

Dialogue is Destiny: Managing the Message in Humanitarian Action

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NGO = non-governmental organization

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Abstract

During humanitarian response efforts, the mass media serves as the primary informational intermediary informing donors, policy makers, and the non-affected public. A lack of professional standards within the current culture of journalism, the politics of media ownership, and media manipulation by governments has distorted reporting on humanitarian crises, with possible detrimental effects on response efforts. Humanitarian response organizations must assume a proactive, leading role in the management and sharing of information with each other as well as with donors, policy makers, and the public. This will require working with the media as partners, as well as exploring innovative methods of mass communication. A multi-stakeholder, cooperative communication initiative could help improve media involvement, and harness the media as a credible and knowledgeable communication tool for response efforts. A professional publication dedicated to the discipline of humanitarian relief also could optimize efforts, communicate the perspectives of beneficiaries, and manage the underutilized resource of the general public.

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A Tale Worth Telling

"The field of humanitarian practice really began when [people] got together and started writing about it in a way that would capture the attention and imagination, and above all the aggressive intellectual energy of the world."

Jennifer Leaning, MD, SMH

This quote illuminates the importance of transparency and publicity in legitimizing efforts to respond to disasters and crises. It also embraces the idea that definitions of an appropriate response to disasters and emergencies are influenced heavily by how policy makers and the public view humanitarian needs and efforts. Central to the outcome of this evaluative process is the quality of the information from which assumptions are derived. Since inherently, disaster areas and affected populations are challenging to access, informational intermediaries are necessary to report to policy makers and the public. Currently, this is left to the mass media, whose reporting tends to simplify, misrepresent, or avoid complex situations entirely.^{1,2} Collusion with, or manipulation by, governments can reduce reporting on armed conflicts to little more than propaganda, and recent systematic analyses of media reporting of major disasters suggests that the weight of evidence provided by the popular media bears little relationship with human suffering and actually can reinforce public stereotypes of affected populations.^{3–5} Due to the hardships of reporting from disaster or conflict-affected areas, the short attention span of the mass media, and competition from less complex stories, many crises are left to unfold with virtually no media coverage at all.^{2,6}

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and aid workers focus on the crises to which they are tasked to respond, and often let intermediaries tell their story. Organizations have begun to recognize the importance of com-

municating with the people they serve in the field.⁷ Now, it is time to recognize the importance of communicating with each other, giving a voice to the beneficiaries of disaster relief, and developing strategies to functionally resolve the characteristically tense and uncoordinated relationship between the mass media and aid workers.^{2,8} The narrative and analysis of how humans experience and respond to crises are too rich in learning and advocacy potential to be told in piecemeal fashion by individual, often niche organizations, or by the uninvested and untrained mass media. Some of the dangers of letting the dialogue about humanitarian crisis and response slip out of the hands of public health and aid workers are outlined, and the need for these experts to assume a leading role in that dialogue is emphasized.

The View from Ground Level

Although improvement efforts are underway, disaster and crisis response often is hampered by poor communication. A number of initiatives attempted to improve the quality and coordination of information generated by the NGO community. The Sphere Project, launched in 1997, in response to the preventable cholera and dysentery epidemics among Rwandan refugees in Goma, Zaire, perhaps is the best-known effort to coordinate information among humanitarian organizations. Aimed at establishing technical and ideological standards, the Project distilled the communal experience of >200 organizations into practical, actionable tenets.⁹ The acceptance of the Sphere Standards has been impressive, but institutionalization has been hampered by a perception that they are too rigid to be applied to rapidly changing conditions in the field, and that the standards threaten the unique procedures of individual organizations.^{9,10} Also, while successful as a consensus-building exercise to produce recommendations, the Sphere Project does not address ongoing coordination. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Action (UNOCHA) is an example of an agency that has developed infrastructures for managing information at the global and country levels (humanitarian information centers), however, these are not always easily accessible at the field level.^{11,12}

Results on the ground continue to illustrate this problem. Published reports indicate that poor communication, resulting in a lack of effective field-level coordination continues, such as during the response efforts following the 2004 Tsunami (which was the scene of a generally uncoordinated relief effort, despite the presence of a United Nations Special Envoy and a Special Coordinator) and the Hurricane Katrina response, during which a near complete communications failure occurred at the local levels.¹²⁻¹⁶ In this issue, Bolton *et al* discuss how communications regarding the overall effectiveness of relief efforts are hampered by the tendency of assessments to focus on the "good news," in order to encourage future donor support.¹⁷ In order to be effective, both pre- and post-intervention field assessments require extensive information-sharing among the different parties, and these assessments must focus on actionable recommendations; this is doubly so if experience is to be applied in future situations.¹⁸ Information systems associated with successful reductions of mortality and mor-

bidity, several of which are catalogued by Roberts, tend to be complex, with multiple measures requiring a high degree of epidemiological competence and information coordination.¹⁹ Even informal, self-evaluative "lessons learned" discussions have been recognized as important learning tools that must be encouraged.¹⁰ In short, internal analysis and reporting by NGOs and aid workers in the field require greater focus on the simple, practical, and relevant.

Meanwhile, the media and responding organizations consistently fail to address the perspectives, experiences, concerns, and values of the beneficiary populations. In addition to access, aid workers have a moral obligation to ensure that their clients are portrayed as "dignified humans, not hopeless objects" (Figure 1). While stories and images of individual human loss may be utilized for emotional appeal, there is a tendency for the media and responding organizations to impose their values and judgments on crisis populations without regard to the beliefs of that population.²⁰ For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, initial media coverage focused on the scale of death and destruction, then quickly shifted to coverage of the political implications and scandals related to relief efforts. Little effort was invested in conveying the ongoing experiences and concerns of the affected populations.² This approach is paternalistic and exploitative, and contrary to the underlying ideals of humanitarianism.

The View in the Media

"[Being] there in a presence mode, bearing witness... creates a sense of stability, at least in the short run."

Jennifer Leaning, MD, SMH

Past experiences demonstrate that the media often perform their own assessments regardless of whether they are performed by humanitarian organizations. Lacking the depth of knowledge or motivation to provide an objective or scientific evaluation, media reports often lead to unhelpful conclusions that fail to characterize events accurately, do not contribute to learning or improvement in future emergencies, and do not address the perspectives of affected populations.

Some scholars have proposed the so-called "CNN Effect", or the ability of the media to trigger national humanitarian responses by focusing public attention and national policy on specific crises.^{21,22} Humanitarian interventions into Ethiopia in 1984 and Somalia in 1992 often are cited as early examples of this effect. Alternatively, the "manufactured consent" theory postulates that governments may manipulate the media to support and justify predetermined policies, typically in the form of military interventions.^{3,23} Campaigns by the United States Government to spread false information, which resulted in manipulated and grossly inaccurate news coverage of pre-war intelligence preceding the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a showcase of "manufactured consent".^{5,24} It has been argued that the "CNN Effect" occurs when governmental policies toward a crisis are ill-defined and uncertain, allowing public opinion to drive governmental or organizational action, and that "manufactured consent" occurs when governmental policy is well-established, but must justify itself in the minds of the public.²¹ Others have argued that the media

"In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects."

"Respect for the disaster victim as an equal partner in action should never be lost. In our public information we shall portray an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears. While we will cooperate with the media in order to enhance public response, we will not allow external or internal demands for publicity to take precedence over the principle of maximizing overall relief assistance. We will avoid competing with other disaster response agencies for media coverage in situations where such coverage may be to the detriment of the service provided to the beneficiaries or to the security of our staff or the beneficiaries."

Lobb 2007 Prehospital and Disaster Medicine

Figure 1—From the Sphere Project's Code of Conduct in Disaster Relief (http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/html/8_annex.htm)

has little influence on whether interventions occur and that such decisions are based more on a political calculus of governments and donors, e.g., when intense US media coverage of crises in Liberia in the 1990s did not result in a US intervention.^{22,25} Regardless of whether the media assume the position of cart, horse, or vocal passenger in humanitarian crises, there is little doubt that they play an important role in influencing the public and policy perceptions of what constitutes a crisis worthy of attention, and what response should follow.^{21,22}

If the mass media were better able to portray unfolding events in an accurate manner, unbiased by political considerations, their role in disasters could be complimentary to assessment and response efforts. Unfortunately, the current culture of the major news outlets generally is not conducive to such standards, especially when portraying complex emergencies and disasters. Journalists are trained to tell easily understood stories that follow predictable, scripted plot lines leading to a coherent conclusion, all within the unnecessarily strict time constraints of news cycles measured in hours or days. They are rewarded for asserting the primacy, importance, and dramatic appeal of their stories above others, and frequently achieve this by oversimplifying situations, or by focusing on invalid measures of success or failure; and by using language that inappropriately aggrandizes ("greatest", "worst", "most important"), overdramatizes ("bloodbath", "war on terror", "evil", "shock and awe"), or sanitizes a story ("smart bombs", "collateral damage", "friendly fire").

Although objectivity often is touted as a goal of journalism, objective, independent measures of situational development are used rarely. Instead, journalists tend to follow a more legalistic model of averaging multiple, preferably opposing, opinions. Unfortunately, this conviction that the "truth" is an average of opposites may not only lead to incorrect conclusions, but it may grossly oversimplify situations where no conclusion can be ascertained yet. Moreover, these opinions often are sought from "official" sources believed to lend credibility to a story, rather than from experts whose opinions may be perceived as being politically vested and therefore biased.⁵ Ironically, it often is the "official" version of events that is likely to present a more subjective, politically tainted view. Further, objectivity may not be an appropriate goal in situations where human suffering or abuse demand advocacy and intervention. Finally, journalists tend to characterize "news" as events that are unusual. This allows coverage of spectacular,

but relatively uncommon events, such as an outbreak of hemorrhagic fever, to pre-empt reporting on more "mundane," usual threats to human well-being such as malaria, civilian casualties in armed-conflict, or systematic child abuse or rape.

These journalistic shortcomings largely are a response to the growing conglomeration of the news media that has led to an unprecedented restriction in the diversity of stories covered, and the manner in which they are covered.^{24,26,27} The mass media have been centralized to the point where <10 companies control the television news viewed by 90% of Americans, and these figures are similar for newspapers.^{26,28} The analysis of western media coverage of recent catastrophes by CARMA International, the global media analysis group, supports the hypothesis that media coverage is weighted greatly toward politically sensitive regions, and that coverage often adds "grist to the mill", i.e., it focuses on politics at the expense of humanitarian imperatives. In this information age, the control of information is a well-recognized currency of politics, and journalists who attempt to stray beyond their "script", or who report stories that are not considered politically relevant to a home audience or media ownership may be silenced.^{3,5,24} Furthermore, the slow devolution of news into a highly profitable entertainment forum that sells advertised products, makes it increasingly difficult to seriously present the honest portrayals of human suffering, and has led to cuts in costly coverage areas such as foreign reporting and investigative journalism.^{5,26,29}

Since media coverage is driven by such a wide range of subjective influences, determinations of disaster and crisis responses should be made primarily by professional responders who are better able to assess the likelihood that their presence and services will improve, and not further degenerate a situation.³⁰ The current tenor of media involvement has at least two important, unintended consequences for response efforts.

The media's attraction to sudden, violent upheavals or disasters caused by natural hazards has helped define most response efforts largely in terms of clinical medicine-based responses to catastrophes that already are well underway. Slowly building crises, many with predictable triggers that unfold with ample warning signs and opportunities for early intervention and mitigation, receive little attention.^{5,22} The net effect is an inherently reactive view of humanitarian relief, and not a preventive one. The focus on clinical interventions and displaced persons works nicely with the clinical medicine response model, and depends on tragedy

already having occurred. However, it does little to aid the development of a public health approach that strives to mitigate the root causes of crises through primary and secondary prevention, or to bolster local capacity to better respond, withstand, and recover from disasters that may be unavoidable. This focus on doctors in disaster zones also overlooks the critical, non-medical needs of such situations—including sanitation, food, and shelter—which, in most cases, far outweigh the need for medical interventions.^{30,31} Almost entirely overlooked is the fact that most deaths during disasters caused by natural hazards occur within the first 24 to 48 hours from the sudden-onset event, long before foreign medical intervention arrives.³²

The media tend to focus predominantly on populations that are culturally and racially similar to the populations they serve.^{1,3} For example, throughout the late 1990s, civil wars in Bosnia and Kosovo received intense coverage in the Western media, while those in the Congo and Sierra Leone received minimal and sporadic coverage.^{1,21} Whether this is the result of cultural and racial bias or a sense of “disaster fatigue” towards unfamiliar populations, the result is the same: that the media becomes a *de facto* arbiter of the value of human suffering—whose suffering deserves moral outrage and whose suffering should pass unnoticed.²² In the eyes of the journalist, the “ideal” disaster is likely to be a novel event, in a politically sensitive area with the emotional appeal of clear victims and villains (who may be human or forces of nature), that unfolds with cataclysmic suffering and economic impact, among an easily accessed population toward whom the public feels familiar and empathetic.^{1,3,8,22} If it achieves nothing else, humanitarian interventions and crisis response should at least bear witness to situations that demand international attention wherever and to whomever they occur.³³ Along with solidarity and justice, bearing witness has been described as the moral underpinning of humanitarian values.³⁴

A New Conversation

To help address these communication shortcomings, there is a desperate need for those who work in disaster preparedness and response to stake a claim to the dialogue concerning how crises occur, and what effective methods of prevention, relief, and mitigation can be employed. Several approaches could help, and a multi-pronged, cooperative communication initiative involving multiple stakeholders would likely be the most effective.

Conceptually, the mass media sit at the base of a chain of players influencing the flow of information and decision-making during disaster assessments and responses. This is depicted in as a process in which responding organizations may feel constrained by the requirements of their donors, who are influenced by policy makers, who, in turn, claim to respond to public opinion that is informed by media reporting from the scene of a disaster (Figure 2).³⁵ It can be argued that potentially, the media has a disproportionate influence in this process, since it simultaneously informs the four other links in the chain. Moreover, while this multi-stepped process has the potential advantage of providing accountability to the involved parties, the media currently lack adequate oversight, accountability, or stan-

dards over reporting. What is needed is a means of locating the “missing link”: a paradigm shift that systematically closes the chain by allowing experts in the field and the voices of beneficiaries to inform the other links through collaboration with the mass media (Figure 3). This model recognizes the centrality of beneficiaries’ perspectives and values, and emphasizes collaboration, while maintaining an independent role for the media as a “watchdog”.

To begin, humanitarian organizations must learn to harness the media as a communication resource, to utilize their attributes, and improve their shortcomings. The media can serve as a tool for situational awareness—identifying factors in the humanitarian context that bear further examination. For example, with proper coordination and training, local or international media could serve a sentinel role, alerting aid workers or local governments of abnormal population movements or the sudden appearance of unusual numbers of sick or dying victims. With their global reach, the mass media could be a potent mouthpiece for beneficiary populations, serving as intermediaries that allow the world to bear witness to and learn from the experiences of those afflicted by and recovering from disaster and/or crisis. To do this ethically and effectively requires developing the ability and desire to “portray an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears” (Figure 1), by focusing primarily on conveying the perspectives of beneficiaries instead of catering to the entertainment of a passive home audience. At the very least, this requires bringing the media to the table to discuss their role, to find ways to coordinate their efforts with the communication needs of field workers and beneficiaries, and to introduce greater accountability among reporters. Keeping the media at the table will require exploring methods of building strategic partnerships. These could include developing relationships with influential thought-leaders within the industry who are willing to champion responsible reporting, partnering with schools of journalism, and including the media in monitoring exercises. The need for such efforts has been recognized before and could help launch an industry shift that addresses the informational shortcomings discussed above.⁸

Another strategy for media management could be the development of a cooperative public relations initiative involving multiple field organizations. Such an effort could focus on publicizing under-reported stories through such typical public relations strategies as issuing press releases, publicizing academic studies or conferences, and providing fact sheets on “hot topics.”

Finally, systems for coordinating with the local media during times of crisis also should be developed, to facilitate the informational needs of beneficiaries.² This requires a process of: (1) identifying which local media sources are used and trusted by beneficiaries; (2) assessing their shortcomings, including restrictions placed upon them; and (3) evaluating the risks to personal safety or future credibility that local media may face from collaborating with expatriate organizations. When available, local media outlets could be valuable partners. They are established, familiar with the social, physical, and political terrain, have established con-

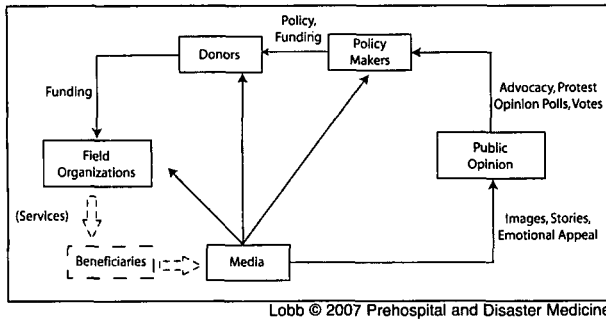


Figure 2—Chain of information and influence currently surrounding discussion and decision-making during disasters and crises (missing link is area with dashed lines)

tacts, and possess the cultural understanding necessary for effective, nuanced messaging. Communicating with a crisis population through their own media also may help re-establish some sense of normalcy and security in times of social upheaval. Local news sources also may be better positioned than the international or non-local media to report to responders about the core concerns and needs of beneficiary populations.

A New Voice

There are weaknesses to collaborating with the mass media. Media outlets may perceive that they have nothing to gain from such a partnership, being unaware of their current shortcomings or disinterested in improving their methods of information gathering and reporting, and decline to participate. Those that favor cooperation likely will retain final control of how messages are delivered, and will continue to simultaneously carry other, possibly contradictory messages to the public, policy makers, donors, and organizations in the field. Hence, a strategy that does not relinquish control of the dialogue and that allows for direct and simultaneous communication with multiple parties holds great promise.

This could be achieved through a central publication created by humanitarian NGOs and aid workers to share information with each other, and to communicate directly with the public, donors, and policy makers about the central values, priorities, goals, and needs of humanitarian action. Using a magazine format that “takes you there” through the active, first-person voice of dedicated field workers and photography, a humanitarian-focused publication could reach beyond the community of NGO and aid workers to involve the public by educating them about the real world of humanitarian efforts and defining their role in humanitarian endeavors. The public has an important role, since public opinion ultimately shapes policy, and public action either can help or hinder disaster and crisis responses. Providing a transparent information flow between communities affected by crises and those compelled to be connected with them, also could help the public develop the patience to provide political and monetary support to long-term relief and development efforts. By assisting in a public relations and fundraising capacity, this could help raise the public visibility of aid organizations and leverage

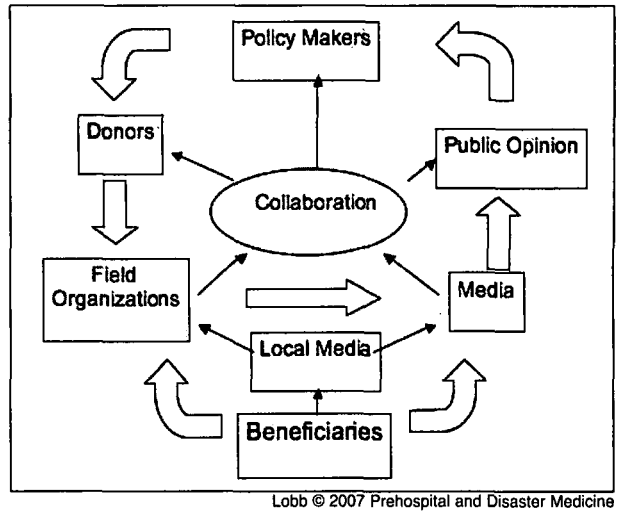


Figure 3—Improved chain of information and influence surrounding discussion and decision-making during disasters and crises

greater mission buy-in from the public and donors who feel they are involved and are allowed access to an otherwise insulated profession.

Written and edited by public health and humanitarian professionals, this publication would advance the overall discipline by redefining what it means to be a humanitarian, and report on the true nature of current and past crises. Professional responders could benefit by utilizing such a venue to share practical field skills and lessons learned, develop informal coordination networks, promote cross-disciplinary understanding, and bring the perspectives, experiences, and values of beneficiaries into the non-beneficiary public consciousness. A Website could provide timely information in response to quickly evolving situations, and serve as an information hub linked to existing informational resources, such as the international monitoring program for emerging disease, <http://www.promedmail.org>. Finally, core values of justice and solidarity would be bolstered by allowing the global community to bear witness to violations of human dignity that currently go largely unnoticed.

Conclusions

There is a clear need for more relevant and compelling information to guide crisis and disaster responses. Non-governmental organizations and aid workers are operators on the ground, and they must take a leading role in the dialogue about the priorities, needs, goals, and values of the beneficiary populations they serve. It is the responsibility of crisis responders to educate, advocate, communicate, coordinate, and assess in order to better serve a core mission of preventing human crises as well as responding to them. A multi-stakeholder cooperative communication initiative could help improve media involvement and quality reporting on disasters and crises, and harness the media as a credible and knowledgeable communication tool for response efforts. A professional publication dedicated to the discipline would help optimize efforts, communicate the perspective of beneficiaries, and manage the underutilized resource of the general public.

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THE WORLD ASSOCIATION FOR DISASTER AND EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Requests Input and Expressions of Interest in the Development of Regional Chapters

The World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine (WADEM) is an international, humanitarian association dedicated to the improvement of disaster and emergency medicine. Its Board of Directors, pursuant to decisions of the Board made at Edinburgh, Scotland, May, 2005, hereby offer the designation of WADEM Chapters to nation-states, nation-state provinces, or individual states, regional organizations and recognized healthcare societies of these entities who share the mission and dedication of WADEM.

Chapters will have an academic, research, and/or operational focus and will participate as a recognized chapter to further develop for the WADEM and the individual chapter membership:

- Education and training
- Interpretation and exchange of information through its network of members and publications
- Development and maintenance of evidence-based standards of emergency and disaster health care and provision of leadership concerning their integration into practice
- Coordination of data collection and provision of direction in the development of standardized disaster assessment and research and evaluation methodologies
- Encourage publications and presentation of evidence-based research findings in scientific publications, national, regional, and international conferences, and congresses
- Will foster and deliberately promote, whenever possible, the recognition of a regional, national, and or profession-specific knowledge base for the general WADEM membership. The WADEM agrees to recognize these advances in publications, conferences, congresses, task forces, and committees.

Interested in developing a Regional Chapter?

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