

Dispatches From Disaster Zones: Media and Humanitarianism

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Here are my notes from [a symposium hosted by the Red Cross](#) on how humanitarian crises are mediated by journalism. This session asked Can Media Stop Disasters Happening?

Where's the media?

[Bruna Seu \(Birkbeck\)](#) is working on a research project next year with Polis and other colleagues here at LSE. She is social psychologist who looks at how people respond to media coverage of disasters and conflict.

'The good news' says Bruna is that people will respond positively in the right circumstances. They need to see a personal, human effect on the victim. They also like to see others giving too. And they need to see their donation having a direct effect (like Oxfam's Buy A Goat campaign) and finally they like to feel personally responsible.

The bad news is that there are things that hinder giving. People are very sceptical of aid agencies and that has become part of the 'ordinary narrative' used by people about the issues. They say they don't trust humanitarians even when they do. [I would argue this is part of a more general reflex public scepticism about a range of political issues and may stem from an overdose of marketing and spin from governments as well as civil society organisations like NGOs].

People may not deny that there is a disaster or crisis, but they will question the motives of the NGOs. They think (correctly) that humanitarians also want your money as well as your sympathy. People also feel overwhelmed. They rightly think that their donation won't solve the whole problem so why donate at all?

Bruna Seu points out the important point that people's response to a crisis is a process and dynamic. There are different levels at which people might engage. All this adds complexity to the relationship between the citizen and the issue at hand. The media is critical in shaping that relationship.

So our response is not just rational. We relate to people who suffer on an emotional and personal level as well. But with someone who is in some far away country, that relationship happens through the media.

Glenda Cooper

Journalist and researcher [Glenda Cooper](#) points out that there have been 245 disasters around the world already this year so we can't expect the news media to give them all extensive coverage.

She believes that aid agencies are too pious in their complaints about lack of coverage in mainstream media. She says that they need to work harder at using new media following the example of NGOs like Oxfam and SCF.

Sam Barrett Oxfam

Sam Barrett, head of media at Oxfam, said that 'we are in the middle of a huge shift'. Giving is relatively less important these days, he says, than advocacy and mobilisation of other resources. 'We are focusing on areas where we can make a difference and create tipping points'.

'Giving people assistance saves lives in the short term but won't change lives in the long term' says Barrett, so NGOs need to think about new creative relationships with the media but also with the people they work with.

The media can help by increasing the likelihood of people donating. Crisis coverage stimulates Oxfam supporters to donate but it doesn't always bring in new people.

Media is crucial in raising issues up politicians' priorities. And it is a political response that makes a longer term difference. Darfur is a case in point of an issue that the media helped to move up the agenda.

'This is a challenge about creativity, not a whinge' says Barrett. The era of using celebrities and dragging journalists around on trips is over.

Photography is interesting in that it can cover an issue but also allow people to tell their own stories. Oxfam sent Don McCullin to take photographs of suffering in a refugee camp and then used them as part of a mock-up of a refugee camp back in the UK.

Barrett also says it is about understanding news cycles and even disaster cycles such as weather-related crises that happen at predictable seasonal times. So NGOs can even prepare for disasters and feed it into their media work.

New media technologies mean that people in disaster zones can communicate directly themselves. So NGOs have to think about how they facilitate that rather than just creating their own communications.

Sam Kiley

Journalist Sam Kiley [who is speaking at Polis on February 13th] claimed that reporters have no moral responsibilities but they are all moral beings. Their job is to sell a product but as individuals they do want to make a difference. That provides aid agencies with an opportunity.

The decreasing resources for international journalism also provides an opportunity for NGOs to engage with media.

Kiley was very critical about naive journalists who cover NGO photo-opportunities without looking at the issues behind the disasters. Why for example does no-one look at the causes of famines in places like Kenya or Ethiopia where there is plenty of food but it is badly distributed. NGOs have the resources to do this research and analysis, journalists don't. But will NGOs tell the world about that more difficult and complex reality?

So giving money to micro-finance may make more sense than donating to food aid – but it's not a sexy story so neither media nor NGOs will tell it.

Conclusion?

What do we actually want from media coverage of humanitarian disasters? It seemed to me after this debate that there is still some confusion about why we should bother telling the public and trying to get them engaged. If it is just for their money or do we want to provoke some sort of political action? There is an appetite from the public for more information and even for action, but there will be limits to what we can expect. There is also a limit to the ability of mainstream media to tell such a complex story.

Certainly it is clear that both aid agencies and journalists have some way to go to embrace the new realities of the globalised Internet age but from the evidence of this session, there is a desire to begin that process. I would agree with Sam Barrett and Sam Kiley that one vital element is that the distinction between journalists and NGOs is breaking down. NGOs are now Media. [For more on that have a [read of this paper](#)]

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