

Humanitarian relief and the media: making the relationship more effective

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Humanitarian aid organisations need the press. Good coverage can help with fundraising, smooth the way to cooperation with host governments and raise staff morale. Journalists need humanitarian organisations to provide on-the-ground expertise and resources, and the raw material of their stories. It is therefore surprising how little each side understands the other:

- NGO press officers complain that few journalists know about chronic, long-term problems such as HIV/AIDS in Africa or the comeback of malaria. Journalists say that they do know about these issues, but need better reasons to run stories on chronic issues today, rather than at some point in the future.
- NGO press officers complain that journalists are less knowledgeable than they used to be, and less polite in the field. Journalists doubt that humanitarian organisations operate efficiently, and are sceptical about their motives.
- Journalists complain that NGO press events lack the kind of follow-up or relevance that could result in more than a single story about an event.
- NGOs offer increasingly elaborate websites. Journalists find that the sites do not contain all the information they need – and that for competitive reasons NGOs usually do not link to other NGOs doing the same kind

of work or providing aid in the same area.

This article reports on two surveys exploring the nature of the relationship between humanitarian NGOs and the press, carried out in the latter half of 2003. The work was sponsored by the Fritz Institute and the Reuters Foundation. The first survey covered press officers and field personnel at 54 humanitarian aid organisations worldwide, by email and telephone. Their responses helped shape the second survey, covering reporters, editors and opinion writers. More than 290 responses were tallied. The full report, by far the largest and most systematic ever attempted in this field, is available at www.fritzinstitute.org.

Has coverage of aid work increased?

By a three-to-one margin, journalists said that coverage of humanitarian aid operations had increased. This was contrary to the belief among many NGO press officers that coverage was static or declining, especially for chronic problems such as HIV/AIDS in Africa. Research in NEXIS, a database of articles, showed that the volume of stories on long-term chronic crises has indeed been increasing in the mainstream press. The coverage is spread across many more groups providing aid, including humanitarian NGOs, perhaps contributing to the perception of less coverage by individual NGO press officers.

The bad news: a more critical press

By a four-to-one margin, journalists said that criticism and scepticism in the press about relief organisations had increased. Among columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers, the gap was 11-to-1: 57% said they were more critical about relief organisations, as against 5% who said they were not. Journalists criticised NGOs as having ‘large bureaucracies’, and for staging ‘fancy events and expensive lunches aimed at attracting journalists’. Faith-based organisations were noticeably exempt from these criticisms. It seems that journalists have only a hazy idea about what overhead is necessary in any organisation, and only a vague notion about where to gather comparative data (one source for North American NGOs is www.guidestar.com).

What makes news?

Reporters who cover crises do not do so full time. In fact, the average among the respondents was less than one story in five. Only two of the 265 journalists who responded to this question said that they exclusively covered crises. Only 10% (27) said that crisis stories made up more than half of their output. Thus, the newsworthiness of humanitarian stories is judged by the norms of other stories they do, such as timeliness and death-toll.

Almost half of the respondents (49%) said that a high death-toll was the best reason to run a relief story. Having a readership of the same background as the people

affected by the crisis was also cited as making a story compelling, as was the involvement of aid workers from the readership or viewership area. As for what keeps crisis stories off the news agenda, the two main reasons given were a lack of journalistic resources and 'crisis fatigue'; each was mentioned by more than a quarter of respondents. The third most cited reason was the predominance of Iraq and Afghanistan, followed closely by a 'lack of new angles' to long-running crises.

There was a marked orientation towards breaking news: almost half (48%) of all the stories done by all the respondents were categorised by them as breaking news; 31% were categorised as features and 20% as opinion, columns or editorials. Even respondents who classified themselves as columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers did a substantial amount of what they considered to be breaking news (43% of their output, on average). The lesson from this is that humanitarian aid organisations should not pour huge resources into 'educating' journalists about crises. The issue is not lack of knowledge, but that journalists and their editors do not consider many crises to be 'news'.

What journalists want

Journalists most want what most NGOs seem loath to provide: links on their websites to other groups doing similar things or working in the same areas. The next most popular request was for NGOs to hold more press conferences. Journalists, particularly outside North America, also asked for training, travel help and free editorial material, such as images and

video. This was confirmed by NGO respondents, who reported an increase in requests by journalists for 'stock footage' video and still images to use in coverage. Many NGOs have started to put still images on their websites in response. While these images are typically collected informally, some NGOs give their field staff digital cameras and ask them to submit photographs.

Lessons for NGOs

Resource issues

Only nine of the 54 NGO respondents said that they had a specific budget for press relations within field and regional offices. The approach is remarkably ad hoc, despite the potential fundraising benefits of a good relationship with the press. While donors want to see their money used operationally, some are willing to specifically fund press relations efforts.

NGOs acknowledge many missteps in press relations, and many NGO respondents mentioned a need for more training. Although large international organisations often hire experienced journalists as press officers at headquarters, regional press officers are rarely well-versed in international press relations. There is, however, little time or money to train press officers in the field. No respondent outside CARE and the IFRC mentioned having a budget for such training beyond perhaps a few hundred dollars for attending short seminars.

Nevertheless, regional press officers described the range of basic services they provide to journalists without special prompting. These include writing and distributing

press releases and background reports on regional aid needs, offering photographs for use with journalists' stories and holding the press conferences that journalists say they want more of. They displayed good understanding of the need for timeliness in attending to journalists' requests.

The web

The worldwide web has opened up opportunities for humanitarian aid organisations to gain international visibility. But the potential of Internet technologies has barely begun to be exploited. Few NGOs have a formal online press room and archive of press releases. Those that do, and had the usage data to tell, reported that these areas were popular with users.

Key issues include:

- Few humanitarian organisations' websites have internal search engines.
- None of the NGO officers we talked to said that their organisation had a formal procedure in place to check on a continuing basis whether their website was easily found on the various international versions of Google, Yahoo and other search engines. Several assumed that their webmasters or other 'technical' personnel handled such chores.
- Many sites cannot be fully searched from the outside by search engines such as Google, either because the pages are sparse on text or because they are 'framed'. Framed pages load faster when bandwidth is low, but cannot easily be found and indexed by search engines.

- Newer web technologies such as streaming video and blogs (weblogs: online newsletters by individual or corporate reporters) are virtually ignored.
- Older Internet technologies that predate the web are sparsely used. These include chat rooms, LISTSERVs and Usenet newsgroups.
- Email is often used to send press releases, but distribution lists are built in a haphazard manner. Fax and post are also used, despite the costs and potential for errors in distribution. Email is clearly underutilised, perhaps because address lists are poor.

Conclusions

The issues that need fixing fall into two categories: misconceptions and inefficiencies. On the misconception side, humanitarian aid organisations should pay closer attention to what journalists say they need to enable them to cover crises. The journalists have a fair idea about what the crises are, but often lack the financial resources necessary to report them.

On the inefficiencies side, NGOs need to rethink their traditional ideas about training. If a typical field office staff member stays with an organisation for two years, expensive annual training

visits would benefit that organisation for only 18 months before replacements are hired.

Organisations should thus think about sharing training visits and basic training materials, and about supplementing visits with alternative training methods such as online or CD-based distance learning. Finally, humanitarian aid organisations have taken great advantage of the worldwide web, but can do far more, at trivial extra cost.