

Disasters and aid: does the media have any impact?

(Harvard Pt V)

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After the Burma cyclone and the China quake we all realised how vital the media was in reporting disasters. In China a repressive regime rushed to make sure that international coverage was relatively open and sympathetic. In Burma the generals made sure that journalists (and aid workers) were kept away from the carnage. So what should be the role of the news media?



Here at [Harvard Douglas Van Belle from Wellington University](#) argues that it matters because media coverage drives aid, but not in the way that you might think. Governments give because their citizens respond to the grim news pictures. He says that in the past this media effect was as influential upon the UK government in driving policy as is colonial ties. It was as influential upon US policy as the factor of strategic interests. This is strong stuff and based on textual research.

He says that this can be put in terms of numbers. Prior to the 1989 this was \$1.7 million dollars in aid for every New York Times story about a disaster.

Since the 1980s the media only judged coverage of disasters on their scale – distance was no longer any object. Disaster coverage is now truly global. Politicians learnt after the Sahal drought on that decade that publics cared when they see disasters through their media. The governmental response is bureaucratic – it sends aid in quite a predictable relationship.

But after the Cold War the international media coverage and its effect changes. The reaction of the media to disaster, the public response and so the government policy becomes much more random.

News Media now only matters if it is truly tremendous or if there are special factors that make it stand out.

Around 2000 this changes again. As an international system evolves to respond to disasters the news media becomes significant again in a more consistent way.

Interestingly for the journalist, Douglas says that the actual content of the coverage is unimportant in terms of provoking aid. The only thing that matters is the scale. More coverage gets more aid regardless of other factors. You can see Douglas' paper if you click through to the conference papers [here](#).

Of course, other conference delegates have different explanations for the changes in media effects that Douglas describes.

[Paul Mitchell](#) from the World Bank points out other factors which impact on the way coverage changes and has different results in raising aid such as the closure of African news bureaux which restricted access. Humanitarian agencies then had a critical role to bring journalists to the stories. This was highly effective in provoking meaningful coverage. But then with cell phone and sat phones the journalists can get there themselves so may report the events differently. It sounds a bit mechanistic but I think Paul is right to point out how technology can effect editorial policy.

[Susan Moeller](#) insists that content does matter. Newsrooms have reasons why they cover certain disasters in certain ways. For example, mainstream media finds it difficult to have more than one disaster at a time.

This is a great bit of empirical research. But it strikes me that aid is quite a narrow measure of interest. And looking at the logistics of coverage is also a bit of a distraction. Humanitarian disasters are only one point at which people or governments feel compelled to care about somewhere else. The effect of the coverage in terms of how we

understand other places and people goes beyond the moment of crisis.

It also seems to me that there are particular cycles of public perception – especially in response to campaigns such as [Make Poverty History](#) which altered the terms of communication between media, public and government. And in that sense HOW a disaster is reported has impact beyond how much aid is given.

As Douglas says “These are very rare events but they impact on what they think about media and causality. The content, the dramatic pictures don’t sway the [government aid]bureaucrats but they will be more likely to give aid if they feel the public knows about the disaster through the media”.

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