

## **The media and responses to humanitarian crises**

**Presentation by Maurice Herson, Senior Projects Manager - ALNAP**

Do the media have a positive role in exposing or 'covering' corruption? Of course! What I want to do is set that in a broader context of the role of the media in the case of disasters, and how it fits with what humanitarian action is about.

I'm coming from outside the media so I want to reflect back how things look from outside. In my sector this is a constant challenge to us - to get the view of others, specifically those we seek to help, in doing our work. Not what we can provide, not what we think we need to provide, but what they think they want us to provide, or just to do.

It's a story of black and white - we love the media and we hate and fear them. We use them when we can. Of course they also use us - they need stories and sales or viewers, and we can provide some of the voices and facts and views that make those stories. We speak a language that the international media can understand, literally and more metaphorically speaking.

Behind all these oversimplified and provocative, not to say aggressive, statements is a more complex reality.

I am taking this from the point of view not just of corruption, but of the wider role of the media in humanitarian crises, because I do not think that you can easily or justifiably take the positive role of the media as potential exposers of something wrong without setting that in the more complete context of the other aspects of the role of the media in that same situation or context.

For example, there is the wholly disproportionate coverage of the tsunami by the global and the European media. Not just the amount of attention given to the whole phenomenon as compared to the attention given to the next 10 largest emergencies combined (*an Alertnet study (March 2005) "finds that the ...tsunami got more media attention in the first six weeks after it struck than all of the world's top 10 'forgotten' emergencies combined have received in a year."* The research also suggests the tsunami squeezed out coverage of other crises) but also the fact that 40% of the coverage in our media was of the tourists who were 1% of those affected. Now on the one hand this is justifiable through the interest of the potential readers and viewers, but it does give those who are dependent on the media a very unbalanced picture. Does the fact of having promoted that unbalanced picture reduce the credibility of a later emphasis on the 'sexy' but virtuous story of misuse of funds? I would say so.

What's the interest of the donor in media exposure of corruption or other wrongdoing? The institutional or governmental donor - for whom I cannot speak representatively, of course - might welcome being made aware of something that they would not otherwise know about easily. On the other hand they might sympathise with an organisation that they have funded, if it feels that it is being badly treated on the grounds that its achievements are being neglected for the sake of a sensationalised tidbit - I'm aware that I'm expressing emotions here, by the way, not objective realities.

Or the donor might take the view that there is a political risk to them if they are seen to have given money into untrustworthy hands. Donors tend to have procedures in place in their contracts with those they fund that include normal accountability processes, such as demanding progress reports and evaluations and so on. This is normal, if not always helpful, practice. So they may feel that the politics of public scrutiny are muddying the waters of accountability.

For the individual donor, the member of the public who either donates money themselves or is aware of their taxes being given to support a humanitarian response, what I think they really want to know is that their money is being well spent, and spent as they

intended it to be spent. Maybe the next best thing is to know that those who mis-spend it are not doing so with impunity - although public exposure of course does not guarantee that there will not be impunity anyway.

In the case of the December 26<sup>th</sup> tsunami, the normal ratios of public and private funding were overturned and agencies received a larger proportion of their funding from private donations than from institutions, although some governments then felt obliged to pledge matching amounts. I can only speculate what, if any, difference those in the media feel that this makes to their perceived duty to report on what has subsequently happened in the tsunami-affected countries; maybe this is one of the things that we can explore in the discussion that will follow.

Unfortunately some humanitarian agencies, like some governments, produce unbalanced or misleading information about themselves, their work and their achievements; some people say that for many years agencies have been spinning feel-good PR to the media and the public. There is a very complex relationship between fundraising, public education, accountability to one's donors and accountability to disaster-affected people.

Ten years ago there was a very large multi-donor evaluation of all the circumstances around the Rwandan genocide, the JEEAR, including the responses to it. It took the media to task for its bad reporting that, it said, probably contributed to the international indifference and thus to the crime itself. It also said that the influence of the media on both aid agency and political decision-makers was to encourage them to make *ad hoc* decisions that were not always in line with sound operating principles. There's a recent story from the relative remoteness of West Aceh that resonates with this, where the relatively few agencies who were working there without the presence of lights and cameras are said to be working together under more effective coordination of the UN than elsewhere.

Anyway, the JEEAR's messages to the media were :

- 1) there is a pressing need for a study of media coverage and its influence on the operation of a particular humanitarian aid operation, and
- 2) efforts to raise awareness among media personnel about the workings of the humanitarian aid system would benefit everyone. I would add that it is the media's duty to be somewhat knowledgeable in order to be able to fulfill its public role properly.

The follow-up to the JEEAR published a year or so ago notes that the same actions are still needed.

It is a fact that most media staff do not have the time to become specialists, and it was certainly the case that many of the reporters who went to the tsunami-affected areas had never been anywhere like it before, and had never covered a major disaster before. They are but an extreme example maybe. But in this reality, how therefore can they be expected to understand the difficulties, achievements and failings of the humanitarian enterprise. If they did, of course, it would be a much more fertile environment for transparency and consideration of lessons than mere exposure of corruption.

I'm absolutely not suggesting that if you understood better you'd be able to say : "Well, that's the nature of their operating reality so that's OK then". Not at all. There are two points: the first is about the distorting effect of the media on the humanitarian response, and the second is about the variety of failings that are possible, indeed that do occur.

I have already mentioned that media presence can make for bad decisions by the actors in a situation. It's also true that the media need quick results, need to be able to report something before they move on. If the story's not about rapid success, it almost always has to be about slow failure. This is not helpful to thoughtful and considered response to emergency needs.

There is a corrupting effect, on the response, of the agencies' need to meet media deadlines. Systematic needs assessments are stripped out - it has even been said that it was the media who did the assessments in some of the areas struck by the tsunami. The result is that agencies become accountable to the press rather than to governments, to

the programme or to beneficiaries. Yet the media also display significant ignorance, for example warning of the health risks from dead bodies, when in fact these are minimal unless the people died of infectious disease.

I want to be more subtle than just to talk about failure or corruption. I want to talk about the failings of the humanitarian enterprise. There is on the one hand sheer inability to do something, or to do it right; and there is doing something badly, bad performance. In either of these there may be an element of corruption, but they are much more common realities than that, and they require us, as humanitarian agencies, to learn from them and do better in future.

Unsurprisingly these complexities are echoed in many discussions between different departments inside agencies about what they should say publicly about themselves and their work. Ideally - and let's reach for the ideal - communications and learning should not be going in different directions. Personally I'm not always happy with the outcome of such discussions, but I have the prejudice of a programme person that priority should go to public education and beneficiary accountability. But who am I to argue with a PR professional about 'messages'?!

Yes, there is some corruption that takes place in and around humanitarian operations, but aid agencies - at least the big and professional ones; the 'gotta-do-something-about-that' newcomers are generally different - also tend to have audit and management systems that are designed to and generally do control that. There are failures too.

Now I don't want to excuse anything here, but let's be realistic. A major aid operation generally means scaling up from a very small operation, or even from nothing, to a huge operation in a matter of days, taking on hundreds of new staff, very large capital expenditure etc. And this often takes place in situations where (a) systems in general are down - I doubt the banks were working in Aceh for a few weeks after the tsunami, correct me if I'm wrong, and (b) where what we call corruption is rife. Indonesia is number 140 in Transparency International's list, India 92, Sri Lanka 81, and so on. Try working in Democratic Republic of Congo and being assured of being squeaky clean.

But of course corruption, scandal and failure are sexy. I don't want to make any special pleading that aid agencies should be exempt from public and transparent criticism, but it should be justified and it should be proportionate, in my view. I've just imported into this text a bit of our jargon - proportionality. And it reminds me that it's strange that both the media and aid workers both feel that in some way we occupy the high moral ground, although it's not actually the same bit of it.

Going back to the conclusions of the JEEAR, what I'd say is that it would be most helpful if the corruption stories did not appear to stick out in contrast with the stories that are there at the start of an emergency, the 'the aid agencies are here so it will all be alright' stories. What would be good is if there was a nuanced picture of the scandal and wickedness and of our successes and the real problems - problems that, incidentally, are remarkably consistent across locations and time, so are easily accessible to the media, for example in ALNAP's annual *Review of Humanitarian Action*.

I think that this would have two good effects. The first is that it would be likely to take the edge off the fear that exists inside agencies of the media. The second is that it would put the emphasis back where it should be, which is not so much on agency performance as on the situation of disaster-affected people.

I want to come back to this point one last time : there is a general push, although one that is still far short of where it needs to get, on what we call downwards or, as I prefer, forwards<sup>1</sup> accountability, that is to disaster-affected people. It involves consultation with and participation of those people in the responses to their emergency, informing them and finding ways for them to make complaints in safety, and so on. Now I believe strongly that we need to do all of that better. And I also believe that if we do, the risk of corruption will be less. Therefore - to try and get agendas to match somewhat, and if the media's interest is really in trying to make the greatest impact on corruption - it is in

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<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid the hierarchy implied in up and down, and possibly to reflect the 'back donors'.

everyone's interest to have the focus on the beneficiary rather than the agency, to seek their story rather than the scandal.

Transparency International would say this of course, but they say that transparency is the key to combatting corruption, and that is certainly built into the assumptions about the way things in my country are meant to work and the role of the media in it.

Certainly in the context of an aid operation, transparency with the people who are meant to benefit is likely to result in less possibility for corruption both with the agencies and with the government. As it is, agencies too often pay more attention to avoiding brand damage than to what beneficiaries may need.

If there were clear complaint mechanisms locally and internationally, then the media role in exposing corruption would be far less important. This is a failing in the international humanitarian system for now. If the media really want to fight corruption, as opposed to getting a good story, then media exposure should be the last resort and the last threat in the chain of anti-corruption measures. And I would urge the media to not only fill the gap, but to do it in such a way as to reinforce the development of positive changes in our system rather than to be oppositional.

There is not an actual conspiracy between aid agencies and the media over fundraising, but it is nevertheless true that without media coverage it is both harder to get public funds and also harder to get government donor funds, which are too much driven by political pressures, which include both geopolitical factors and local public pressure. The way that governments were driven to put up matching funds for the tsunami is an obvious case in point. As is their generalised failure to fund so-called neglected emergencies. You could say that there is an element of political corruption in making unfulfilled promises to allocate funds and then not to do it. Aid agencies would welcome the media following up on government pledges of aid.

To return to fundraising, however, the media do need to think about taking responsibility for their fundraising effect - sometimes formalised as in the UK Disasters Emergency Committee, the Dutch SHO, etc. If they are instrumental in getting public

and government funds for humanitarian responses, they need to have a more informed approach to what happens next. The media need instant stories; disaster-affected people need thoughtful and long-term responses. It is about more than catching out corruption, it is also about the quality and effectiveness of aid and its financing.