

Haiti: Questions for Journalism (Part One)

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/02/10/haiti-questions-for-journalism-part-one/

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An AP photographer snaps other photographers (AP)

It now appears that the Haiti Earthquake was a disaster on the scale of the 2004 Asian Tsunami in terms of loss of life. This is less important, of course, but it was/is also a media event on the same scale. But what questions does it raise about how journalism deals with humanitarian crises? What's changed in six years?

We are just starting to digest the lessons from Haiti, so I can only raise some questions. At Polis and elsewhere, researchers are sifting through the data and discussing the significance, but here are some tentative thoughts. I'd welcome any information on others who are looking at these issues and your thoughts on how we should be researching them.

1. Attention Surplus?

Normally the aid agencies and pioneer journalists are crying out for attention. "Look at this forgotten war/famine!" "Come with me to this flooded village" they plead to the readers/viewers. Not a problem with Haiti. The dramatic scale, the immediate impact, the compelling imagery, the proximity to America, the pathos of the such a poor place being so badly hit, all meant that this was a story that did play big and was attended to by the public.

We all found gruesome examples where newspapers led on celebrity stories or TV programmes covered scandals instead of Haiti. But generally speaking everyone on the planet near a TV, radio, newspaper or computer would have had access to vast amounts of information and imagery.

There is an argument that says that this kind of all-consuming story actually distorts our understanding of suffering. Does Haiti mean that we will ignore longer-term problems or any crisis that fails to measure up to this colossal scale of destruction?

Is there a danger that the suffering so vividly on display becomes a kind of humanitarian soft-porn? In one sense, Haiti was an 'easy' story to report. Searing imagery was everywhere. Each person had an appalling tale to tell.

In fact the real question is whether there were too many journalists in Haiti, getting in the way of the relief work. The sheer volume of media production suggested that this was a feeding frenzy. This is more than just a practical question, as raised in a series of fascinating articles reacting to a piece by the picture editor of the New York Times piece who asked ['are there too many photographers in Haiti?'](#)

Of course, one response was, 'yes, there are too many now but within a few weeks there won't be enough'.

I sensed a public backlash against the media presence. Many people thought (I think unfairly) that the media were eating food and using shelter that Haitians needed. The relief effort may have been badly co-ordinated, but perhaps so was the media effort.

Coming up in subsequent posts:

2. The ethics of involvement

3. Accountability of Aid

4. A Voice for the 'Victim'

5. Action and Memory

6. A 'Deeper' Narrative?

Check out the Polis [website](#) for a whole series of papers, reports and articles on humanitarian communications.

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