



ALNAP

LEARNING • ACCOUNTABILITY • PERFORMANCE
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

“Don’t Chase Headlines, Chase Good Quality News... Don’t Be First, Be Accountable.”

A New Agenda for News Media and Humanitarian Aid



*Leire Pajin,
Spanish Secretary of State,
International Cooperation,
opening the meeting*



*Kate Adie, OBE
Biannual Meeting Chair*



*Glenda Cooper,
Visiting Fellow at the Reuters
Institute, Key Note Speaker*



*José María Figueres,
former President of Costa Rica,
in final plenary*



*Brendan Gormley,
Chief Executive, DEC,
in final plenary*



*Jemilah Mahmood,
President, MERCY Malaysia
in final plenary*

**Report of the 23rd ALNAP Biannual Meeting
4th June 2008, Madrid
Foreword by Brendan Gormley**

ALNAP, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, was established in 1997, following the multi-agency evaluation of the Rwanda genocide. It is a collective response by the humanitarian sector, dedicated to strengthening humanitarian performance through improved learning and accountability. It is a unique network of the key international humanitarian organisations and experts from across the humanitarian sector, including members from donor, NGO, Red Cross/Crescent, UN and independent/academic organisations.

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Acknowledgements:

This paper results from the wide-ranging observations, perspectives and recommendations exchanged during the ALNAP 23rd Biannual Meeting. We thank all those who participated in the meeting for their valuable contributions and DARA for their gracious hospitality and generosity. We also thank Catherine Fentress for her contribution to the original biannual meeting background paper, upon which this paper is also based, and Brendan Gormley for his Foreword.

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Foreword

The 23rd ALNAP Biannual, held in Madrid in June 2008, was a remarkable and memorable event. Our aim was to reflect on the key issues that shape the complex relationships between key actors and players in the news media and the humanitarian sectors and to collectively frame a new agenda for the future.

The wealth of experience assembled was impressive and I found myself rubbing shoulders with operational programme managers, humanitarian evaluators, accountability specialists, directors of aid agencies, heads of foreign news desks, veteran journalists and even princesses and former presidents. I think that everyone present was able to appreciate the convening power of the ALNAP network, in bringing together such a diverse group of stakeholders

This event allowed some of the most recent experiences in the aid world to be discussed, including the Tsunami, the Niger food crisis, and Myanmar. A recurring theme was the potential for new technologies and user-generated content to change the information dynamics around humanitarian crises and response. Discussions focused on the complex web at the heart of the media-humanitarian interactions, raising key issues around competition, accountability, performance and transparency. The contributions were honest, forthright and frequently challenging.

I believe that we began to create an agenda which reflects what is going on now in the world, and provides a credible and authoritative basis for future action. I see this as a very healthy sign that people from different sectors can sit down together and establish a productive dialogue around shared areas of effort. I would welcome more such efforts in the future - involving the military, maybe, or the private sector, as the "non-traditional" counterparts to the humanitarians.

This excellent report reflects the hard work that the ALNAP Secretariat has put into collating existing evidence and experience on this vital topic, bringing it together with the outcomes of our dialogue and discussions at the Biannual. They present the whole in a way that is rich, readable and compelling.

The recommendations outlined here point to a sound, realistic and honest foundation for future media-humanitarian interactions. While recognising the different vocations, I hope that this work will be used as a starting point for further discussion, debate and - most importantly - collective action that bridges the humanitarian-media divide, and contributes to better, more accountable and effective aid.

Brendan Gormley
Chief Executive
Disasters Emergency Committee

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Executive Summary

“Don’t chase headlines, chase good quality news... Don’t be first, be accountable” is the key message delivered to the news media and humanitarian communities by this latest ALNAP report. The report draws on debates at the 23rd ALNAP Biannual Meeting held on the 4th June 2008 in Madrid, as well as a broader programme of research and analysis. It outlines a series of new opportunities and challenges for decision makers across the donor, media and humanitarian communities, and points towards a new agenda for news media and humanitarian aid.

At the point of a humanitarian crisis, a complex set of obligations and interests arise in media and humanitarian agencies, and become interlocked. Relief agencies rely heavily on the media to get the humanitarian message out, to inform the world of unfolding disasters and to harness the power of donors to raise funds and respond to the crisis. Cash-strapped news agencies primarily concerned with providing coverage of the latest world affairs and ensuring currency, relevance and audience engagement are increasingly dependent on humanitarian agencies for access and information.

The relationships between providers of news and providers of humanitarian aid can influence public perceptions and capture political attention. They can trigger, inform, critique and, in some cases, undermine international responses. They can also fundamentally shape information flows and aid allocations. In times of crisis, the relationship can be essential and complementary, but it is also often - and at the same time - uncomfortable and ambiguous.

The report points to five key changes which could improve this complex relationship in favour of improved humanitarian outcomes. First, greater effort is required to improve understanding between aid and media agencies, moving towards mutual respect - and perhaps even trust - as a means of addressing the current, complex set of

relationships. Second, there need to be attempts to change the existing flawed and simplistic narratives about crises and people affected by them, and to change the ‘media logic’ around disasters. Third, local and national media in disaster-affected countries should be viewed as instrumental part of humanitarian response capacities. Fourth, more should be made of the potential of existing humanitarian information platforms for communication. Fifth, and most importantly, those affected by crises need to be put centre stage in efforts to improve humanitarian reporting.

How can such changes be brought about? Increased accountability and transparency within both the humanitarian and media sectors lie at the heart of possible solutions. A wide range of actions, both short term and long term, could be taken by humanitarian agencies, the media and donor governments to change the current paradigm. The discussions at the Biannual Meeting and subsequent research and analysis identified five recommendations:

1. Evaluate the role of media relations and communications in humanitarian action, and actively apply this learning within and across agencies
2. Undertake a regular, independent review of “Humanitarian Reporting”
3. Establish collaborative partnerships to enable cross-sector efforts in “disaster myth-busting”
4. Establish a global alliance of media and humanitarian actors, at the local, national and international levels
5. Establish serving the needs of crisis-affected populations as a central common goal of both media and humanitarian agencies

Section 1. Introduction

At the point of a humanitarian crisis, a complex set of interests, relationships, obligations and accountabilities arise and lock together. They can trigger, inform, critique and, in some cases, undermine international responses, influencing public perceptions, capturing political attention and shaping flows of information, aid and other resources.

Some of the most challenging, compelling and - at times - frustrating relationships are those played out between humanitarian and news media organisations. Taken as a whole, these relationships are perhaps best characterised as the interactions between two complex, multifaceted global networks. These networks have diverse and separate mandates and goals, albeit with some interesting common ground. Both increasingly have - or at least aim for - global reach and both operate on the basis of rapid and timely response to events.

In certain high-profile crises, the work of relief agencies and the media becomes highly interconnected and interdependent. Relief agencies rely heavily on the media to get the humanitarian message out, to inform the world of unfolding disasters and to harness the power of donors to raise funds and respond to the crisis. News agencies provide around-the-clock coverage of the latest events and world affairs, working to ensure currency, relevance and audience engagement.

The relationship between providers of news and providers of humanitarian aid in times of crisis can be essential and complementary but is also often - and at the same time - uncomfortable and ambiguous. At the operational level, there is evidence that the lines are blurring. Cash-strapped or access-poor news desks are turning to aid workers to help in the reporting of crises, while journalists are joining cohorts of aid workers in responding to and advocating for the needs of crises-affected people. These changing interactions have profound

implications for the ways in which information in crisis situations is gathered, used and controlled. These, in turn, powerfully shape the expectations of the individuals and institutions that fund aid efforts, as well as the behaviours of staff in agencies managing and delivering aid.

Is it actually possible for the relationship between the aid and media worlds to improve humanitarian outcomes? Debates and practical efforts in this area have - according to some commentators - not evolved significantly in the past twenty years, despite wide-ranging changes in both humanitarian and media work. To take just one long-standing argument, the idea that the so-called "CNN effect" is an important part of what determines major funding for crises, implies that by exhibiting greater proportionality, the media and aid agencies can contribute to humanitarian responses becoming fairer, with aid allocated more in accordance with the needs of affected people. But this knowledge does not appear to have been acted upon to any great extent by either the media or humanitarian agencies.

Collective reflection on longstanding issues and new challenges has the potential to shed light on the dependencies, conflicts and nuances that make up the media-humanitarian relationships, and point towards a future agenda for improving reporting of, and responses to, humanitarian crises.

With these issues in mind, representatives of the news media and aid agencies came together at the **ALNAP 23rd Biannual Meeting** held on the 4th June 2008 in Madrid on "News Media and Humanitarian Aid" to discuss the rapidly changing 'information environment' in which humanitarian action takes place, and to identify lessons for the future.

The purpose of this document

This paper draws on evidence from existing literature, as well as on the wide-ranging observations, perspectives and recommendations exchanged during the ALNAP 23rd Biannual Meeting. It provides an

up-to-date overview of the current context and identifies gaps in knowledge in order to stimulate new thinking in this area. It does so with the overall aim of presenting decision makers across the donor, media and humanitarian communities with a series of new opportunities and challenges for improving information about, and responses to, humanitarian crises.

Overview of key questions

Five sets of questions from the evidence and experience of media and humanitarian actors are central to ALNAP's mission to improve humanitarian performance through improved learning and accountability. These were presented at the Biannual, and explored by participants.

- **Multiple relationships between the global media and humanitarian networks** have the potential to fundamentally shape what is understood and communicated about humanitarian crises and responses to them. It could be argued, for example, that the dependence of humanitarian agencies on the media for marketing and profile inhibits transparency, learning and accountability. *How can the multiple relationships between the media and aid agencies be better understood and managed in ways that promote learning and accountability? And can media and humanitarian agencies actually collaborate better to improve humanitarian outcomes?*
- **Ways in which crises are represented by agencies and the media have a fundamental influence on what is done, by whom, and why.** The Tsunami Evaluation Coalition concluded that much of the aid effort was inappropriate to the needs and capacities of actors in affected countries and asked, damningly, 'Whose crisis was it?' Aid victims are often represented as 'passive victims' waiting for aid to arrive, while local capacities are dismissed as redundant and aid agencies hailed

as heroic deliverers of life-sustaining goods and services. What is 'sold' to the public and donors by agencies and the media may not always correlate with an accurate representation of what is actually happening on the ground. *Is more accurate, objective reporting possible? If so, how could it contribute to improved representation of crises and crisis-affected populations?*

- **National and local media play important roles in many crises and they also have relationships with international agencies.** Often, they are treated with mistrust and caution, not least because political allegiances may run counter to the humanitarian imperative. But local and national media also play vital roles in the immediate response to a crisis, and in supporting the understanding and knowledge of crisis-affected people. *Given the recommendation of the Tsunami Evaluation to re-orient humanitarian assistance around local capacities, what can be said about the relationship between international agencies and local media capacities? Is it taking on the importance that it could and should?*
- **The media plays an increasingly important role in communicating with affected populations.** They can provide essential communications during and after emergencies to affected populations on issues that directly affect people's survival. However, there continue to be gaps in the ways in which information is shared in emergencies; aid organisations and the media have focused on gathering information for their own needs and not enough on exchanging that information with the very people they aim to support. *How can beneficiaries be put centre stage in the relationship between these two global networks? Do networks and new information*

technologies present opportunities for change?

- Finally, there are a range of system-wide media information platforms that have developed from within the sector to help improve the flow of information and knowledge between and across the networks. Reuters Alertnet, IRIN (The Integrated Regional Information Network) and ReliefWeb are all examples of such platforms. It is important to understand the effect these platforms have had, and the contribution do they make to the relationship between these two global networks. *Is their potential to improve the media-humanitarian relationship being maximised?*

The Biannual Meeting addressed these key questions in more depth. This paper brings together the results of the discussions with the latest cutting-edge research on this topic, and draws some general points about each of these areas.

In the concluding section, key ideas and insights are used to point towards a future agenda, suggesting a way of re-thinking the way that humanitarian and media networks could and should interact.

Section 2. Managing Multiple Relationships

News media and humanitarian agencies play crucial roles during humanitarian crises. As has already been suggested, their work becomes interconnected and interdependent, but this does not mean that it becomes identical. Rather, they retain distinct priorities and responsibilities - they are subject to different external pressures and report to different constituents.

Journalists, on the one hand, are charged with providing "infotainment", reporting what is happening, working to maximise exposure, audience, and - in most cases - contribution to profits, in a highly competitive and increasingly commercialised

information market. Their priority is to connect with their audience or readership; otherwise papers do not get sold, and channels get switched. Humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, have historically been concerned with saving lives, alleviating suffering and implementing the ideals of global humanitarianism. During emergencies these distinct roles can create tensions and can also become blurred. As Lindsey Hilsum observes, "aid agencies become the news, and the news becomes a charity appeal".¹

It is well documented that the ability of humanitarian agencies to promote their work, to raise funds and galvanise public and donor support is highly dependent on the practices of the media.² Aid agencies also use the media for advocacy and influencing public opinion, and it is important not to reduce the relationship to fundraising. The media play a crucial role in the 'crisis triangle' of policymakers, humanitarian agencies and the news media and are often depicted as a causal link between a given crisis and the response of the international community.³

It is worth noting, however, that while the view that the media are one of the strongest factors shaping humanitarian aid policy and levels - the so-called "CNN effect" - is widespread, the issue continues to be heavily debated. Analysis suggests that the volume of emergency assistance any humanitarian crisis attracts is influenced by three main factors working either in conjunction or individually: the intensity of media coverage; the degree of political and security interest that donor governments have in a particular region; and the strength of humanitarian agencies present in a specific country experiencing a humanitarian emergency.⁴ This work suggests that the nature and extent of a crisis does not play a major part in the nature and extent of the response to that crisis, a suggestion borne

¹ Hilsum, L. 1996

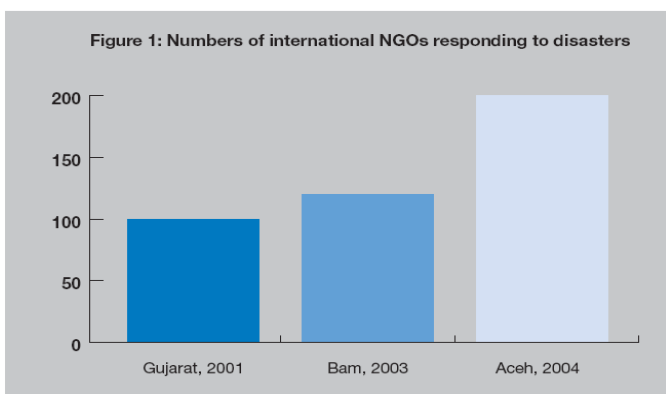
² Benthall, J. 1993; Minear, L. et al. 1996; Hilsum, L. 1996; Large, T. 2007; Cottle, S. and D. Nolan 2007

³ Minear, L. et al. 1996

⁴ Olsen, G. et al, 2003

out by ALNAP's work on proportion and distortion in humanitarian aid allocations.⁵ Recent years have seen enormous growth in the humanitarian sector as traditional humanitarian actors have expanded and been joined by new ones. The number of international NGOs involved in humanitarian work has increased substantially, particularly in high-profile crises such as the response to the Rwandan refugee crisis, the Kosovan 'humanitarian war' and the Indian Ocean tsunami.⁶ The rapid proliferation of NGOs has intensified competition between aid agencies for their 'market share' of media attention and donor funds.⁷ Today, humanitarian agencies confront a globalising, increasingly competitive media environment characterised by new communication technologies and unprecedented "24/7 real-time" capabilities.⁸ In this context, the reliance of aid NGOs on the media, and vice versa, is taking on new characteristics and forms.

Figure 1: Numbers of international agencies responding to disasters



A recent paper based on insider testimonies from some of the major international humanitarian aid agencies⁹ documents how humanitarian agencies' dependence on the media is becoming more complex as they increasingly internalise a global "media logic".¹⁰ Agencies are increasingly pursuing media space to promote "organisational

brands'' in an over-crowded media marketplace and packaging stories to conform to specific, known media needs. Moreover, they seek to facilitate media access to the field, arranging access to field delegates and remote locations. Some have also turned their press offices into newsrooms; providing cash-strapped foreign desks with copy and footage for free.¹¹

The assumption underlying these efforts is that unless information flows from the aid sector are reliable, up-to-date and readily accessible, humanitarian crises will be sidelined.¹² Understandably, the media require an angle or a 'lead' to capture the public attention, emotional response, and to maintain ratings. But the dangers for humanitarian agencies of attempting to 'sell' emergencies to the media, are increasingly being recognised and highlighted by analysts. NGOs need the media to bring public attention to humanitarian emergencies, to lobby political decision makers and mobilise funds. However, in order to attract the spotlight they adhere to a prevailing 'media logic', the priorities and predispositions of which (celebrities, events etc.) are not principally founded on a commitment to global humanitarianism. Moreover, subordination to the 'media logic' predisposes humanitarian issues to fleeting, shallow or questionable coverage.¹³ The fact that high-profile crises are potentially 'good for business'¹⁴ have important implications for the ways in which disasters are represented and perceived in the public imagination.

This state of affairs raises important concerns for journalists as well. Perhaps the most extreme form of aid agencies catering to the media's needs is so-called 'beneficent embedding', where journalists are literally 'bedded down' with NGOs in the field. Arguments over the independence and objectivity of journalists embedded with the armed forces which led the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions apply equally here. While 'embedding' benefits both journalists (in

⁵ Vaux, T., 2006

⁶ Buchanan-Smith, M. 2003

⁷ Ogrizek, M. 2007

⁸ Cottle, S. and D. Nolan, 2007

⁹ Red Cross, Save the Children, Oxfam, World Vision, CARE and Médecins sans Frontières

¹⁰ Cottle, S. and D. Nolan, 2007

¹¹ Cooper, G. 2007a.

¹² Large, T. 2007.

¹³ Cottle, S. and D. Nolan, 2007

¹⁴ Darcy, J. and C. Hofmann 2003

terms of access and security) and NGOs, there is an obvious danger for media organisations that can effectively be co-opted by aid agencies, with implications for exaggeration and spin. According to Stephan Oberreit, Communications Director at MSF-France, during the tsunami the media "crossed the line" from being reporters to being humanitarian actors.¹⁵ While this may not concern humanitarian players directly, it is in the wider interest for the media to remain as independent as is politically and economically possible.¹⁶

There are instances of media scrutiny which counterbalance the increased cosiness of aid-media relationships. Examples are allegations of UN peace keepers being involved in sexual misconduct in DRC and Liberia, humanitarian workers being accused of the same and the Red Cross mishandling public donations in respect of the Bali Bombing in 2004. As Glenda Cooper, one of the keynote speakers at the biannual pointed out, beneficiaries of aid have also started 'playing the media game' and threatening to alert local and international media if agencies do not provide them with what they need. Consequently, NGOs have become increasingly concerned to counter negative press and demonstrate public accountability.¹⁷

ITV News Editor Tim Singleton suggested that many humanitarian agencies are simply unwilling to share information or explore issues that journalists are interested in. It is humanitarian agencies' fear of being compromised or exposed by the media that, to a large extent, encourages shallow, over-simplistic reporting. In general, the Biannual Meeting participants emphasised the need for much greater transparency on the part of humanitarian agencies currently characterised by an opaque 'insiderism'. Greater willingness to provide free access to all news sources (official and unofficial) to journalists could help to ensure accurate and balanced crisis coverage. But this comes with dangers for the organisation - which private or public donor will continue to fund

an agency that admits its liabilities and mistakes? What is also needed is for journalists to stop automatically equating aid mistakes with public scandals.

Ben Parker of IRIN reiterated the need for much greater clarity about what humanitarian aid agencies want from the media - is it money; the common good or simply visibility and recognition? Whatever their motivations, it was suggested that humanitarian agencies needed to "toughen up" and be more transparent in order to better handle the media. The media arguably has clarity on what it wants, but it is shaped by the prevailing media logic. Efforts are needed to change this logic and to support and encourage humanitarian transparency.

New technologies are also altering how, where and by whom disasters are being reported. The internet has created a global space where online diarists or 'bloggers' can offer real-time analysis and commentary on humanitarian affairs, even in isolated places or living in strict regimes. Mobile phones are rapidly becoming an essential instrument in emergencies.¹⁸ According to some, this has created an 'epistemological explosion' in the media coverage of humanitarian disasters - exemplified by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2005, where a high percentage of the images and video footage broadcast around the world were amateur shots taken by tourists.

Journalists and aid agencies confronted by various forms of citizen journalism and user-generated content including photos, blogs, emails, and SMS are being forced to rethink their current roles and relationships. Perhaps the most positive view is that the flow of information is no longer controlled by just a few journalists and aid agencies, because people can tell their own stories.¹⁹ The emerging model is bottom-up, networked, peer-to-peer.²⁰ Aid agencies are responding by adopting 'citizen journalism' techniques, hosting blogs on their websites

¹⁵ World Disasters Report 2005:140

¹⁶ Gordon-Bates, K. 1997

¹⁷ Cottle, S. and D. Nolan, 2007

¹⁸ Ogrizek, M. 2007

¹⁹ Cooper, G. 2007b

²⁰ Sambrooks, R. n.d.

and turning their own staff into journalists and filmmakers.²¹

How to manoeuvre this seeming minefield? The Biannual Chair, Kate Adie, spoke of the need for humanitarians and the media to respect each others work whilst at the same time holding each other accountable. Evaluations and the media can help to hold the humanitarian community to account but what mechanisms are in place for ensuring media accountability? Some saw value in some kind of 'code of practice' for the reporting of emergencies, to be used as the basis of judging media-humanitarian performance. The humanitarian sector already has the Red Cross Code of Conduct for humanitarian agencies, the Sphere and HAP standards, while there are various codes of ethics for journalists. These could provide solid foundations for further work on this issue.

One of the liveliest discussions concerned the tension between editorial independence and media social responsibility (MSR). Sally Begbie noted that while calling upon the media to report on specific humanitarian issues or 'forgotten' disasters could be seen to constitute a violation of editorial independence, there is an important counter-argument. This suggests that there is a moral imperative for proportional coverage and that even editorial independence should not operate in a moral vacuum when millions of lives are at stake. Quoting Edmund Burke, Begbie asked, should a body with the power of the "Fourth Estate" not have a measure of accountability? Pre-empting arguments about MSR's potential intrusion upon the media's need to satisfy stakeholders, keep ratings high and make a profit, Begbie compared the concept of MSR to that of corporate social responsibility - 15 years ago on the fringes of corporate governance, and now very much in the mainstream.

Turning to the "so what" question of whether the media and humanitarian agencies can, in fact, collaborate better in order to improve humanitarian outcomes,

participants views were very mixed. Some felt strongly that journalists and aid agencies should not collaborate and that such collaboration is an anathema to humanitarian principles. Rafael Vilasanjuán, former head of Medicines Sans Frontieres Spain, argued that while the media could be seen as a kind of "watchdog" to alert the public to issues, NGOs and the media have different audiences and stakeholders and both sectors have very different roles. Others felt that collaboration was possible and desirable but should be approached with caution. Greater understanding among media and humanitarians on each sector's needs and limitations could bring about more trust and collaboration.

Section 3. Representing Disasters

Humanitarian crises are extreme events characterised by all the attributes of striking news, but why is it that some grab the headlines, while others lie 'forgotten'? While humanitarian aid agencies bemoan the media for selective and stereotyped crisis coverage, few of these agencies have steadfastly focused on places and people most in need but instead tend to follow events and flows of resources.²² The mainstream media and humanitarian agencies appear to "...have regard for *only some of the pain* of others".²³ This carries implications for information accuracy, transparency, accountability and coverage of aid.

This is at least partly because "good intentions alone do not make a good news story"²⁴. Journalists and the quality of the stories they report are subject to a multitude of different social, political and economic forces which shape the content, as well as when and how it is reported. The practical constraints of the newsgathering process, the collective norms of the newsroom, personal interests and preferences, manipulation by external

²¹ Cooper, G. 2007a

²² World Disasters Report, 2005

²³ Moeller, S. 2006

²⁴ Large, T. 2007

pressure groups, advertising and competition with other news agencies and events all affect the 'news value' given to a particular humanitarian emergency. When the media consider what stories to put on their news budget, elements far removed from the intrinsic importance of a crisis have an influence.²⁵ In this light, a distinction needs to be drawn between media institutions, owners and managers on the one hand, and journalists on the other.

In 2004, a survey by Reuters, The Colombia School of Journalism and the Fritz Institute on the dynamics of media coverage asked journalists what factors lead to a crisis being 'noticed' by the media. High death-tolls, involvement of aid workers from the home region, general humanitarian concerns and photos and video footage were all mentioned as important factors that help to tell a compelling, newsworthy story.²⁶

Table 1: Factors that get humanitarian crises into the news²⁷

What gets a humanitarian crisis into the news?	Percentage of journalists* mentioning the factor
High death toll	49%
Involvement of aid workers from your region	32%
General humanitarian concerns	39%
Foreign policy implications for editors' country	29%
Material (photos, video, interviews) to help tell a compelling story	28%
Audience of same background to those suffering	27%
Children suffering	25%
Coverage by the competition	14%
Involvement of a celebrity	7%
Other	5%

*Journalists were asked to check no more than three factors

In January 2006, media consultancy Carma International published a survey of European, US and Australian media coverage of six humanitarian disasters. It concluded -

²⁵ Moeller, S. 2006.

²⁶ Ross, S. 2004 in T. Large, 2007.

²⁷ Large, T. 2007

contentiously - that "Western self-interest is the pre-condition for significant coverage of a humanitarian crisis" and that national political and economic interests are a better guide to press interest than human suffering.²⁸ The analysis, which covered six disasters²⁹, found a clear correlation between the perceived economic impact of a disaster on European and US markets and the quantity of coverage. Hurricane Stanley stood out as the clearest example of this, with Carma concluding that the lack of significant economic or political interest led to virtually no press coverage of any kind beyond the first few days. The study also noted an egocentric tendency in reporting disasters - the Indian Ocean tsunami dominated the headlines primarily because Western tourists were affected, and indeed, Western tourists were the subject of over half the news articles, whilst representing a far smaller proportion of the overall death toll.

Such is the power of the media that according to the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, a total of \$13.5 billion was raised (\$5.5 billion from the general public) amounting to over \$7,100 for each affected person. This contrasts starkly with only \$3 per head donated in response to the Bangladesh floods in 2004. At the same time in Africa, over 3 million people were affected by protracted drought and locust swarms but a UN appeal for just \$16 million attracted only a fifth of the funds 2 months after being launched.³⁰ What this suggests is that emergency relief is often given not on the basis of need, but in response to political pressures, media coverage and aid agencies' reckoning of what might be popular with donors and the general public.³¹

²⁸ Carma International, 2006

²⁹ The study looked at US and European media coverage of the earthquake in Pakistani Kashmir (8 October 2005), Hurricane Stanley, (1st October 2005), Hurricane Katrina (23 August 2005), Indian Ocean Earthquake a.k.a. tsunami (26th December 2004), the earthquake in Bam, Iran (26 December 2003) and the humanitarian crisis in Darfur (since Feb 2003).

³⁰ World Disasters Report 2005.

³¹ The Hindu, 2006

In addition to accusations of being insufficient, the quality of news coverage of humanitarian emergencies is often seen as inadequate. Susan Moeller highlights the preference of the global media for reporting apolitical 'acts of god' rather than man-made crises such as that in Darfur or the Democratic Republic of Congo. Rarely is political and historical context adequately addressed. Rather, the complexity of crises is distilled into 'sound bytes'.³² Similarly, Lindsey Hilsum describes how, from Afghanistan to Somalia, conflicts in developing countries are reported with an emphasis on humanitarian over political or military issues. This is partly because editors think their viewers and readers have a limited interest in complex political events far away, and partly a reflection of the lack of political or strategic interests of outside powers - "the political story is remote because it does not involve us".³³

Michael Buerk's famous BBC news report on the 1984 Ethiopian famine provides a classic example of the conversion of a political famine into a natural disaster in order to mobilise an international response. The aid operation that followed excluded criticism of the Ethiopian government's use of famine as a weapon of war and other human rights violations including the forced resettlement programme which cost an estimated 100,000 lives. Publicity was simplistic and focused on food distributions to starving Ethiopians. As Daniel Wolf has argued, it was an implicit axiom of the aid operation at the time that such facts should not be made public, so as not to endanger the flow of aid. In defence of Oxfam and other agencies, who at the time held internal debates about the extent to which they should publicly criticise the Ethiopian Government, Hugh Goyder suggests that sometimes aid agencies have to cooperate with brutal regimes or leave, and, by implication, do no good at all.³⁴

Participants at the biannual noted that journalists often fail to take into account the complexities of the aid world, often because they do not fully understand them.

Kate Adie referred to the 'cholera bias' amongst journalists, with cholera being reported as a threat following almost every major disaster, despite the low likelihood of such an outbreak.

Equally problematic is the historical tendency within the global media and humanitarian agencies to perpetuate stereotypes of crisis-affected populations as helpless 'victims' dependent on international aid. According to Michael Ogrizek, the 1967 civil war in Biafra marked a significant 'before' and 'after' period for humanitarian aid mobilisation strategies, shifting focus from explanation, compassion and the quest for justice to evoking emotion, pity and sentiment. Today, he notes, humanitarian organisations and the media continue in concert to sell tragedy to the public and donor governments.³⁵ Jonathan Benthall notes that virtually all appeals for charity in the 1970s tended to picture helpless passive victims and aid workers as heroic saviours.³⁶ He describes how the incidence of disasters, fundraising pressures and the growing influence of corporate advertising produced some of the most blatant images, such as the 1980s image of a frail and withered hand of an African child held by a healthy adult white hand.³⁷

However, just as it is important not to underestimate journalistic 'news values', it is equally important not to view them as purely cynical. The media should not be dismissed as a monolithic actor bent on exploiting humanitarian crises as sellable news at the lowest possible cost. Many journalists are genuinely dedicated to 'telling the real story' and 'making a difference' and yet still they frequently fail to tell the truth. There are various attempts to explain why this is the case. Some locate the problem with the state, which exerts control through censorship, legal restraint or coercion. Others suggest that it is commercial advertisers and proprietors who impose their political and financial agenda on compliant staff, or editorial

³² Moeller, S. 2006

³³ Hilsum, L. 1996

³⁴ Debate hosted by World Disasters Report 2005:142-3

³⁵ Ogrizek, M. 2007.

³⁶ Benthall, J. 1993

³⁷ *ibid.*

'gatekeepers'. Some argue that the primary obstacle to truth-telling is to be found right back at the stage of gathering and testing raw information³⁸ - genuine ignorance is seen to be at the root of much media misrepresentation of crises. It is a simple fact, says Nick Davies, that journalists invariably do not know whether they are telling the truth or not; "the ethic of honesty has been overwhelmed by the mass production of ignorance".³⁹ For Nik Gowing, the flawed nature of media reporting in complex emergencies can be attributed to the 'tyranny of real-time', which necessitates a perennial choice between speed and accuracy.⁴⁰

While selective, emotional, formulaic reporting may make for more vivid journalism, the cost for both the media and humanitarian agencies in terms of accuracy, balance and overall credibility may be high. It is clear that the drive of humanitarian agencies for mainstream media coverage has a significant impact on how they themselves, the public and donors interpret and respond to crises. Media marketing strategies run the risk of distorting the scale of threats and the importance of proposed interventions. Similarly, the humanitarian press release is often little more than a fund-raising tool, thinly disguised and, in order to solicit funds, paints an exaggerated picture of 'doom and gloom'.⁴¹ In some cases, the media's role in mobilising funds has prompted agencies to make high-profile, quick impact interventions, which may make them look good but do not necessarily respond to real needs on the ground. For example, during the response to the Rwanda genocide in 1994, Lindsey Hilsum describes how some agencies "rushed in without thinking properly about what they had to offer". According to Hilsum, the proliferation of NGOs was a direct result of media coverage. Goma became a huge opportunity for smaller, less experienced agencies to gain profile and to be seen to be

doing something good. This lowered standards and complicated coordination.⁴²

The burning question is whether the media can report complex humanitarian issues more accurately and still keep the public engaged and sympathetic? As various analysts of the US media have pointed out, one of the paradoxes of the 'information age' is that in a time of unprecedented abundance of news, the public appear to want it less.⁴³ Newspaper readership is down and foreign news is a smaller portion than ever. Most Americans rely on local television newscasts for their news about the world.⁴⁴

When it comes to coverage of humanitarian crises, the media's ability to encourage demand for complexity is complicated by the fact that ratings depend on certain criteria - including the innocence of 'victims' and the presence of a 'mediator' (doctor, celebrity, NGO) to provide a 'solution'.⁴⁵ It could even be argued that reporting complexity is irresponsible given its potential to reduce emotional appeal and much needed funding.

Interestingly, and broadly speaking, journalists at the Biannual Meeting thought that today there was more and better coverage of emergencies than there had been before. Representatives of aid agencies generally disagreed. As James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hofmann note, the humanitarian system as a whole needs some way of 'checking' inherent bias towards high-profile, media-friendly crises.⁴⁶ At the root of the problem lies a combination of increased competition between humanitarian agencies, the bias of media 'news values', geopolitical preferences of donors and a widespread fear that telling the truth about global needs will cause public disengagement.

Confronting these issues will require courage and moral leadership from both sides. The message delivered to the humanitarian

³⁸ Davies, N. 2008; Gowing, N. 2000

³⁹ Davies, N. 2008

⁴⁰ Gowing, N. 2000

⁴¹ Begby, S. 2008

⁴² Hilsum, L. 1996

⁴³ Moisy, C. 1996; The Brookings Institution, 2007

⁴⁴ The Brookings Institution, 2007

⁴⁵ Braumann, R. 1996 in Ogrizek, M. 2007

⁴⁶ Darcy, J. and C. Hofmann, 2003

community by plenary panellist Brendan Gormley, Chief Executive of the UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) summed up the issues succinctly for both sides of the relationship: *“Don’t chase headlines, chase good quality news. Don’t be first, be accountable”*

Participants at the Biannual Meeting agreed that accountability and transparency within the humanitarian sector lie at the heart of possible solutions. More accurate public information and objective media reporting has the potential to contribute to improved representation of crisis-affected people in ways that do not damage their dignity or mask and supplant humanitarian with institutional needs. But while humanitarian agencies are, to some extent, held accountable at the operational level through evaluations and media reporting, very rarely are they, or the media, held accountable for what they report at the time of occurrence. In the recent case of Cyclone Nargis, risks were probably overstated. Predictions by some agencies of epidemics were not borne out by the facts and some agencies may well have overreacted. Jemilah Mahmood, President of Mercy Malaysia, pointed out eloquently in the plenary discussion that international agencies that were not even on the ground in Myanmar were reporting huge potential fatalities, while at the same time admitting that they had no access to solid information.

Participants raised concerns about the lack of media accountability and the continued propagation of disaster ‘myths’ which can lead to inappropriate, burdensome aid that diverts resources from what is most needed. Examples of such ‘myths’ include the belief that dead bodies create a major risk of diseases such as cholera; that disaster-affected populations are helplessly waiting for the western world to save them; that disasters bring out the worst in human behaviour; and that things go back to normal within a few weeks.⁴⁷ These ideas are fallacies, and need to be addressed. On the rare occasions when victims of disasters are carriers of communicable diseases, they are,

in fact, a far lesser threat to the public than they were alive. Usually, by the time foreign assistance arrives, most of the survivors of disasters have been rescued and have received some form of medical attention thanks to local volunteers and institutions dedicated to the common good. The effects of disasters last a long time and often the greatest need for financial and material assistance to restore primary health care services, water systems, housing and livelihoods is in the months following a disaster.⁴⁸

There was a strong sense among participants at the conference that both humanitarian agencies and the media could play important roles in preventing the propagation of such myths and promoting more accountable, field-driven responses based on need. Brendan Gormley suggested that evaluators might have a specific role to play. He asked, ‘how do we build trust through evaluation work and in this critical and complex media world, get tough messages through; how do we put information out and how do we prepare and brief journalists?’.

Section 4. Engagement with national and local media in crisis-affected areas

*“No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press”.*⁴⁹

The famous quote from Amartya Sen points to the positive role national and local media in crisis-affected areas can play in tackling humanitarian and development issues and promoting good governance, transparency and accountability – a role which, to date, remains under developed. An independent survey of the state of the media in 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa⁵⁰, led by a

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sen, A. 1999

⁵⁰ The Initiative was the most extensive independent survey of the state of the media across 17 sub-Saharan African countries: Angola, Botswana, Cameroon,

⁴⁷ de Ville de Goyet, 2000

group of senior African media experts in collaboration with the BBC World Service Trust and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), found that the media sector's potential as an agency for change within the development 'debate' is *surprisingly undervalued by the international community*.⁵¹ The same could be said about the role of national and local media in humanitarian crises.

Compared to the interactions with international media, relatively little is known about interactions between humanitarian organisations and local media during humanitarian crises, how the information (or misinformation) they generate is handled, and their potential for contributing to improved humanitarian outcomes.

What is known is that during emergencies, national and local media can play key roles in disaster relief as well as in shaping affected people's views and understandings of the crisis. National and local media can also play an instrumental role in counterbalancing the 'news values' and biased messages being broadcast to the world by foreign correspondents 'parachuting' into disaster-affected areas. In this sense, strong national news agencies and regional news networks are vital for improving each country's national and international crisis coverage.

Several participants expressed an urgent need for international humanitarian agencies to build closer, strategic relationships with local and national media in crisis-affected states. This, they suggested, would not only enhance operational accountability, since national and local media reach affected populations, local and national authorities through television, newspaper and radio, but would also serve the interests of humanitarian agencies as failure to communicate with local media opens up space for speculation

and in some cases reporting false information about agencies' work.

However, the building of relationships between humanitarian organisations and national and local media remains a delicate issue for a number of reasons. Most serious is the fact that, in politically sensitive situations, national and local media may be under the control of repressive, authoritarian states, which are responsible for atrocities, and which place restrictions on foreign and domestic reporters. There are also many documented cases of attempts by government or political groups to manipulate national and local media in order to move society towards conflict or non-democratic rule. Most famously, the Rwandan Interahamwe genocidaires were aided, abetted and motivated by a national radio station. In Serbia, television was manipulated in order to stir ethnic tensions prior to civil war.⁵² More recently, local language or "vernacular" media were accused of inciting the violence that followed the Kenyan presidential election in December 2007. However, in this last situation, the national press played a significant and courageous role in calming tensions, coming together to print long editorials, commentaries and joint headlines calling for national harmony.⁵³

The competence of local media in crisis-affected areas may be weak due to lack of physical resources such as computers and vehicles, and training in researching, writing and editing etc, and further weakened by the crisis itself. If local media lack physical resources, not only is their ability to perform their duties compromised but they may also be more susceptible to being pressurised and co-opted by malign or self-serving influences.⁵⁴

At least partly because of the reasons stated above, humanitarian agencies tend to distrust local media and often find it easier and more beneficial to communicate through controlled information campaigns or

Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

⁵¹ BBC World Service Trust, 2006

⁵² Hieber, L. 2001

⁵³ Article 19, IMS & RSF, 2008

⁵⁴ Frohardt, M. and J. Temin, 2003

with international media.⁵⁵ As Loretta Hieber notes, “communication activities most often consist of providing information to *Western journalists* about the activities of individual agencies...” (emphasis added).⁵⁶

This reluctance to work with local media may also be to do with time, language and cultural barriers to effective communication. It may equally be an attempt to keep control of the self-promotional stories and images released to the rest of the world. According to Mark Frohardt, there is a general perception among humanitarian organisations that local and national media are overly focused on problems with aid delivery.⁵⁷

What is needed in order to progress towards a more equal balance between local, national and international reporting of humanitarian crises, and to enhance accountability to crisis-affected populations? Establishing and strengthening strategic relationships between journalists and humanitarian actors at local, national and international level could be an effective strategy, particularly in societies where the state is wary of independent media and eager to crack down on independent journalists.⁵⁸ In some cases, measures may be required to increase local and national media capacity and infrastructure, as well as access to and control over communications technologies by disaster-affected populations. However, as some participants at the conference noted, many local media are already extremely professional, highly qualified and do extremely good work with limited resources. Humanitarian agencies, they suggested, should overcome their prejudice and not view all local media as corrupt, incompetent or vulnerable.

As blogs and other kinds of user generated content begin to emerge in countries affected by disasters or where there are few other outlets for political expression, their potential for getting new voices into the

equation must be carefully analysed and unpacked. Can blogs and user generated content affect politics in regimes where there is no thriving independent media sector? How do factors such as geographic location, type of technology (camera, video recorder, laptop, mobile and so on), links to the global media, levels of state censorship and existing accountability agendas shape their influence?

The fact that international media increasingly take their cues from ‘what matters’ in the world of blogs and other forms of user generated content, has led some argue that new forms of citizen journalism exert formidable agenda-setting power and can therefore bring about renewed and sustained attention to ‘forgotten’ or neglected issues or crises. Rallying cries such as “the revolution will be blogged” reflect the widespread belief that blogs could eventually supplant traditional journalism.⁵⁹ But is control of the story really shifting? Glenda Cooper argues that it is, describing the South Asia Earthquake in 2005 as an example of a disaster widely covered by and through user-generated content despite the lack of Western tourists in the area. Given that today between 80 and 100 million Africans own a mobile phone, compared with only eight million five years ago, “the next big story may well come from Africa”.⁶⁰

The contrasting view is that many blogs still only attract only a fraction of the web traffic that mainstream media agencies attract, and that in any case, it is still the mainstream agencies that select which user generated content is useful and that which is not. Mobile phone clips of the tsunami got their widest viewing by being shown on news programmes. The scope for new sources and new kinds of information to influence humanitarian politics and dynamics may be limited. As Sanjana Hattotuwa points out, the increased availability and affordability of information and communication technologies does not necessarily result in better qualitative coverage and understanding of, or indeed response to,

⁵⁵ Malam, M. 2005

⁵⁶ Hieber, L. 2001

⁵⁷ Q and A with Mark Frohardt in Stein, L. 2006

⁵⁸ Frohardt, M. and J. Temin, 2003

⁵⁹ Drezner, D. and H. Farell, 2004

⁶⁰ Cooper, G. 2007a

disasters. There is no guarantee that images and photos from disasters produced by victims in the thick of it will galvanise attention and support. ICTs can also serve to strengthen hierarchies and bureaucracy that impede accountability and responsive aid delivery.⁶¹ Information overload, citizen subjectivity and prejudice are real problems, and there is still no widely accepted standard for citizen journalists.⁶²

Section 5. Engagement with primary stakeholders affected by crises

Information is a fundamental human right and vital form of aid in its own right. Lack of information in emergencies can have negative consequences for people affected by crises. However, there continue to be gaps in the ways in which this powerful resource is shared and gathered in emergencies. According to the World Disasters Report 2005, aid organisations and the media have focused on gathering information for their own needs and not enough on exchanging that information with the people they aim to support. Maintaining a two-way flow of information is a crucial way in which humanitarian agencies and the media can learn while at the same time ensuring that primary stakeholders can become active participants in their own recovery.⁶³

Local media, in particular broadcast media, can provide essential communications during and after emergencies on issues that directly affect people's survival; information on health, security, land-mines, basic logistical data on relief efforts and so on. Reporters with long experience of covering a particular affected community are also well-placed to create a forum for discussion, giving voice to the community during the recovery process. In some cases though, humanitarian emergencies can have a devastating impact on local media. Following the Pakistan earthquake in 2005,

dozens of journalists went missing and newspaper offices and press clubs were destroyed. Local news generation came to a halt resulting in a dangerous paradox: news about the disaster and its impact was going out to the rest of the world but those affected had few means of finding out what was going on, what to do or how to get help.⁶⁴

There are increasing efforts to address this at the international level. Internews is an international media development organisation whose mission is to empower people worldwide with the news and information they need, the ability to connect, and the means to make their voices heard. In the month preceding the 23rd ALNAP Biannual, Internews' emergency response team was assisting national and local media in Myanmar to get urgent humanitarian information out to citizens of Myanmar affected by Cyclone Nargis and coordinating information dissemination efforts with UN and international humanitarian organisations and donors.

According to Internews staff, the most affected areas - and indeed most of the country - were still in complete information darkness about where to get help, and where or how to access any aid, even if it was available. Internews provided aid in the form of satellite phones, small mobile power supplies, cash distribution for food and fuel, and also established a small "information clearing house" to enable reporters, producers and bloggers to send data, photos and make much needed calls to report what they were seeing and hearing on the ground.

Previous experience from the tsunami countries and the Pakistan earthquake has shown that these information platforms can help the wider international response effort to focus its resources where they are most needed, and are also instrumental in allowing vital aid-related information to be re-broadcast to isolated groups of affected communities.

⁶¹ Hattotuwa, S. 2007

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Frohardt, M. in Makino, A. 2006

⁶⁴ Rehmat, A. 2006

The BBC World Service Trust performs a similar function to Internews through creating, repairing or enhancing the infrastructure that local broadcasters need to deliver public-service broadcasting, and producing and broadcasting programmes that provide critical life-saving advice and information on health, livelihoods, governance and human rights issues.⁶⁵

Lisa Robinson of the BBC World Service Trust argued that communicating with affected populations needs to be mainstreamed into every aspect of disaster risk reduction and emergency response. Donors should provide funds for communications initiatives; disaster preparedness projects should include training for local broadcasters on how to effectively broadcast vital information during a disaster; rapid needs assessments can include questions about information and communication technologies, for example, the number of working radios, radio stations etc.; aid agencies should prepare statements with life-saving information (hand-washing, shelter, clinics, food distribution, etc) for broadcast on local media. Such efforts, she noted, must include local stakeholders at every stage. Information should be communicated through established, trusted channels, outputs should be produced in local languages.

However, as Mark Frohardt and Jonathan Temin point out, attention must also be paid to the “demand side” of the media equation. That is, the demand by communities for news and information. A problem often found in societies in which media abuse occurs, and in societies with underdeveloped media in general, is that media consumers rarely consider and question the source and credibility of their news. Instead, they take for granted that what they hear on the radio and read in the newspapers is accurate and unbiased.⁶⁶ This can be a dangerous tendency, especially when media outlets are weak and could be co-opted by special interests.

Again, blogs and mobile phones may present new possibilities for engaging with beneficiaries but do they bring about real change? More exploration of the possibilities for future collaboration between networks of beneficiaries, journalists and aid workers was seen as being of highly beneficial in terms of the quality of aid delivery.

Section 6. System-wide platforms for sharing information

In an attempt to improve humanitarian-media communications, and humanitarian information more generally, the UN, NGOs and the philanthropic community have set up innovative internet-based information networks through which more detailed, accurate information on humanitarian crises can be shared and contextualised.⁶⁷ The thinking behind these platforms is to strengthen reporting of humanitarian crises by filling gaps in reporting on issues not usually covered by the mainstream media and using system-wide platforms to do so that are free from the interests of any particular agency. Three of the most prominent existing platforms include IRIN, ReliefWeb and Reuters Alertnet.

IRIN was founded in 1995 to improve the flow of vital information to those involved in relief efforts in the Great Lakes region following the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Its principal role is to provide news and analysis about sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia for the humanitarian community. It also provides text, radio services, photos, films and reports that can be used by humanitarian agencies to highlight ‘forgotten’ crises. It targets decision-makers in relief agencies, host and donor governments, human-rights organisations, humanitarian advocacy groups, academic institutions and the media. At the same time, it strives to ensure that affected communities can also access reliable information. Regional desks in Nairobi, Johannesburg, Dakar and Dubai are

⁶⁵ BBC World Service Trust, 2008

⁶⁶ Frohardt, M. and J. Temin, 2003

⁶⁷ Moeller, S. 2006

staffed by experienced journalists, who travel frequently within the countries they cover to report directly from the humanitarian frontline.

Although IRIN is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), its news service is editorially independent, "strict controls are employed to ensure that reports are accurate, fair, carefully sourced and rich in perspective".⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Ben Parker, co-founder of IRIN, admitted that the network does experience pressure from various external sources including governments and aid agencies, which threatens its stated goal of independence. He also stated that it was difficult to find journalists that specialised in humanitarian issues.

Another platform positioned as an independent vehicle for information on humanitarian crises is ReliefWeb, which is "the global hub for time-critical humanitarian information on Complex Emergencies and Natural Disasters".⁶⁹ Launched in 1996 and like IRIN, also administered by OCHA, ReliefWeb was designed specifically to assist the international humanitarian community in effective delivery of emergency assistance by providing timely, reliable and relevant information as events unfold, while also emphasising the coverage of "forgotten emergencies".

Reuters AlertNet, was founded in 1997 by Reuters Foundation - an educational and humanitarian trust. It aims to keep relief professionals and the wider public up-to-date on humanitarian crises around the globe and pays special attention to 'forgotten' emergencies. It devotes a whole section of its website to media-friendly packaging of humanitarian issues.⁷⁰

An evaluation of Reliefweb, undertaken in 2006, highlights a number of important considerations that apply generally to these system-wide platforms. The key criteria for assessing ReliefWeb were seen as credibility,

reliability and neutrality. While many respondents saw Reliefweb as reliable and credible, there were questions raised about its neutrality and independence. Some typical comments from interviewees concerned about ReliefWeb's lack of neutrality included:

[ReliefWeb is] not seen as neutral, instead more UN and government oriented. But it is trying to be [neutral]. (Desk Officer, Donor Government, HQ)

User views on ReliefWeb's representativeness were less positive. The site was generally seen as representing the major humanitarian players - UN agencies, large international NGOs, international organizations, and donor governments - and marginalising the perspectives of National/Local NGOs and organisations who work primarily in languages other than English.

The perception out there is that these webpages are international and western motivated and biased. (Senior Manager, International NGO, Field)

The timeliness issue raised a number of comparisons with international media:

When I was covering Afghanistan I would check ReliefWeb on a daily basis to see if anything happened - things that would not be important to the BBC.

If you expect ReliefWeb to be news agency, then it is not timely. But if you use ReliefWeb mainly for background information, I think the information is timely.

And perhaps most interestingly:

Every morning I go to BBC to see what's new in a specific region... it is much more user friendly and appealing than ReliefWeb. Then to get the humanitarian perspective I use ReliefWeb.⁷¹

⁶⁸ IRIN, 2008

⁶⁹ ReliefWeb, 2008

⁷⁰ Large, T. 2007

⁷¹ Wolz, C. and N. Park, 2006

[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/LTIO-6VLQJP/\\$file/5044_RW_evaluation_final_2006-v2.pdf?openelement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900sid/LTIO-6VLQJP/$file/5044_RW_evaluation_final_2006-v2.pdf?openelement)

Ed Girardet argues that while initiatives such as IRIN and ReliefWeb are excellent in many ways, they are still seen as 'beholden' to their organisations and the fact that they are co-funded by governments makes their independence questionable. He suggests that what is needed is media, corporate and foundation support for a specialised, independent humanitarian reporting entity.⁷²

While such comments highlight the fact that there is certainly room for improvement, they also highlight the untapped potential of system-wide platforms for disseminating timely and accurate information to the general public, donors and media about humanitarian emergencies.

These platforms can also play a role in bridging the gap between media and aid agencies. In 2005, AlertNet launched a series of tools and services called 'MediaBridge' aimed at satisfying the needs of journalists reporting disasters. It provides crisis profiles, a directory of aid groups operational in different emergencies, a database of humanitarian statistics by country; a weekly newsletter containing tips for journalists and interactive training modules designed to help improve their crisis reporting.

Participants at the biannual agreed that such tool kits were extremely useful but highlighted the need for similar ones targeting NGOs. Specifically, it was suggested that toolkits which aimed to assist NGO PR and communications staff to better understand the needs of journalists, editorial decision making processes etc. would be welcomed. Participants also felt that secondments of NGO staff into organisations such as Reuters Alertnet or IRIN would be helpful. It was suggested that such toolkits could contribute to and facilitate the 'myth-busting' agenda and that ALNAP could play a significant role in helping to coordinate and promote such initiatives.

⁷² Girardet, E. 2007

Section 7. A new agenda

This paper started with an account of the dramatic expansion in the global networks of media and humanitarian actors responding to disasters, as well as in the information and communication technologies and possibilities available to them. It has also documented the various ways in which information is used and controlled by various actors in these networks as a marketing tool; a commercial product; a means of education and a vital form of aid in its own right.

Humanitarian agencies and the news media have traditionally enjoyed a love-hate relationship, with humanitarian agencies viewing the media as more of an adversary than an ally. The media likewise, often view those responding to disasters as "standoffish", untrusting and secretive.⁷³ While it is a well established fact that the news media capitalise on the spectacular nature of disasters and disaster response, less analysis has been carried out of the various benefits that humanitarian agencies derive from partnerships with the media, such as more effective communication for disaster risk reduction and early warning messages; alerting the world to disasters and raising public awareness and funds; and increased pressure on governments and multilateral organisations to take action. Is this relationship at risk of being too cosy? What are the implications for both media and humanitarian accountability, and accountability to whom?

The contemporary situation clearly demands a better and more just approach to handling and reporting information about humanitarian emergencies. Should the humanitarian sector work towards independent global platforms for information sharing, to encourage proportionality and highlight 'neglected' crises? Is more exploration of the potential of blogs and user generated content in disasters and crises valuable? Could funding mechanisms for humanitarian emergencies

⁷³ Coppola, D. P., 2006: 527-529

be improved in ways that reduce humanitarian agencies' dependence on media publicity and PR? Should there be clearer divisions between the fundraising and the operational arms of agencies, and more clarity on the kinds of accountability and information that could be expected from both? Will donors support the development of innovative strategies to improve media-humanitarian-beneficiary collaboration, given its potential for improving humanitarian outcomes? These and other questions demand further research and possibly provide grounds for optimism and strategic innovation.

As actors in a huge and ever expanding matrix, neither NGOs nor journalists have the power to put an end to humanitarian disasters. However, as unprecedented climate change brings more frequent and calamitous natural disasters and as the threat of conflict and terrorist attacks are increasingly a permanent feature of domestic life in many countries⁷⁴, humanitarians and the news media must find a means to overcome the social, cultural, political and economic constraints that prevent free, open and balanced communications.

A wide range of actions, both short term and long term, could be taken by humanitarian agencies, the media and donor governments to change the current paradigm. Discussions at the ALNAP 23rd Biannual Meeting and subsequent research and analysis have identified five recommendations for achieving greater accountability of both professional communities to the public, donors and most importantly, to those affected by disasters:

1. **Evaluate the role of media relations and communications in humanitarian action, and actively apply this learning within and across agencies** It was suggested that humanitarian-media cooperation needs to be preceded by a clear analysis of risks associated with such work, on a case by case basis, to

establish whether cooperation is viable and/or desirable. Participants at the Biannual Meeting also called for more effort in evaluating and learning from the impact of communications work at a programmatic level. The goals of humanitarian programming, as much as marketing, should provide a basis for criteria by which the effectiveness of communications is gauged. This requires further research, and should be focused on bringing about changes in organisational structures and cultures within aid agencies, which currently prevent media and programme teams working together better.

2. **Undertake a regular, independent review of "Humanitarian Reporting"** Such a review would need to establish criteria on accurate, effective and responsible reporting, and would take into account the perspectives of survivors of crises. Undertaken on a regular basis, this will enable analysis of trends in media-coverage of humanitarian crises and the effect these trends have on government policies, relief operations and populations affected by crises.
3. **Establish collaborative partnerships to enable cross-sector efforts in "disaster myth-busting"** The media, and aid agencies should work together to unpack the "myths" and "realities" surrounding disasters and crises, and to find ways to counter the spread inaccurate and misleading stories. There was a strong sense among participants at the Biannual Meeting that both humanitarian agencies and the media should play a more active role in preventing the propagation of myths and promoting more accountable, field-driven responses based on needs. Such partnerships would need to focus on how agencies put information out and how they prepare and brief journalists at the time of crises, as

⁷⁴ Hattotuwa, S. 2007

well as on what journalists expect from agencies and how they should approach disaster reporting. One goal of such partnerships may be to develop a code of practice to clarify expectations and increase understanding between humanitarian and media organisations. Local and national media should play a key role in such partnerships, as should the quality and accountability networks - ALNAP, HAP, Sphere, People in Aid etc.

information communication technologies. Media agencies should undertake focus groups with crisis-affected populations, and provide channels for survivors contribute to and respond to media articles.

4. **Establish a global alliance of media and humanitarian actors, at the local, national and international levels** The news media and humanitarian communities need each other and each possesses highly refined tools that the other could better utilise. There is a need to establish trust and respect at local, national, and international levels between the two professional communities. It was suggested that one way to do this would be to allow for and encourage the exchange of knowledge and staff between the two professional communities in order to enable better interaction, both formally and informally. Again, it is especially important that, in conditions where national and local media are in a position to contribute to humanitarian goals, they are instrumental in defining this process. It is also important that initiatives make full use of the existing information-sharing platforms of the system such as IRIN, Alertnet and Reliefweb.
5. **Establish serving the needs of crisis-affected populations as a central common goal of both media and humanitarian agencies** Work towards realising beneficiaries' rights to humanitarian information throughout the relief, response and risk-reduction cycle. Also strengthen their right to be heard, and to speak for themselves through increasing their access to and control over

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