

# Chapter 7

## Challenges and Lessons: Reporting from Ground Zero—Diaries of Journalists Covering Disasters in the Asia Pacific



**Suvendrini Kakuchi**

**Abstract** This chapter offers the diverse reporting experience of Asian journalists when covering major disasters in their countries for leading domestic and international media. Through their voices—as quoted in their personal contributions for this book—the reader has access to a special insider look into the intricacies of media reporting. In addition, this chapter opens a window into the varied topics covered by journalists before, during and after the disaster. A critical aspect of this section is the compilation of their recommendations based on their experience. We hope the information will contribute to the ongoing development of disaster communication practices and media research.

**Keyword** Journalist field reports · Foreign correspondent reports · Personal reporting versus objective reporting · Gender in disaster reporting

### 7.1 Introduction and Need for Journalist's Diary

Often the reporters' coverage is an important source of independent communication from disaster sites to readers. Story content is a combination of official information and reporter's interviews. Journalists rely on government sources to provide statistics and data of the disaster including official activities responding to the tragedy. Field stories and analysis are captured through the eyes of the reporter—onsite interviews—and reflect the guidance of their editors (Alexander 2002).

Journalists' reports are often reliable sources for private-sector humanitarian aid and assistance to the disaster sites. Their stories provide information on humanitarian issues such as the lack of goods, assistance and financial help and the impact on survivors. Given the wide public appeal of disaster reporting, especially during a massive tragedy, news organizations view the topic as both a social commitment and an important financial source. As the media expands with expanding private cable television channels and new online media outlets spawning the Internet, competition

---

S. Kakuchi (✉)  
Tokyo Correspondent, University World News, Tokyo, Japan  
e-mail: [suven@kdp.biglobe.ne.jp](mailto:suven@kdp.biglobe.ne.jp)

between media has grown intense. With news companies relying on advertising for financial stability, viewer rates become imperative for survival. This backdrop has affected the media coverage of disasters. Large-scale destruction provides unusual news coverage, dramatic photos and stories representing trauma and adventure. The coverage evokes massive emotional appeal to the public-making disaster stories some of the most read, watched and listened. Ref Media Capacity Building and Disaster Risk Reduction: Building Resilience and Protecting Socio Economic Development Gains in Southeast Asia. International Development. Australia Broadcasting Corporation.

Against this context, the media invests heavily in human resources and technology to gain readership and thrive for successful coverage. The focus of disaster reporting is then on the visibility of the disasters—shocking images of suffering is an example of the high priority to produce emotive reporting (Pantti 2018).

International news on disasters is dependent on geo dominated by the bigger and richer media companies. Journalists in these companies have access to vast funds and technology, such as employing drones, that give them an edge over smaller companies. Bigger companies can dispatch their journalists to foreign disaster sites. Better access to a network of researchers, contacts in the foreign governments and the private sector also contribute to more coverage and visually attractive production of stories. Their perspectives shape public opinion in foreign audiences (Pantti 2018).

Journalist reports can also convey misleading information, which can be conspicuous in news filed by reporters from large mainstream companies who are not familiar with the local settings. A potent example cited by researchers is in reference to the 2004 massive Asian tsunami when western media emphasized victim helplessness by covering displaced children when the reality was that orphans were taken care of by the community and were rarely placed in orphanages (Sterling 2009).

With the growth of social media, information sharing has become a two-way flow. New technologies—laptops, cell phones digital cameras—have changed the way news is gathered and disseminated. Online access to disaster news is immediate and covers large populations. Social media tools such as Twitter and blogs have become key news sources. The growth of the popularity of social media has changed the way mainstream media organizations cover the news—journalists covering disasters are required to upload short social media messages on their I-phones from disaster sites. Longer stories are disseminated later. Social media has also pushed the framework of transparency and accountability. As more ordinary citizens, referred to as First Informers, use the technology to send messages based on real experiences, their messages can counter official information leading to holding people and organizations responsible. In addition, the social media has fostered the importance of participatory journalism in news organizations. More disaster reporting is based on multimedia format. The dependence on photos and videos sent by the people from the disaster sites are now viewed as vital resources in news reporting (Haddow and Haddow 2014).

Blogs Message Board, Hotlines, Message boards provide critical information about missing persons, shelter locations, support organizations and other important information necessary for the survivors and other stakeholders. Bill Gannon, owner of

Yahoo, a major online provider, is quoted as saying referring to the Katrina hurricane in august 2005, “what we realized is that user’s wanted not just to read the information but they wanted to be empowered. They wanted to be personally involved either through a message board or simply through a donation” (Haddow and Haddow 2014). Research has also indicated the social media provides pinpoint information that is first accessed during disaster—Twitter messages on lifeline information were most read during the March 11, 2011 triple disaster. Television news was most popular 1 week after the disaster (NHK 2013).

## 7.2 Diaries of Journalists

### *Freelance reporter and photographer for almost three decades. Indonesia. Disaster: July 2, 2013. Disaster:Ache earthquake. Indonesia*

It was the day when an earthquake with tremor 6.1 on the Richter scale jolted Aceh province. The epicenter was in the districts of Central Aceh and BenerMeriah. Thirty-nine people died and 420 were injured. In one area, the land was split up into two, creating a huge and long hole. Three villages were shattered and 3000 houses were destroyed.

I went to the site the next day with a photographer, when the aftershocks were still occurring. The National Disaster Management Body has set up an emergency office close to the offices of national and international voluntary, humanitarian organizations. As I worked busily to gather information from the site and these offices I realized that covering a big disaster by one or two journalists would not result in reliable information. The best approach is when news organizations employ at least three people. A team of four or five people dispatched to the site for disaster reporting can contribute to stable story coverage.

Why: because any disaster is a huge occurrence, involving many people, organizations, institutions that require information that covers a wide area. In disaster, everybody and concerned parties want to say things, want to be heard, want to get your attention.

Victims would say that they have not to get food, clothes and other relief items. Social organizations would say that they are conducting many activities that have helped victims. Corporations would report that they have donated money and other relief items, and the government officials will try to convince the journalist that everything is under control.

Amid these mass of information I am faced with a limitation of time because the situation demands that I should verify most of what I am being told. This is imperative because during this disaster every victim I interviewed conveyed the same story: they had not got assistance; or they did not get enough. Even unaffected people said to me that they lost many things with the purpose that they can now apply for international and national assistance.

The other reason why I recommend journalists to be work in teams is to be better able to meet the pressure to attend as many daily briefings by officials in the field. These events are important to gather official statistics and statements. But very often these press conferences go on till late night. Therefore, I missed the first-hand information about the refugee camps and from the voluntary organizations.

Working alone forced me to make a difficult selection for my coverage, including among my news sources. When it came to gathering information about the condition of victims, I chose to interview the refugee's leader, or village heads. While the information was mostly true and reliable, as a journalist I faced the obstacle of not being able to listen to diverse sectors of people who would be able to convey diverse viewpoints.

On the site, my reporting pattern was to talk to government disaster management organizations and local administration officials to gather information on disaster management. For my reports on the importance of prediction of the aftershocks or other quakes, I talked to climate, meteorology and geophysics organizations.

Given the fact that Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, disasters are of important news value in the media. The sad fact, however, is that disasters make news only when it happens.

***Former News editor Sunday Times, Sri Lanka; 2004 Asian tsunami disaster tragedy in a war zone***

I am sharing with you my experience working for a foreign news company covering the massive Asian tsunami that devastated one-third of Sri Lanka's coasts on December 26 2004. Six days after the disaster, we crossed into less reported area in the northeast of Sri Lanka, an area that was facing a civil war. As we got closer to the town, we noticed a stench emanating from the town. The strong odor was unbearable and was from the corpses of victims that were still lying around. It was a disaster of unparalleled proportions, as almost the entire town had been wiped out. Everyone had been taken unawares by the tsunami. But the focus of our report was about the animals because we were told they had fled before the disaster. We saw hundreds of dogs running around the town because they were lost and looking for food. The story of animals escaping the tsunami is well known in Sri Lanka. When the earth rumbled from the massive earthquake that shook Indonesia, there were experts who reported the animals escaped to safety. Now they were back. The dogs were looking for their masters, who were all dead. This situation was one of our disaster stories, which was filed from the site.

The foreign media crew set up operations on the beach and by evening they were ready to transmit via satellite the coverage to the USA. The correspondent reported news on an hourly basis. We had to shut down power completely between broadcasts because we needed to conserve energy. Apart from the technology issues, the challenge of reporting a disaster for an international audience is that the viewer is sitting in a living room thousands of miles away. We have to reach an audience removed from the reality we faced. The basic rule was that people far away will not be able to understand the full extent of the tragedy. Therefore, sometimes a point needs to be overemphasized, and iconic examples were used, to depict a situation.

One such example was when a stray dog walked towards the foreign crew that was broadcasting live to the camera. The dog rubbed against the television anchor and he bent down to pet the animal and told his viewers the story of how these dogs had lost their masters. The dog was the commonality shared with the foreign audience and was a potent symbol to portray the tragedy of the tsunami.

Effective disaster reporting is to make people understand is to be able to relate the story through emotional content while also balancing the objectivity. Yet, it is also true that as the reporter becomes deeply embedded into the tragic surrounding, his own subjectivity makes him become deeply involved in the story.

Newsrooms have to understand these perspectives and need to give reporters on the ground, a chance to vent their emotions by allowing them a place in the story. In many cases, media, both domestic and foreign, have started a segment on their news, which gives space to the reporter to talk about what he felt about the situation and how he connected the story to his personal feelings. The assignment produces beautiful stories that are popular with the viewers.

I will add that when reporting a disaster, journalists have to make the rules. Yet at the same time journalists are aware that their reporting must be ethical—our reports have to contain facts and be balanced. Our goal is to capture a situation as it is and makes it relevant to the reader or viewer.

***Former Tokyo Correspondent. Taiwan TV; March 11.2011. Great East Japan***

The March 11, 2011 disaster emerged as a sudden shock. I was not prepared. The ordinary public can escape to save their lives. But journalists cannot do that. So my big lesson from the March 11, 2011 Great East Japan disaster is that journalists must be prepared better to act faster and be ready to minimize the stress they face during a disaster. To make this happen, the first step is that news organizations must be prepared by making plans to provide immediate food and transport for journalists who must report from the disaster sites, and part from providing physical support to them the news organizations but also prepare their journalists with the correct knowledge of that particular disaster. During the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster, the big lesson for me was that I was not prepared to report because I lacked in-depth nuclear information. We need access to science information before so we can write good reports.

At that time of the disaster, my office sent helmets, radiation check monitors, gasoline to the media team—2 Taiwanese journalists and a cameraman. But this was not enough. This disaster raised the risk of radiation contamination so going to the site means we face a dangerous situation. The bottom line is news media organizations are not prepared ahead for natural disasters.

During the triple disaster, my editors decided to follow the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown. This is because Taiwanese readers who also depend on nuclear energy and reports from Japan will cater to this need. Overall the stories I filed from the disaster focused on the data and predictions on safety from the radiation contamination and also included reports to show our readers the response from the Japanese public to the dangerous situation. I took care to tell readers that the Japanese survivors were careful and serious and were following orders from disaster experts.

For my 1-year anniversary recovery story, I focused on environment protection as an important disaster mitigation measure. I quoted data compiled by experts to show the loss of the natural tree barricade in the area caused the tsunami to enter the area faster resulting in wider destruction. Huge amounts of aid and assistance were dispatched from Taiwan to the Japanese victims. Therefore monitoring the aid story is important for Taiwanese reporters. My stories on the way Taiwanese aid was spent by the affected people were popular. My story about Taiwanese assistance sent the message that Taiwan was returning generosity extended to us by Japanese public during disasters in our country.

***Senior reporter. Daily Star, Bangladesh on major Fire in Dhaka***

The deadliest disaster I covered was on February 21 2019. The fire occurred in the crowded Chawkbazar, the older part of the city, and killed 71 people. It was a national holiday. I got the news at night and rushed to the site around 12:30 am. But I could not reach close to the fire area because the firefighters blocked the road and stopped the reporters.

I saw the fire had turned the whole sky reddish. In my haste to tell the news I remembered a very important aspect for journalists reporting disaster. In a training program for the media organized by Japanese NGO, SEEDS Asia, we discussed the issue of safety of journalists that must always be the first priority for the reporter. Most often we are overwhelmed to report the facts of the disaster quickly to satisfy the reader and our stories have to be available as quickly. Updates are essential and must be sent repeatedly. At the same time, the journalist must take precautions to save his own life and this means that journalists too must be knowledgeable about disasters and how to protect themselves.

How I covered the fire: I first took a number of photos from the spot and sent it to the office through WhatsApp so that the office can update on its website. I sent reports about people screaming for help and also the firefighters working hard to provide a stable water supply. As the disaster site was located in a narrow area, there was a shortage of water supply. I saw a number of people came forward to provide water to help to stop the fire. They opened their water pumps to supply water. I took some pictures and dropped the story in our office.

Old Dhaka is also known as a hub for stocking counterfeit perfume products, including scent and deodorant that is inflammable. Numerous warehouses have been set up to store counterfeit products. Storehouses are built in some almost unreachable and undetectable rooms and buildings, meaning these are inaccessible to firefighters. The area became slippery due to the tons of water and I struggled to walk safely in the area. I had to find my way among the huge crowd of hundreds of reporters and photographer sas all pushed alongside each other to cover the event.

I reported the firefighters had become tired of spraying water over so many hours—the fire came under control at 4:30 am. The firefighters were exhausted. They just lay down on the floor, unbuttoning their uniforms and taking off their boots. They were asking for water and food. I reported it was a terrible situation. When the fire came under control, I went to the disaster site and found there was nothing but ashes and some plastic waste. I saw some bodies but the authorities were finding it difficult

to identify them. I was exhausted myself but it now time to file the longer stories. These were the scenes I witnessed and communicated in my disaster reporting.

***Contributor, Dawn Newspaper, Pakistan on Kashmir earthquake***

The October 8, 2005 earthquake was one of Pakistan's biggest disasters. The epicenter of the 7.6 earthquake that struck the Himalayan region of northern Pakistan and Kashmir was located approximately 9 km northeast of the city of Muzaffarabad, capital city of the Pakistani-administered Kashmir also known as Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK). The official death toll as of November 2005 stood at 87,350, an approximately 38,000 were injured and over 3.5 million were rendered homeless.

Since I could not visit the disaster site immediately I collected information from sources in Karachi. I also talked on the phone to people on the site and involved in rescue operations. The purpose of my disaster reporting was to give the tragedy a human face. For a journalist, the human story can be cathartic as it is my contribution to make the world understand the situation. I also pledged that part of the money I earned from my reporting will be donated to the needy.

The earthquake happened at the time when private channels had just started their broadcast with almost all major media houses and newspaper owners establishing their own TV stations. With competition heating, this was also the first time that Pakistani journalists learnt about the ethics of humanitarian reporting. A major lesson was that we should refrain from capturing on screen the shots of people grieving over their loss, the dead and also those in physical pain due to bad injuries.

A month later, I visited the devastated area, this time focusing on the humanitarian side of recovery. I had to walk in the cold and face the regular tremors and rats while sleeping in tents. I reported about the necessities not available for the survivors. I also reported in 2009. At that time, the media was banned because the Pakistan army launched an operation to seed out the militants belonging to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). I covered the topics of displacement focusing on the impact on women who were also badly affected by the military conflict. My contacts in the military and among the militants were very valuable for my reporting.

***Reporter on March 11, 2011 Great East Japan Disaster—3-month anniversary story***

I focused on gender issues in disaster for my 3-month anniversary story to mark the massive March 11, 2011 triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant blast—that ravaged the north east parts of Japan. The theme was unique among the many anniversary stories filed by the male-dominated Japanese media. I wanted to take a different angle by highlighting the efforts and courage of female survivors, a sector that faces marginalization and stereo-typing in mainstream. The gender subject is also relatively new in disaster management and is a focus point in ongoing research. Turning the spotlight on their stories in Tohoku conservative society was about flushing out new angles and new thoughts from the affected women. Breaking new ground is a key goal in journalism. An anniversary story that focuses on recovery is aimed at readers who are looking for hope after the shock and sadness that was

caused by the tragedy. Readers are eager to help and the journalist's job, in this context, is to cater to these needs by providing interesting stories.

My gender story highlighted the traumas caused by the disaster impact on women—how they coped with physical destruction and deaths in their families. But it did not stop there. By spending many weeks with large groups of survivors, I also reported about their activities that contributed to the recovery of their homes and neighborhoods. Their role as grandmothers, mothers, single women and widows placed them in the position of caring for their families, especially young children and the elderly. They cooked and cleaned in the evacuation centers and organized themselves into groups to make sure the work was shared to ease the burden on women. At the same time, they had got together to lobby the authorities to pay attention to the specific needs of women survivors such as providing privacy in shelters and access to goods that catered to their personal needs. In one story, I followed a woman who was appointed as a public spokesperson, a major feat in Tohoku where social norms accept that men speak on behalf of their community. In Fukushima, which was ravaged by the nuclear plant explosion, I focused on women who emerged as leaders in the new anti-nuclear energy movement that was rocking the country. My stories conveyed that disaster recovery cannot be achieved without listening to the voices of women and making them partners at the national and local disaster management authorities.

### 7.3 Postscripts

The importance of the local media gained attention in the reporting experience during of the Great East Japan March 11, 2011 triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown. The lives of hundreds of thousands of people's living in the disaster sites and beyond were disrupted. Research indicates while big media such as Nippon HosoKyokai and major newspapers had larger staff and carried wider coverage, the mainstream news sided with official information released from government and Tokyo Electric Power Company that operated the damaged nuclear power plant. In comparison, local media, radio and newspapers gained popularity as a source of information for the community because the information was aimed at the local post-disaster needs and recovery efforts.

Referred to the "Age of the Extreme Weather," the topic of disasters has become an important beat in mainstream reporting. But research also indicates that natural disaster reporting is linked to extreme weather stories that are in turn reported under the topic of global warming. The trend has raised its profile in the news mostly related to the international spotlight on Climate Change with its focus on the impact on national and local economic development. Disaster coverage topics, when not during a major tragedy, are therefore heavily based on the release of new scientific data, binding regulations and other newsworthy information. Reporting specifically



on the impact of hazards is restricted to its short-term impact describing a media situation where the implementation of capacity building measure remains crucial (DRRAJ 2016).

## References

- Alexander D (2002) Principles of emergency planning and management. Oxford University Press, UK, 340 pages
- DRRAJ (2016) Media Capacity building and disaster risk reduction: building resilience and protecting socio-economic development gains in southeast Asia. International Development Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia, 33 pages
- Haddow G, Haddow K (2014) Disaster communication in a changing media world. Elsevier publication, Netherland, 282 pages
- NHK (2013) Public opinion survey on “Disaster Prevention and Energy” conducted three years after the Great East Japan Earthquake. <https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/english/reports/summary/201404/01.html>. Accessed 14 July 2020
- Pantii M (2018) Crisis and disaster coverage. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0202>. Accessed 13 July 2020
- Sterling C (2009) Encyclopedia of journalism. Sage publishing, UK, 3136 pages