

# COLUMBIA NEWS

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## Columbia Survey:

### Low News Priority of Humanitarian Crises Result of Mismatch of Press Resources, Needs

News coverage of humanitarian emergencies is sparse not because of reporter ignorance but because of a discrepancy between reporter needs and resources to meet them. Few reporters are assigned this beat full time, newsrooms have limited funding available for crisis site visits, and the media suffer from crises fatigue, according to a new survey by Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. Compounding these obstacles, the study found that local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) lack experienced media relations officers and journalist-friendly websites.

The study "Toward New Understandings: Journalists and Humanitarian Relief Coverage" by Associate Professor of Journalism Steven S. Ross, was commissioned by not-for-profits Reuters AlertNet and Fritz Institute. It is the largest, most comprehensive survey to date of the symbiotic relationship between international journalists and NGOs.

"Conventional wisdom is that reporters, editors and columnists do not know enough about crises, especially chronic crises such as AIDS in Africa, or strife or natural disasters in countries of no immediate interest to the American public," Ross said. "However, our survey shows that journalists are actually fairly well-informed, so money spent

training journalists in that regard might be wasted."

Press relations specialists at NGOs noted repeatedly that field offices tend to be staffed by local nationals who are inexperienced in press relations and unfamiliar with what might be at stake when working with a reporter from outside the region.

"Media coverage is a vital tool for relief charities in garnering public support and funding. Fritz Institute and Reuters AlertNet conducted this study to help the humanitarian relief community build its capacity to engage the media," said Anisya Thomas, Ph.D., managing director of Fritz Institute.

Ross and his team sought to understand the dynamics of media coverage of humanitarian relief. They analyzed the factors that went into editors' and journalists' decisions to cover a story, and the capabilities of humanitarian agencies to reach out to the media to successfully present and place their stories.

The researchers conducted interviews and received detailed responses from 54 humanitarian relief organization officials, located mainly in organizations' international headquarters and in regional hubs worldwide. About half (47 percent) were from Europe, 20 percent from Asia and 11 percent from North

America. The team also collected more than 1,000 reporters' bylines and e-mailed an invitation to participate to journalists around the world, yielding 290 in-depth responses.

#### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Crises appear to be given low priority by news organizations for a number of reasons.

#### **Crises are not a full-time beat**

Surveying journalists from all over the world, the study found that reporters who cover crises do not do it full time. In fact, for those who do cover relief efforts, the average is less than one story in five.

Only two of the 265 respondents to this question said they covered crises 100 percent of the time. Only 10 percent (27) said crisis stories were more than half their output.

When asked why it was harder to get a crisis story onto the news agenda now than in the past, respondents cited two main contributing factors: lack of journalistic resources and crisis fatigue. Each obstacle was mentioned by more than a quarter of the respondents and each proved to be a bigger issue for those respondents outside North America.

## **The thorny issue of money**

Lack of funding was among the greatest barriers to coverage, mentioned by 55 percent of North American journalists and 71 percent by foreign journalists. Responses to numerous survey questions reveal that news organizations are reluctant to spend money to send reporters to areas where aid is being administered. Respondents, especially from outside North America, say they need and would welcome funds from other organizations to cover these stories. The funding, however, would need to be independent of the groups they cover, they said.

## **Lack of PR skills among NGOs**

The ability of NGOs to meet the needs of reporters is hampered by a number of factors, according to the survey. For instance, NGO press officers noted repeatedly that field offices tend to be staffed by local nationals who are often inexperienced in Western-style press relations. Larger organizations have guidelines for press relations that typically ask press officers to "pass media up the line" to home offices. But the process is often ignored, especially if a journalist has been doing stories in the region or specifically with the regional humanitarian aid organization's office. In addition, while journalists are usually given adequate access to NGO sites, the information they receive is often incorrect, with the potential during crisis situations to result in unfavorable press coverage.

## **NGO websites not meeting journalists' needs**

In the absence of funding for trips and timely information from press officers, reporters are reliant on NGO websites. Even small field offices often have websites, and news about them can be found on headquarters sites even if they don't. But Internet technology is not used to its fullest:

- Three of the 32 websites reviewed lacked contact names and addresses. Only 17 of the 32 described the organization's background or included an archive of project reports; only a third included an archive of past press releases.
- Almost half (43 percent) of journalists surveyed relied on Google or other search engines to find local organizations. Few sites are organized so that Google and other general-purpose search engines can search reliably beyond their homepage.
- Few NGOs had links and contact information on their websites to other groups doing similar things or serving in the same areas. Journalists' frustration at this lack of coordination among NGOs was apparent, with many reporting that they feel NGOs are "in a crisis together," and should help one another by acknowledging each other's existence.

These frustrations may go some way toward explaining why, by a 3-1 margin, respondents say criticism and skepticism in the press about relief organizations has also increased.

## **Recommendations**

The researchers recommend the following steps to help overcome the obstacles revealed by the survey:

- Establish for NGOs a single organization to produce more detailed information to support journalists covering humanitarian crises, a suggestion strongly supported by journalists surveyed.
- Better promote existing information sources; most journalists are unaware of those that exist now, such as AlertNet and ReliefWeb.
- Establish a mechanism to offer direct support to journalists covering humanitarian crises (including training and finance for travel) on short notice, when necessary.
- Establish a facility to make photography, audio and video available on request to journalists who can't travel, or to supplement on-the-scene reporting when a media outlet can't afford to send a photographer with a reporter.
- Use existing organizations to make available ongoing press-related training, especially for NGO field-office and regional office staff.
- Help NGOs build better websites and other Internet-based tools.
- Establish mechanism for interested journalists to gather, exchange ideas and share a mailing list -- without the list becoming saturated with NGO press releases and coverage pleas.

Published: Mar 04, 2004

Last modified: Mar 04, 2004