate in gruesome detail the shrinking of humanitarian space. The increasing lack of respect for humanitarian space in recent years is a symptom of the changing nature of war coupled, perhaps, with the confusion surrounding how humanitarian organizations like the ICRC put their principles into practice. The classic definition of neutrality which the ICRC cites no longer represents the principle in action and thus is no longer a fitting

definition.⁵⁹ The goal of neutrality, in part, is to protect humanitarian space and make aid available to those in need. However, if all the parties to a conflict as well as the organizations who are providing aid do not have a mutual understanding and expectation regarding what neutrality actually looks like during a conflict, then it makes it much easier for a party to a conflict to claim breach of neutrality as justification for attacking humanitarian space. This problem has become evident in modern conflicts like Syria where, “non-state actors [...] do not believe that there is any such thing as a neutral humanitarian.”⁶⁰ In a worldview where neutral humanitarians do not exist, then there is no reason to respect humanitarian space, and all the silence in the world will not protect aid workers and hospitals. However, as symbols of an outside, “moral order”, it remains crucial that organizations maintain their principles as examples of integrity in the conflict zone.⁶¹

The tightrope of neutrality and media presence upon which humanitarian NGOs must balance grows ever thinner. The goals which inform the principle of neutrality – ensuring the provision of aid and the protection of humanitarian space – are admirable and crucial to the function of humanitarian NGOs like the ICRC. However, as evidenced by the Nigerian Civil War and the conflict in Syria, the classic definition of neutrality is antiquated. The ICRC has bent the classic definition of neutrality into a sort of operational definition to fit the current conflict and media climate, always keeping in mind the spirit of the principle of neutrality. Ultimately, the classic definition desperately needs updating to match the operational definitions of neutrality that have evolved over

⁵⁹ Leaning, “The Dilemma of Neutrality,” 419.

⁶⁰ Leaning, “The Dilemma of Neutrality,” 419.

⁶¹ Leaning, “The Dilemma of Neutrality,” 421.

time. In order to avoid misunderstandings in an increasingly mediatized, the ICRC should adjust its classic, formal definition of neutrality to more closely match its informal, operational definition. By adjusting the formal to match the informal, then all parties to a conflict will know without question what to expect from the ICRC with regards to aid and media presence, which will encourage state and non-state actors to respect humanitarian space again.

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