

Haiti: Questions for Journalism (Part Two) Guilt and Involvement

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/02/16/haiti-questions-for-journalism-part-two-guilt-and-involvement/

2010-2-16

The Haitian earthquake was a terrifying TV tableau of human misery, pain, and fear. Emotions of hope, despair and disbelief swept around the island with the seismic shocks. So it's hardly surprising that witnesses to the aftermath also felt swamped by human feelings. How can journalists show that emotion without succumbing to it? How involved should a journalist get in helping those she watches?

There is a real set of dilemmas here that say a lot about journalism today and its struggle to report on humanitarian crises. But it goes deeper than that to touch upon the core problem of how journalists manage what I call the Cycle of Sensitivity. As journalists we witness hugely emotional events. We then package them using professional skills that exclude emotions from the production process: we have to get the job done. But then we re-introduce the emotions into the report because we have to convey to the public the full humanity of the story. It's how we do it that decides the ethical value of the journalism.

CNN's Anderson Cooper is a brave and honourable correspondent who has put himself on the line in various danger zones. But how much is he using his personality to tell the story and how much has he become it? In Haiti, for example, he was [filmed rescuing a young boy](#) from a violent crowd. It was an instinctive and practical reaction on the spur of the moment. But did it shatter his objectivity?



Surely the BBC would not be tempted? The excellent Matthew Price, who was the BBC's first person on the ground in Haiti, has spoken at length about how they did cross the line at one point. Overall, his reporting was outstanding for its calm, thorough and relentless passage through the hell that was Haiti. He kept talking to Haitians and giving them the chance to speak for themselves. And he made it clear – without hysteria – that there was a colossal failure to deliver aid.

This is the classic understanding of the role of the journalist in a crisis situation. As Matthew made clear in an interview on the [Media Show](#) he is 'not a doctor or a builder'. But that as a professional communicator he could make a difference by telling the world what was going on, so that people would donate money and governments would send aid.

However, at one point they did dramatically intervene when they were filming a young, exhausted woman about to give birth among the rubble. Price's producer felt she had to get to a hospital. As they had the only transport, they took her, and she and the baby survived. The doctor told Price afterwards that it was their intervention that had saved those lives.

Price's team did film the incident, including footage of Matthew helping the woman into the car. But he did not make the rescue and his part in it the centre of the story. So in that sense, I think that he just about 'got away' with what was clearly a breach of 'normal' journalistic objectivity. He certainly wasn't making a drama out of a crisis – the crisis was already there. And while their actions became part of the narrative, it was still clearly about the plight of the woman not about their 'heroism'.

Price points out that there is a dilemma here in terms of public expectations. If you do intervene then the viewer loses trust in the reporter as an impartial observer. However, there is also a danger that if you don't show any compassion then the public will demand to know why you didn't help.

I think we are in a new place with humanitarian reporting for a whole lot of reasons. Firstly, new media means that NGOs and citizens can report on what's happening directly and without the strictures of journalistic dispassion. I think that means the journalists should stress their professionalism, not abandon it. But here's the (benign) paradox. The same new media allows the professional journalist to use blogs, online video, Twitter etc to give more of the emotional background and their own reflections to supplement their core reportage. 24 hour news allows them to tell the facts but also to show some context, both to the events but also how they are showing them.

I also think that a good reporter (like Anderson and Price) has the credibility to allow humanity into their work. Jon Snow at Channel 4 News was the master of the correspondent who wears his heart on his sleeve, but is also trusted. Others will not want to foreground that empathy, as Channel 4 News' [Jonathan Rugman](#) explained in a fascinating blog about his more restrained emotional reaction to reporting Haiti:

"I think I remain sanguine about the Haiti experience, partly because of the extraordinary way the many Haitians I met handled themselves. .. You would never wish an earthquake on anyone, but bizarrely it is because Haitians were so poor in the first place that they have handled this disaster with remarkable stoicism... The anger at the grindingly slow delivery of aid came from the aid agencies and from the journalists, but not, it seemed to me, from many Haitians themselves...and there was a real risk of transferring one's own anger, as an eyewitness, to victims so lost in a daze of incomprehension that they were still working out how they felt."

Journalists don't get a lot of time to think as they cover a breaking disaster story. So it is good to hear people like Price and Rugman reflecting so thoughtfully after the event. I still believe in the value of aiming for objective, dispassionate reporting. But I have always believed that journalism is an act of human communication and that empathy can be part of the process. I am sure that human interest is at the heart of good journalism that connects you to a distant event. What is hard is not allowing that emotion to become the story itself.

This is the second blog looking at the Haiti coverage, the first is [here](#). Polis will be researching this as part of our examination of media and humanitarian and development issues.

If you want to get involved in that process, contact us via polis@lse.ac.uk

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science