

Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage

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On behalf of Fritz Institute (www.fritzinstitute.org) and Reuters Foundation's AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), we surveyed press relations personnel in headquarters and regional offices of humanitarian relief organizations and, in a separate survey, journalists who cover them. Our goal was to determine the dynamics of media coverage of relief efforts. Such efforts tend to occur when, in the words of humanitarian aid organization Oxfam, a crisis situation occurs "that overwhelms the capacity of a society to cope using its resources alone."

This is apparently the largest, most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of this symbiotic relationship. Humanitarian relief organization officials (almost all such organizations are "non-governmental organizations" or "NGOs" for short) say that media coverage of humanitarian relief is an important component of their ability to marshal relief resources and support. Favorable and even neutral coverage can lead to more funding, more cooperation with host governments, and higher staff morale. Journalists depend on relief organizations for orientation in the field and access to populations being helped. Public –and thus journalistic – interest is especially keen in times of war and natural disasters. But interest in educating readers and viewers about many "chronic," long-term relief operations are also strong.

An initial search for documentation of the role the media plays in humanitarian relief, the ways in which relief agencies interact with the press and the societal drivers that lead journalists to cover these stories showed that no large, comprehensive study was available. Hence, we set out to understand the dynamics of the media coverage of humanitarian relief. We were interested in the nature and extent of the coverage, 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. We conducted

interviews and received detailed responses from 54 humanitarian relief organization officials, located mainly in organizations' international headquarters and in regional hubs around the world. About half (47%) were from Europe, 20% from Asia and 11% from North America. (Details are in Appendix B)

We used their responses to develop a questionnaire returned by 290 journalists, of whom 106 specifically identified themselves as working outside North America. Responses were received from every continent except Antarctica and more than 40 countries.

As for NGOs, our surveys found:

- Lack of press relations training, particularly in field offices.
- Lack of donor appreciation for the benefits of good press relations, and lack of metrics for determining "how much is enough."
- Lack of an ethic for publicly sharing information (and perhaps glory) with peer organizations.
- Failure to clearly delineate internally what strategies are best for "marketing" (fundraising and long-term image-building) and what work best for press relations, and to separate the budgeting and staffing required to carry out those strategies.
- Failure to take full advantage of Internet-based tools including, but not limited to, the World Wide Web.

As for the media, we found:

- Few journalists specializing in the coverage of humanitarian crisis and relief stories. This is due, of course, to the episodic nature of crises and the physical and psychological demands this type of reporting demands. But the situation limits strategies for improving coverage.
- Lack of resources to finance crisis coverage.
- Lack of specialist knowledge, including local history, social customs, even the legal rights of populations being helped.
- Poor (or non-existent) use of existing information

sources such as AlertNet and ReliefWeb.

- Impatience.
- Crisis fatigue.

There are also many things we did not find:

- Conventional wisdom – apparently based on the existence of a few well-known television personalities – is that covering humanitarian operations is a regular full-time beat. Nothing could be further from the truth.
- Celebrities pushing specific causes do attract media coverage, but celebrity-oriented coverage tends to be short-term.
- Conventional wisdom among NGOs is that journalists are ignorant of chronic problems caused by poverty and disease. But journalist respondents, in answering specific questions and in open-ended comments, displayed a good grasp of chronic problems such as poverty and AIDS. They also understood what is at stake worldwide – poverty, hunger and disease are the precursors, as well as the products of war, terrorism, and natural disasters.
- Conventional wisdom is that reporters are neither as knowledgeable nor as courteous as they used to be. While there are plenty of anecdotes circulating among NGOs and other journalists about the antics of various journalists in the field, journalists themselves say the situation is, if anything, improving.

Our data leads us to several key recommendations:

- Establishment of a single organization to produce more detailed information to support journalists. Journalists strongly support the idea. It would also be more efficient. Why should every

NGO spend its resources to produce background material (so-called “crisis profiles”) when one well-done, current, and constantly updated crisis profile could be referenced by all?

- Better promotion of existing information sources; most journalists are unaware of those that exist now, such as AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int), the European Commission (http://europa.eu.int/comm/echo/index_en.htm), various United Nations Web sites, and even sites run by the diplomatic corps of almost all sovereign nations.
- Establishment of a mechanism to offer direct support to journalists interested in covering humanitarian emergencies (including training and finance for travel) on short notice when necessary.
- Establishment of 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 organization cannot afford to send a photographer with a reporter.
- Take advantage of organizations that provide training in press relations to make ongoing training available, especially for NGO field-office and regional office staff.
- Help for NGOs to build better Web sites and other Internet-based tools such as LISTSERVs and newsgroups.
- A mechanism to allow journalists interested in this kind of coverage to gather, exchange ideas, and share a mailing list – without the list becoming saturated with press releases and individual pleas for coverage from NGOs.