# Chapter 13
# Media and Humanitarian Action

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## 13.1 Representation of Disasters in the Media

Whether a disaster is reported in the media and how this is done depends on several criteria, which are rarely revealed to the recipients and especially the persons involved in the disaster. Major disasters such as the tsunami in South East Asia in 2004, the Haiti earthquake of 2010 or the triple catastrophe[1] in Japan in 2011 are events that are picked up by the media worldwide and can create fear, compassion and feelings of powerlessness in the recipient. The media bring images, as well as emotions, to our living rooms. This is important for NGOs because of the power of the media, where competing commercial companies are particularly prominent due to circulation or audience.

## 13.2 The Agenda-Setting Function of the Media

Before a humanitarian catastrophe even reaches the public, various stakeholders such as the media, organisations and politics have already exercised their influence on the way in which this happens. The NGOs working in the emergency often assume that the media has just as much of an interest in humanitarian crises as they

[1] Earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

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do. However, they often overestimate the work ethic of journalists in selecting the topics independently (Cottle and Nolan 2009).

From a scientific perspective, the news factors set out in news research play a crucial role. Schulz (1976) cites 18 different factors and makes it clear that the more an event gains news value, the more these factors are able to come together (Ruhrmann and Göbbel 2007).[2] For example, the tsunami in South East Asia had huge media attention because the priority factors such as proximity (holiday destinations), identification (German tourists) and suddenness (real-time reports at Christmas time) played a role. As practical experience with editorial offices shows, an additional phenomenon called a topic hole sometimes occurs, whereby journalists pick up on a less interesting topic when there would otherwise hardly be any news to report there—for example the floods in Pakistan in 2010.[3]

Especially in traditional media—i.e. print and audio-visual media—an editor is still a constant. They assume the role of gatekeeper[4] in the creation of messages and decide what 'passes through', in other words, what is published and what is not. There are several factors here, such as the editorial organisation or professional experience. In relation to humanitarian disaster reporting, what follows is the journalistic duty to inform and the degree of personal emotional concern. NGOs are dependent on the audience's empathy with the report—they want to achieve one of their objectives: to generate an altruistic impulse in the recipient and stimulate their willingness to donate. The frequency, that is, how often an event has been reported and through how many media channels, is also a factor.

Experience has shown that natural disasters tend to create a larger media event than violent conflicts or prolonged emergencies. In the 'best case' all conditions are met (large extent, sudden event, destruction, violence, personal reference). In contrast, it is far more difficult to overcome the media barrier regarding man-made disasters such as the civil war in Syria (since 2011). It is true that such crises are widely reported; however the reports primarily cover political, ethnic and religious conflict and much less about the need for humanitarian assistance.

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[2] Schulz had to split 18 news factors in six dimensions: The dimension "time" includes the timely evolution of events ("time") and the relationship to other events ("theming"). "Proximity" has different forms ("spatial", "political", "cultural proximity") and refers also to the feeling of affectedness through the events with a ("relevance"). Under the dimension of "status" ("VIPs" "personal influence"), the significance of the place ("regional", "national centrism") and the participants of events are summarised. "Dynamics" includes special peculiarities in the end ("surprise") and content of events ("structure"). The dimension of "valence" recognises negative ("conflict", "crime", "damage") and positive event characteristics ("success"). "Identification" includes reference to personal and social events ("personalisation", "ethnocentrism"). An event has a higher news value the more of the mentioned factors come together.

[3] According to multiple experiences in the press office of Germany's Relief Coalition.

[4] The term "gatekeeper" is from the American social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who originally studied decision-making regarding the use of food in families. David Manning White transferred the approach in the 1950s to news value research. In contrast to research on the gatekeeper theory, the news value theory does not deal with the properties of the journalists or the factors by the organisation, but continues with the media content.

News value also does not seem to be necessarily high when a large number of people are starving, abused or killed in civil wars. The competition between items of 'suffering news' is strong. In the 1990s, there was a much higher awareness of the war in the Balkans than of the genocide in Rwanda. For example, in 2009, just as many people died in Nigeria from HIV/AIDS as in the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 (CIA World Fact Book 2011). These figures are intended to illustrate proportions, although disasters are not comparable in character (slow-onset disaster versus sudden-onset disaster).

According to the evaluation by *Aktion Deutschland Hilft* over the course of reporting on disasters, media interest in Germany within 3–4 weeks after an event of great magnitude such as the earthquake in Haiti follows the same pattern: (1) Initial event and the consequences for those affected; (2) Help and helpers: Logistics and faces of aid, equipment, circumstances, experience reports before departure, on-site and on return; (3) Donations from celebrities, actions of third parties in favour of NGOs; (4) Donation phenomena: Tips for safe donations (crooks and dangers), misuse, and later statistics of who donates most.[5]

Despite considerable efforts, humanitarian NGOs have failed to communicate with the public about clichés regarding emergency clean-ups (allegedly required donations of clothes or the idea that every donated Euro must be used locally for the project) so that the coverage of a disaster relies on these stereotypes and real reasons are not (and cannot be) illuminated. Further questioning of the causes at this point could perhaps have provided a greater opportunity for maximum and improved public perception. Since editors (as a rule) rarely have information from experts on humanitarian assistance, their journalistic skills often lack what is necessary to allow them to provide adequate facts.

The media's portrayal of disasters and their consequences, among other things is characterised in such a way that negative messages have a higher news value. This means that the media spotlight is focused on reports that tend to be negative and critical rather than reports of success from auxiliary activities. Positive news encounters generate a lower resonance. The usual annual reports on disasters are mainly interested in terms of the money that has already been spent. An effort from organisations to make the 'good deeds' of the donor visible is seldom supported by the media.

Economic aspects also play a role here. As a journalistic phrase of wisdom goes "if it bleeds, it leads": violent events cross media barriers rather than topics that do not sell as well. In short, the media prefers to report loud disasters rather than political crises whose backgrounds are rarely transparent to recipients. The tendency to report mainly on conflicts means that crises and conflict reporting is the norm for media consumers (Bratic and Schirch 2007).

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[5] Media Impact Analysis Germany's Relief Q3 2010.

## 13.3 What Is Reported? The Construction of Reality by the Media and Humanitarian Organisations

An immediate presence in the disaster area is of vital importance to humanitarian NGOs. Whoever is on-site quicker gives the impression of effectiveness. The visibility of one's own brand ensures that donations flow to the 'right' account. Munz (2007) has shown, however, that in the rarest of cases, disaster victims wait helplessly for their 'white' saviour. This stereotype, however, fulfils an expectation in recipients of reports on disasters, who want to identify with the helper. This in turn carries the media further with their questions about the German workers' bill. With the dominance of Western media in global world news, reports are thus far most often about disasters that are often adapted to the Western reader's expectations.

Extensively criticised imagery[6] is still widely disseminated. Innocent victims are usually children, women and old people, and help is given to them by 'white heroes'. Dramatisations range up to so-called hunger pornography.[7] With these measures, humanitarian NGOs often follow a predefined logic of the media, not least in their imagery, in order to generate media attention. Phrases like 'images of destruction/neediness', 'images of assistance (from Germany…)' and 'resurgent/self-concerned' constitute a dramatic arc. A questionable tactic is the holding of televised fundraising galas. They reduce complex situations to infotainment formats. The view in the background is not questioned; it is one of a unique fate. In many cases, media-initiated fundraising campaigns are the central theme of reports.

In this interplay of stakeholders, NGOs, the media and donors are trying to be heard and be seen in this variety of global issues. The simplistic and alarmist language of fundraising is in contrast to a (self-) critical information service from humanitarian NGOs. Related to this is the accusation that the credibility of reporting is diminishing (Moeller 1999). The loss of credibility is a threat to media and humanitarian agencies. However, NGOs are striving to change that and to place the potential and the strengths of people affected by disasters in their imagery at the centre of what they present.

Studies at the Free University of Berlin on the 2004 tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the earthquake in Pakistan in 2005, China in 2008 and Haiti in 2010 reveals evidence that when consumers have to put together a piece comprised of a sequence of images, they follow the narrative logic of artistic disaster reports on television or magazines such as "Stern" or "News Week" (Scholz 2012) and thus internalise the imagery. A disaster for the spatially distant recipient 'arrives' and motivates them to take action (donations), thus communication hurdles are

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[6] For example, as shown in the movie "White Charity" by Carolin Philipp and Timo Kiesel. It analyses the methods of construction of blackness and whiteness in the image on the basis of advertising billboards of large development organisations.

[7] Portrayed children littered with emaciated bodies, bloated bellies and flies sitting on parched soil should trigger donations by showing shock images.

overcome and the media performs in an emergency. Only when the disaster becomes a media event can it lead to successful donations. That "does not make all recipients and helpers, however, those who help have accessed the media and called in to do so" (Scholz 2012).

Disasters do not generate any donations without media coverage. Oversubscription is not only operated by humanitarian NGOs, but is also of media interest due to high ratings/requirements. These distortions (media bias) are thus supported by the media and humanitarian NGOs. The latter therefore try to influence the gatekeeper role of the journalist, in whose power it is to decide on the 'victim-value' of those affected. According to Knaup (2000), what is missing is the media's professional, sober dealing with the interests of organisations who "exploit the media".

> The donor will have to make the effort, on this subject too, to distinguish between slinging entertainment and factual information. The rules and laws of the media market are aimed at selling the information to the widest possible clientele. This is a reality, with which both the public and humanitarian agencies must learn to deal with, noted Munz (2007 p 137).

## 13.4    The Importance of the CNN Effect

When talking about the so-called 'CNN effect', this is taken to mean that the media—especially when it is based on the eponymous U.S. television network—not only sets the agenda for this or other humanitarian disasters with their coverage of crises and armed conflicts, but also reinforces other media.

Conversely, it also means that humanitarian disasters that are not perceived in a certain way by the media are not seen this way by the public either. This is particularly evident in the media's so-called 'silence' over secret or forgotten crises such as the on-going needs of the population in the Central African Republic, on which news is reported only in passing, if at all.

Apart from the direct assumed causality between news media reporting and the perception of crises and disasters in the public, a thesis has been discussed as to whether and to what extent the CNN effect could also influence the foreign policy of a country's economy (Robinson 2002). Moreover, the increasing media coverage of crises and conflicts is leading to political action taking place in public. There is public pressure to enforce justice and consequently more action by all stakeholders is encouraged. This pressure is becoming greater than political office holders who wish to be re-elected can ignore (Caritas international – Brennpunkte 2007).

However, it is not only foreign policy chiefs that are subject to operating within media-friendly constraints. Even humanitarian organisations liaise with specific media—especially mainstream media such as 'CNN' or 'Der Spiegel'—in order to have an impact on the public and to emphasise characteristics, events and issues in a certain way so that they are picked up by other media. Thus, they act as an amplifier for events.

## 13.5    Power and Powerlessness of Humanitarian Organisations: Influence on Reporting

When major natural disasters occur all main factors are usually present, especially the innocent victims, and they become a media event. Creeping disasters (slow-onset disasters) such as famine in East or West Africa in 2011 and 2012 are often presented in the media as a result of drought or other natural events. However, they are usually an expression of grievances caused by people, such as misguided agricultural policies, civil wars, but also the interests of industrialised countries.

## 13.6    What Do Humanitarian Organisations Do to Attract Media Attention?

On the one hand, humanitarian NGOs simplify crises and disasters in order to gain media attention and raise funds for their work, and on the other hand, they also want to lend the people affected by the disasters a voice. In their role as the early warner voicing concern about impending disasters, humanitarian NGOs often feel that they are not taken seriously enough by the media. This was shown during the hunger crisis in West Africa in the first half of 2012 when NGOs wanted to avoid a situation similar to the famine in East Africa in 2011. The efforts to bring the issue into the media met with little success. NGOs that offered German journalists in early 2012 an opportunity to see the needs of the population in Niger or Mali in order to demonstrate the urgency of early help were dismissed with answers such as: "We have that on the agenda for June", the predicted height of the crisis. The NGOs failed to draw attention to the threat of a scenario in which there could be 18 million people hungry. The dramatic images of hunger were missing.

   To counteract the lack of interest in certain humanitarian crises and disasters, aid organisations seek to draw the media's attention to neglected crises. This happens at symposia and with travelling journalists whereby only journalists with special interests can be reached. The involvement of prominent supporters in political or social arenas provides an opportunity, albeit limited, for issues to be highlighted that would otherwise be unknown.

   Humanitarian NGOs are, therefore, increasingly going in other directions. They establish their own channels of information and communication strategies (Dijkzeul and Moke 2005). They are employed at organisations as online journalists who take care of versatile content creation, i.e. preparation of editorial content or videos for the website. They also use YouTube to broadcast material, thereby making the information they want to provide readily available.

   Humanitarian NGOs might possibly be well positioned—if they act in accordance with international, professional standards—to provide a high level of quality as content suppliers (replacement reporters who produce stories, background reports, (moving-) images, etc.) in a changing media world, where editorial offices

have limited funds to afford dealing with a correspondent or sending an editor on travels.

## 13.7   Is There a Dependent Relationship Between Aid Organisations and the Media?

Humanitarian NGOs need the media to inform the public about their work and to solicit donations for their activities. The media in turn needs NGOs to be able to access information in areas in which they would have difficulty in accessing themselves without the logistical support and the know-how that humanitarian organisations can provide. In addition, NGOs provide media representatives with background material and interview partners. The intertwining of the media and NGOs is only partially visible to the media user. It can be argued that the organisations finance part of the foreign reporting (the above mentioned trips for journalists). Only large newsrooms under the pressure of competition from other media companies can afford to send correspondents or editors at their own expense. This may lead to conflicts of interest that affect objective reporting and leads to calls for the critical role (independent of commercial or quote-driven interests) of the reporter to be maintained (Knaup 2000).

By providing journalists an insight into their work, on the one hand, aid organisations allow for greater transparency about their activities, and, on the other hand, take a risk of exposing their work to false or tendentious reports. Aid organisations do not fear the critical questions coming from the media, but the widespread negative interpretations of their answers from the public. If the positive image of NGOs is questioned by negative reports, this has a detrimental effect on the acquisition of donations in other disasters. Thus, marketing studies have shown that the extent of a disaster or the number of deaths is less crucial for the mobilisation of donors than the media event itself (Royal 2005), in which either positive or negative reports are made about organisations.

## 13.8   The New Media: Opportunities and Risks

McLuhan's thesis that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964) has all the more relevance even today, as new media on the internet creates a global space to which people have access around the clock; time zones and geographic distances have become meaningless. People can take part or be informed at any time—even during a disaster or in the midst of a political conflict. Local has gone global, interactive and cross-border. These are tools of which humanitarian NGOs are increasingly making use.

## 13.9   Humanitarian and Social Networks

With the help of new media and social networks like Twitter, YouTube or Facebook, information cannot only be found worldwide within a short time, but can also make people pay attention to their humanitarian circumstances as well. After the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, social media was used by survivors to tell their story, which in turn influenced the coverage in traditional media (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism 2012). This form of digital interaction of users and recipients in which information is collected in different ways, processed and divided is given the term 'crowd-sourcing'. However, these forms of digital communication also involve the risk of spreading false or inaccurate information—deliberately or inadvertently. A new platform that attempts to minimise such risks is Ushahidi (Coyle and Meier 2009). Established by Kenyan bloggers in 2007, users can use various services (including Facebook, Twitter, SMS or blogs) to find information about humanitarian disasters or human rights violations and make them known on this platform, 'map' them and recall them. This information is always checked by a variety of other users for the truthfulness of the published information. This is just one example of the opportunities and risks of using new media as well as the ability to network people in disaster situations (Nelson et al. 2010).

In addition to information from people in disaster-stricken areas, organisations increasingly use new means of communication to communicate faster with their donors. After the 2004 tsunami, mobile communications played a central role as a fundraising tool. In Britain, for example, more than 700,000 people took part in a joint campaign using all mobile phone companies and poured around £1.1 million into the accounts of the British Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) in just two months (Coyle and Meier 2009).

In addition, new media through the internet enables humanitarian NGOs to prepare background information on wider humanitarian disasters or to describe their work in a more thematically profound way than is possible with traditional media. Through the hyperlink structure, it is possible to provide unlimited space for information in the form of text, pictures or footage.[8] Moreover, humanitarian NGOs also use social networks to get in contact with interested people in a crisis or disaster more quickly and accurately, as well as with potential donors. Journalists and humanitarian workers can also use social networks to report on humanitarian work directly from conflict or disaster regions.

Not only NGOs, but also media companies recognise the opportunities of new media and are increasingly offering online content. As the example of Spiegel Online shows, these versions can in turn advance to key media on the internet, with live tickers, background reports and photo galleries. These offers lead the recipient to using both traditional media (television, print and radio) and online versions of media content in parallel. Media users can further inform themselves on a report

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[8] Raw material for further use by the mass media.

they saw on television or an article on humanitarian crises and disasters they read and interactively exchange information and commentary, regardless of time and place.

In addition to social networking and the exchange of new media, people can also interact with life-saving functions. The United Nations (UN) and various international aid organisations now use this to swiftly obtain information on acute crises and disasters and to inform people quickly, for example, about where clean drinking water can be found or where to find medical care stations (Nelson et al. 2010).

## 13.10 Testing the Veracity of Information

There is the question of the veracity and verifiability of the information distributed by new media. Traditional media channels are hesitant about spreading news through unsafe or non-verifiable sources, especially when they do not have their own local journalists on site. Oriental expert Günter Meyer complained about unsecured location information in regards to the political crisis in Syria 2011: "I've never experienced such a form of disinformation. [...]. Lots of videos are distributed, including completely the wrong information" (Meyer 2012). Even Reuters news agency was tricked by forgery and sold a movie from Lebanon in 2008 as a news update from the Syrian crisis. "At RTL, people use their own material or agency material. Our motto is: "Better safe than sorry", says Peter Klöppel, anchorman of the RTL's main newscast (Klöppel 2012).

The review of sources is difficult, especially when reporting on war events. There remains only the possibility of checking the veracity of the use of different sources. One can just offer valuable support in a crisis or disaster area or local media, insofar as they are on-site and thus able to report adequately. Nevertheless, there is also the risk of local media, particularly those in political crises, delivering instrumentalised news via those in power. In any case, questions must be asked about the inspection of video material or sources from the internet: Who is the author of the material? Has the source already made a public impact, and if so, was it serious and trustworthy? When was the material created? Who is shown there? What is talked about? Does the subject of the material fit with the context? ARD has been maintaining a separate department for this type of processing since April 2011, which also includes local experts in assessment. But in the end, it is also a reflection of reality that "some truth always dies at war." (Ulrich Leidholdt, correspondent of WDR 5, Wallrafplatz, 18 August 2012).

## 13.11 Conclusion: Quality Journalism: A Serious Concern of Editors and Aid Organisations

Aid organisations are increasingly trying to match media logic. This is reflected in the fact that organisations answer more requests from media professionals now than was the case a few years ago. Many NGOs acquire their own media and PR departments with experts. Their communication strategies also aim to satisfy the hunger for media news and mainstream demand: human interest stories are written and their relief workers are trained as interview partners and shown how rapidly statements can be taken out of context, misinterpreted and abused. This hurts the cause, and leads to a loss of the NGO's credibility. In addition, media training is aimed to train workers in such a way that they look authentic and are able to report briefly and precisely about their work in a disaster.

With all media products, however, the information must not lose its credibility. Therefore, it must be equal to the value and quality of reporting from the media. The disadvantage is when information is increasingly taken as if it were stated by the media in the first instance (Schnedler 2006).

An important contribution to quality and credibility happens when local media are better integrated in to the reporting of a disaster, and the training of local capacity, as well as the support of democratic development, is increased.

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