

TOWARD
NEW UNDERSTANDINGS:

JOURNALISTS &
HUMANITARIAN RELIEF
—— COVERAGE ——

FritzInstitute

REUTERS  AlertNet
FOUNDATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On behalf of Fritz Institute (www.fritzinstitute.org) and Reuters Foundation's AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), we surveyed press relations personnel in headquarters and regional offices of humanitarian relief organizations and, in a separate survey, journalists who cover them. Our goal was to determine the dynamics of media coverage of relief efforts. Such efforts tend to occur when, in the words of humanitarian aid organization Oxfam, a crisis situation occurs "that overwhelms the capacity of a society to cope using its resources alone."

This is apparently the largest, most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of this symbiotic relationship. Humanitarian relief organization officials (almost all such organizations are "non-governmental organizations" or "NGOs" for short) say that media coverage of humanitarian relief is an important component of their ability to marshal relief resources and support. Favorable and even neutral coverage can lead to more funding, more cooperation with host governments, and higher staff morale. Journalists depend on relief organizations for orientation in the field and access to populations being helped. Public – and thus journalistic – interest is especially keen in times of war and natural disasters. But interest in educating readers and viewers about many "chronic," long-term relief operations is also strong.

An initial search for documentation of the role the media plays in humanitarian relief, the ways in which relief agencies interact with the press and the societal drivers that lead journalists to cover these stories showed that no large, comprehensive study was available. Hence, we set out to understand the dynamics of the media coverage of humanitarian relief. We were interested in the nature and extent of the coverage, the factors that went into editors' and journalists' decisions to cover a story, and the capabilities of humanitarian agencies to reach out to the media to successfully present and place their stories.

We conducted interviews and received detailed responses from 54 humanitarian relief organization officials, located mainly in organizations' international headquarters and in regional hubs around the world. About half (47%) were from Europe, 20% from Asia and 11% from North America. (Details are in Appendix B)

We used their responses to develop a questionnaire returned by 290 journalists, of whom 106 specifically identified themselves as working outside North America. Responses were received from every continent except Antarctica and more than 40 countries.

As for NGOs, our surveys found:

- Lack of press relations training, particularly in field offices.
- Lack of donor appreciation for the benefits of good press relations, and lack of metrics for determining "how much is enough."

- Lack of an ethic for publicly sharing information (and perhaps glory) with peer organizations.
- Failure to clearly delineate internally what strategies are best for “marketing” (fundraising and long-term image-building) and what work best for press relations, and to separate the budgeting and staffing required to carry out those strategies.
- Failure to take full advantage of Internet-based tools including, but not limited to, the World Wide Web.

As for the media, we found:

- Few journalists specializing in the coverage of humanitarian crisis and relief stories. This is due, of course, to the episodic nature of crises and the physical and psychological demands this type of reporting demands. But the situation limits strategies for improving coverage.
- Lack of resources to finance crisis coverage.
- Lack of specialist knowledge, including local history, social customs, even the legal rights of populations being helped.
- Poor (or non-existent) use of existing information sources such as AlertNet and ReliefWeb.
- Impatience.
- Crisis fatigue.

There are also many things we did not find:

- Conventional wisdom – apparently based on the existence of a few well-known television personalities – is that covering humanitarian operations is a regular full-time beat. Nothing could be further from the truth.
- Celebrities pushing specific causes do attract media coverage, but celebrity-oriented coverage tends to be short-term.
- Conventional wisdom among NGOs is that journalists are ignorant of chronic problems caused by poverty and disease. But journalist respondents, in answering specific questions and in open-ended comments, displayed a good grasp of chronic problems such as poverty and AIDS. They also understood what is at stake worldwide – poverty, hunger and disease are the precursors, as well as the products of war, terrorism, and natural disasters.
- Conventional wisdom is that reporters are neither as knowledgeable nor as courteous as they used to be. While there are plenty of anecdotes circulating among NGOs and other journalists about the antics of various journalists in the field, journalists themselves say the situation is, if anything, improving.

Our data leads us to several key recommendations:

- Establishment of a single organization to produce more detailed information to support journalists. Journalists strongly support the idea. It would also be more efficient. Why should every NGO spend its resources to produce background material (so-called “crisis profiles”), when one well-done, current, and constantly updated crisis profile could be referenced by all?

- Better promotion of existing information sources; most journalists are unaware of those that exist now, such as AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int), the European Commission (http://europa.eu.int/comm/echo/index_en.htm), various United Nations Web sites, and even sites run by the diplomatic corps of almost all sovereign nations.
- Establishment of a mechanism to offer direct support to journalists interested in covering humanitarian emergencies (including training and finance for travel) on short notice when necessary.
- Establishment of a facility to make photography, audio and video available on request to journalists who can't travel, or to supplement on-the-scene reporting when a media organization cannot afford to send a photographer with a reporter.
- Take advantage of organizations that provide training in press relations to make ongoing training available, especially for NGO field-office and regional office staff.
- Help for NGOs to build better Web sites and other Internet-based tools such as LISTSERVs and newsgroups.
- A mechanism to allow journalists interested in this kind of coverage to gather, exchange ideas, and share a mailing list – without the list becoming saturated with press releases and individual pleas for coverage from NGOs.

The following sections detail our observations and recommendations. Detailed responses to questions we asked journalists are in **Appendix A**. Responses from NGO officials are in **Appendix B**. Details of the survey methodology are in **Appendix C**. To stimulate and aid continued research in this area, raw data from the journalists' survey is also available for the asking (as an Excel or CSV file with code sheet) from ssr3@columbia.edu.

Few journalists who cover disaster relief and humanitarian aid do it full time. Thus, they take conventional news values with them while covering aid issues. That is, steady-state situations are rarely news. The question becomes: "Why should my news organization invest in such stories TODAY when they will be here tomorrow and there are so many stories that MUST be covered today?" Factors such as the number of deaths and other potentially "sensational" aspects of a tragedy weigh heavily in decisions to cover.

Journalists say they need more frequent updating from NGOs and NGOs say they have trouble building lists of journalists to whom they can send information. But neither journalists nor NGO press officers are wildly enthusiastic about a directory of journalists interested in these humanitarian aid stories. Part of the problem is that journalists tend to be assigned to humanitarian aid stories on an almost random basis; they are general assignment reporters, international reporters, or have another beat entirely such as crime, education, or government.

Journalists, ideally, should not base decisions about what is news on the resources available to cover the news. Yet, in the real world, such decisions are regrettably common. In fact money, not reporters' or editors' lack of sensitivity to aid issues, turned out to be the next most important controlling factor. Responses to numerous questions in our survey reveal that news organizations do not feel they can invest more money to send reporters to areas where aid is being administered. Respondents, especially from outside North America, say they need and would welcome funds from other than their news organizations to cover these stories, if the funding is independent of the groups they cover.

There is a serious mismatch between resources and needs with regard to press relations in humanitarian relief organizations at the level of field offices. Press relations specialists at NGOs we surveyed noted repeatedly that field offices tend to be staffed by local nationals and that such personnel are inexperienced in press relations and unfamiliar with what might be at stake when working with a reporter from outside the region. Local aid officers have become somewhat adept at showing donors around, but may have trouble adjusting to the quick turnaround times needed by journalists.

Said one press officer for a large US-based NGO with a small press relations operation: "The natural tendency is that money should go for food. There used to be a natural culture of modesty, and we felt good about it, that there should be little advocacy for the group, that everyone just wanted to do their work. This changed in the 90s with the Balkan conflict. [We] became a huge player... In those days we had no Web site and a five-page annual report."

Funders may want to understand more about what really is happening on the ground and would be wise to allow NGOs to direct a reasonable portion of their donations to public

education through media relations and other effective approaches. But we note that many fine organizations go to great lengths to maximize the percentage of donations allocated for aid; a reduction in that percentage, even if for strategically worthwhile goals, may blur their message with prospective donors, especially prospective individual donors.

Celebrities can call attention to an issue and stimulate some coverage, particularly outside North America, but they are clearly better used for fundraising and even government relations than for gaining sustained media coverage. Journalists say a celebrity can usually provide the reason to cover something only once, in a superficial way.

NGO press officers and journalists disagree on coverage trends. NGO press officers say coverage of humanitarian aid issues is at best holding steady and probably declining, replaced by war coverage. They point to closing or de-emphasis of news bureaus outside Europe and North America. But reporters and editors have the strong impression that coverage is increasing. A look at coverage in English-speaking publications worldwide, tracked by NEXIS, suggests the journalists are right. The number of articles mentioning AIDS in Africa, for instance, jumped steadily from 3,607 in 1998 to 15,349 in 2002 and 19,375 (after President Bush's announced AIDS initiative) in 2003. Reporting on famine in Africa jumped greatly in 2001 and 2002 before falling back slightly in 2003. Perhaps the extra coverage has not increased for most chronic issues as fast as the number of NGOs or NGO activities has increased. No amount of training and sensitizing journalists is likely to substantially increase coverage of major chronic issues beyond the existing trends, although training will certainly help bring new issues to the attention of the world's press faster. Reporters can be trained to see the early warning signs of famine or disease, and to gauge the adequacy of resources available to ameliorate a problem.

NGO officials speak of "crisis fatigue" among journalists, using the same terminology fundraisers use for donors. They note that Iraq has submerged other crises from the public radar in Europe, Muslim countries, and in North America. They tend to describe journalists they deal with as bright, energetic, and at least moderately well versed in the issues at hand. But paradoxically, they also say that the overall quality of reporters has declined – reporters are ill-prepared with regard to the roots of crises they cover. What's more, they say, reporters, increasingly freelancers, are becoming more rude.

The journalists who responded to our survey tend to disagree; they see little change overall but if anything, they say, journalists' competence has improved. Of course, they tend to be speaking for colleagues in their own media organization, or others seen in press conferences. They see an increase in journalists from outside North America and Europe (especially from Asia and Africa), even if they are working for media organizations based in the West. They see an increase in freelance journalists, both for print and for broadcast.

Who is right? When it comes to war and disaster coverage, years of reading published stories with a critical eye reveal many examples of ill-informed coverage. But I doubt if the quality is declining. Television coverage has been more problematical, with what I consider a clear decline in frequency in the United States and mixed trends elsewhere. Radio and magazine coverage seems to have improved in both frequency and quality. Quality of coverage of chronic issues – disease, hunger, and poverty – has clearly improved in every media. Several of the NGO officials we surveyed suggested as much, saying that really big events such as war in Iraq and Afghanistan attract many inexperienced journalists but that the majority of journalists covering most relief operations is perhaps better informed.

For reasons of inertia and marketing, most NGOs do not provide links to Web sites of other NGOs operating in the same areas (or provide other contact information). Few things annoy journalists more, or are more likely to raise their suspicions about NGO motives. Journalists told us they tend to feel that NGOs are “in a crisis together” and should help one another in public ways by acknowledging each others’ existence.

Even small field offices often have Web sites and news about them can be found on headquarters sites even if they don't. But Internet technology is not used to the fullest. Few NGOs use LISTSERVs (automated mailing lists) to update journalists who choose to receive organization news, for instance. Web sites often lack contact information and stock photos journalists need. NGO Web sites are often arranged in ways that make indexing by Web search engines difficult. Yet, because few journalists know of the big sites that reference many humanitarian aid sites in the same place (such as AlertNet and ReliefWeb), search engines are the main mechanism for attracting journalists to an NGO Web site.

KEY FINDINGS

Complete details of responses to the NGO and journalist surveys are in Appendix A (journalists) and Appendix B (NGOs). Some findings deserve more detailed discussion.

What is Humanitarian Aid or Crisis News and What are the Coverage Trends?

Our investigation looked at news of breaking events such as war, earthquake and other natural disasters, as well as coverage of chronic situations such as hunger, poverty and AIDS.

By a three-to-one margin, journalists say that coverage of humanitarian aid operations is up, conflicting somewhat with NGO press officer's beliefs that coverage is static or actually declining, especially for chronic problems such as AIDS in Africa.

The bad news: By a four-to-one margin, journalists say criticism and skepticism in the press about relief organizations has also increased. Among columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers, the gap is 11-to-one (57% versus 5%). Criticism even increased in the wake of the Bam disaster (Appendix A, Question 23).

NGO press officers were nearly unanimous in saying that journalistic organizations jump on disaster coverage but are less willing to cover chronic issues such as poverty, disease and famine. Journalists who responded to our survey, however, say that while it is hard to sell such stories to their editors, such coverage has, if anything, been increasing. Editors responding to our survey agreed. Who's right? While there is evidence to support both points of view, coverage does appear to be increasing. We had that impression when we first gathered bylines of journalists to send the survey to. We went back to NEXIS in a more rigorous way to test the hypothesis against four issues in Africa: AIDS, famine, child mortality and conflict diamonds. Overall, there was a clear increase in coverage.

Some of this could be due to President Bush's call in 2003 for help to fight AIDS in Africa. Some could be due to the substantial amount of new aid money made available by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Some could simply be due to more reporter awareness in general. Dozens of journalists, in free-form comments throughout the survey, mentioned these chronic issues, especially with regard to Africa, without prompting.

There was certainly evidence to support the NGO press officers' point of view, too. Stories on famine in Africa, for instance, doubled from 1999 to 2000 and went back to 1999 levels in 2001, for instance. The conflict diamond story came out of nowhere in 1999, but interest in the issue (which has been partially addressed by diamond dealers) peaked in 2001. There may also be more humanitarian aid groups active now than five years ago, so the stories that are written are spread more widely; that is, each group may be getting less press mention even though press mention overall is increasing. Comments by NGO officials were

sometimes naïve about the role of the press and about how reporters usually have to work on deadline and on budget.

NEXIS Search Terms, in ALL-NWS library	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
AIDS w/10* Africa	3,607	5,904	11,651	12,604	15,349	19,375
Famine w/10 Africa	584	427	977	458	2,336	51,779
Conflict diamonds**	-	13	880	864	528	589
(child or infant) w/3 mortality and Africa	704	1,104	1,043	970	1,756	1,779
Total=	4,895	7,448	14,551	14,896	19,969	23,522

* w/10 and w/3 are NEXIS search terms; w/3 means "within three words of" and w/10 means "within 10 words of," anywhere in the article being searched.

** Diamonds sold to buy weapons and support civil unrest.

Said one NGO official: "There are several difficulties; the field staff is often loath to talk with journalists, so making productive connections can be difficult. Journalists are often interested in what's not going right, or security issues or something flamboyant, and it can be difficult to 'sell' the story of sustainable development success stories."

Said another: "There's not much understanding of basic relief and development realities among many of the reporters we encounter...how we work, what we do, why we are independent of the military, etc. And often, we work in areas of the world that don't interest mainstream US publications."

And another: "Journalists are typically more interested in bombs than humanitarian issues. TV wants a 'visual' and sometimes our story is not so visual. Media is more interested in talking about what is going 'wrong' and not what is going right."

What Journalists Want; What Journalists Write

Around the world, the coverage patterns are almost identical. The oddity is that columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers are slightly more likely than other

respondents to comment on natural disasters (a typically "hard news" issue). Journalists outside North America are slightly more likely to write about armed conflict.

Again, reporters who cover crises do not do it full time. In fact, the average is less than one story in five. Only two of the 265 respondents to this question said they covered crises 100% of the time. Only 10% (27) said crisis stories were more than half their output. Thus, they judge the newsworthiness of humanitarian stories by the norms of all stories. North American respondents to the survey are somewhat less likely to include humanitarian aid, disaster, crisis or war reporting in their mix; the average for them was about one story or column in eight (12%) while the average for respondents outside North America was closer to one in four (22%).

This orientation to breaking news is not surprising; almost half (48%) of all the stories done by all the respondents are categorized by them as breaking news; 31% are categorized as features and 20% as opinion, columns, or editorials. The numbers are almost identical for North American and non-North American respondents. Even among the 60 respondents who classified themselves as columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers, only 27% of their output is in those categories. These respondents also do a substantial amount of what they consider to be breaking news (43% of their output on average).

North Americans want basic but current primers on crisis backgrounds and a directory of NGOs (only 8% know of the ones that already exist, outside of links in Yahoo.) Less than half are interested in an e-mail alert list. North American respondents remain relatively immune to celebrity tie-ins; only 14% were interested in a celebrity interview request engine. But outside North America, 33% were interested (Appendix A, Question 30).

NGO officials say there has been an increase in requests by journalists for "stock footage" video and still images to use in coverage. Many NGOs have started to put still images on their Web sites in response. But the images themselves typically are collected informally. Some NGOs give their field staffers digital cameras and ask that they submit photos.

Journalists most want what most NGOs seem loath to do – to place links on their Web sites to other groups doing similar things or serving in the same areas. Next most popular on the journalists' wish list (and most popular for journalists outside North America) is for NGOs to hold more press conferences. Such meetings are sought more by journalists outside North America (58% mentioned it) than inside (44%). Non-North American journalists, typically with far fewer resources, also ask for training, travel help, and free editorial material such as images and video. The journalistic "culture," especially with respect to taking funds and holding new conferences, is somewhat startling but absolutely in line with other studies.

Cost and Other Barriers to Coverage

Most startling, considering the implications for journalistic ethics and integrity: By a more than two-to-one margin (64% to 28%) those outside North America want independently financed trips to crisis areas.

Cost emerged as by far the tallest barrier to coverage – mentioned by 55% of North American journalists and 71% of those from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Lack of timely response from groups at the scene was the second biggest problem, mentioned by a third of all journalists. This ties in strongly with comments from NGO press relations personnel – they push for more help from "headquarters" because they have limited staff time during emergencies and limited knowledge of how the press works. A key need – mentioned by 35% of the non-North Americans and 15% of North Americans – is for more information on NGO Web sites to support a story pitch; 30% of the editors agreed. Outside North America, there is a critical need for photos, audio, and video. A fifth of the respondents sense a lack of coordination between groups at the scene and their own parent organizations.

Thus, we had expected to hear of requests by freelancers for funding to travel into a region, but only one NGO official said she had received such a request in the past three or four years. No one we talked to described as onerous the need to help occasional journalists find guides or "fixers" who handle various travel and translation services. Many reported that they routinely entertain journalists – buy lunch or dinner, for instance, to explain their organization's operations or to provide detailed backgrounding.

We believe that the disconnect between needing money and unwillingness to ask for it can be explained this way: The journalists know that most groups simply don't have the resources, and that it would indeed be unethical to ask. But the journalists specifically consider "independent" funding sources, separate from the groups they wish to cover, as ethical. Many commentators on journalistic ethics would disagree. It is hard to imagine any existing funding sources as truly independent, because their funding would affect the choice of topics to cover. But such arrangements are indeed more common outside Europe and North America, where media organizations have little money to spare.

High Death Toll Makes News

Almost half the respondents (49%) say that a high death toll is the best reason to run a relief story. Among non-North American journalists, the death toll angle is mentioned almost twice as often as any other, by 61% of the respondents. There were sharp differences about what makes a story compelling, throughout the data. Non-North Americans, for instance, are twice as likely to believe children suffering (40% versus 18%),

but North Americans were more likely to mention readers of the same background as those suffering (34% versus 23%) and involvement of aid workers from the readership or viewership area (44% versus 22%). Death toll loomed more important after Bam (51% mentioning) than before (45%); the difference is barely significant. Respondents were allowed to check as many as three responses from a list, or mention their own.

In line with other questions' responses, compelling visuals were mentioned by a third of the respondents.

Lack of journalistic resources and crisis fatigue are the two biggest reasons keeping crisis stories off the news agenda; each was mentioned by more than a quarter of the respondents (and more than a third of respondents outside of North America). Reporters tended to be more in agreement (36% cite lack of resources; 32% crisis fatigue); this is far higher than what editors and columnists say. Respondents consistently put Iraq and Afghanistan in third place, followed closely by "lack of new angles," which actually ranked third outside North America. Only one-in-six (17%) said Iraq made other crises seem small; this was mentioned by only 13% North Americans but 24% of respondents from elsewhere.

It was not surprising to see reporters outside North America more interested in international crisis stories (46% versus 25%) but as with previous studies, there's another way to look at the data. The proportion of respondents from North America interested in both regional (that is, the region they are based in) and international issues totals 55%; for those outside North America, it is 62%. This difference is barely significant. Likewise, reporters outside North America tend to call their reporting national (33%) rather than local (5%). The percentages are just about reversed (10% and 33%) among respondents from North America.

The lesson: Don't depend on the "more international" outlook of non-US reporters and editors to sell a story! The United States is a big country, and a "region" in the United States can be comparable in size to an entire country.

How Journalists Use the Internet

Surprise! Google, Yahoo, and other search engines are important, used by 43% of all respondents and half of those who specifically do crisis reporting. But local media and Web sites of local groups known to already be in the region rank higher – for reporters working for media based outside North America, much higher – when it comes to checking local media.

When we asked NGO officials about the source of "hits" on their Web sites, there was almost no response (two said Google was the largest source of site visitors, one said links

from other sites were most important; three said specific e-mail domains such as AOL were the largest sources). Several had heard about server logs but no one knew how to use them. It is clear that these groups do not use the Web site management tools available to them. Also, many Web sites are not set up with "press" areas that attract the press but not necessarily the public. So the server logs record many "hits" but cannot differentiate between press and non-press visitors to the site.

Few sites are organized so that Google and other search engines can search reliably beyond their home page. The reasons include lack of searchable material on other pages (photos only, for instance), or pages that are framed. A few sites use pages generated by a database system (active server pages, for instance). Only six sites of the 32 studied in depth have an internal search engine. (Google will help sites set up internal engines using Google technology.)

Every site we looked at in detail offered news of projects and an explanation of the organization's mission. But three of the 32 lacked contact names and addresses and eight lacked information on donors that might attract other donors. Only 17 of the 32 described the organization's background or included an archive of reports on current and past projects and only one-third (10 of 32) included an archive of past press releases. Eleven included links to organizations doing similar work and 12 included links to governmental organizations involved in the same area.

Journalists would like to see links to other NGOs operating in the same region on NGO field office Web sites. They rarely do. Field offices have little time and few resources to keep track of these links, and there is a feeling of "competition" among NGOs as they scramble for recognition. Even large headquarters Web sites of multinational NGOs rarely include links to other groups working on the same problems.

Indexing sites, such as AlertNet, are used by only about 8% of experienced crisis reporting journalists in North America and 22% of those based outside North America. Existing Web sites that bring together references to NGOs should not be expected to update as a crisis occurs. All they have to do is reference NGOs by location of their relief efforts. The real issue is probably that journalists, especially North American journalists, do not know these sites exist. When we mentioned AlertNet and Yahoo in the same question, recognition jumped five-fold. So one clear way to gain more recognition is to lobby Yahoo for inclusion on its link lists.

Journalists inside North America are significantly less likely to use a humanitarian NGO's Web site in imaginative ways than are their counterparts outside North America. For example, 51% (versus 62%) search for the press release archive; 42% (versus 58%) want links to other groups doing similar work, 37% (versus 53%) want an archive of news about a group's past activities; 28% (versus 50%) want a multimedia archive.

NGOs should pay attention to all the items listed; even the least popular, donor information, is desired by a quarter of all journalists. And contributors want this information anyway.

Regional press officers are often young international hires or personnel from the region, and not well versed in international press relations. They talk about the need for more formal training. Large international organizations often hire experienced journalists as press officers to staff headquarters operations. They talk about training as well. But no NGO staffer we contacted outside of CARE and the International Red Cross mentioned budgets for such training that go beyond perhaps a few hundred dollars per employee for attending short seminars. Nevertheless, regional press officers described the range of basic services they provide to journalists without special prompting. These include writing and distributing press releases and background reports on regional aid needs, offering photographs for use with journalists' stories and holding press conferences. They displayed good understanding of the need for timeliness in attending to journalists' requests. The phrase "strike while the iron is hot" or its equivalent showed up in the notes of all our interviewers.

Thus it is not entirely surprising that NGO officials were often confused about the role of press officers in regional and field offices. Larger organizations have guidelines for press relations and those guidelines typically ask press officers to "pass media up the line" to home offices. But the process is often ignored, especially if a journalist has been doing stories in the region or specifically with the regional humanitarian aid organization's office. Execution – providing information and on-site visits to journalists – is usually adequate, but fraught with errors. Many respondents described mistakes that led or could have led to unfavorable coverage of their work.

None of the NGO officials we talked to in regional offices claimed journalism experience, but some said the press officer at headquarters did have some journalism experience. Said one press officer: "Our media officer in Johannesburg tries to have all the people in Africa [in our field offices] have monthly phone conferences to go over issues, and to identify country officers who are best at press relations."

When we checked out headquarters, however, it seems that "journalism" can also mean "public relations" in this community, even when the job is specifically press relations and not marketing or fundraising specifically.

All this suggests that credentialing and hiring practices for humanitarian relief organizations is informal relative to the for-profit world. But the old image of field offices staffed by eager, young and inexperienced press relations staffers is not entirely true these days, even if it is the norm.

Said an NGO official: "In field offices you have to be able to handle both news sense and marketing, but it isn't really fair. If you are in [small African country] you want to get as much money out of foundations as possible now, but in the West we know that how we are perceived in the press is of much greater importance [long-term]."

"Africans are real people with real problems. There has to be an understanding of equals. Africans need access to credit. They don't need the handout. That's the paradigm that doesn't work in development, the direct call to money. So we look for stories that appeal to the marketing side this way."

Said another, there's a tendency in some organizations toward "hiring young [women] who want to change the world. Bow around the Lincoln memorial and all hold hands. Marketing thinking, gimmick thinking, and that is what they are expecting from their people."

When we asked NGO officials, they said news of projects and explanation of mission are the most popular features of Web sites (along with a description of the organization's background), but they are also the most common. Those few that have a formal press room and archive of press releases find it popular, interviewees say. Only a smattering of responses on that point turned up in the survey itself. The reason is simple: As noted earlier, few take advantage of server logs to make this determination. As already noted, Web sites of parent organizations are used the most by journalists, 57% (among reporters, 68%). Web sites that index or group crisis intervention groups, such as AlertNet and Yahoo, also rate highly, 43% use them (and 54% of those outside North America). LISTSERVs are also fairly widely used. As with most other usage patterns, there are not many differences among various subsets of journalists. But USENET newsgroups (accessible through most e-mail providers and through Google) are much more popular outside North America (18% use them) than in (10%). If one removes the 10% of the sample that has no experience doing crisis reporting, the numbers above are all increased by about 10% (not 10 percentage points).

How NGOs Communicate with Journalists Apart from the Web

About half the journalists in our survey (48%) report that they are not getting any form of communications from crisis-intervention NGOs. But some of this might be due to the devastating earthquake December 26 in Bam, Iran. In the wake of the earthquake, NGOs actually cut back their flow of routine press releases, due to staffing shortages and the belief that the crisis would sell itself. Relief organizations working elsewhere realized that Bam would be absorbing the press's attention, giving another reason to cut back.

Sending press releases by e-mail has become the norm – 39% of our sample respondents report getting e-mail from crisis NGOs. That's double the next most popular method, fax.

Faxes and press releases by regular mail are dying out worldwide for all PR uses. NGO press officers at headquarters in Europe and North America say they try to follow up by phone, at least to a few journalists, but it appears that NGO press officers are missing that basic and essential ingredient for getting their stories on the journalists' radar screens, due to a lack of staffing. One suggested that perhaps during a crisis, the NGO could hire a public relations firm to help with press outreach. Instead, NGOs seem more likely to hire public relations firms for help with marketing (especially image-building and fund raising).

The "personal touch" is limited to going to academic conferences to meet journalists, holding press conferences and taking people out to lunch or dinner.

Only two of the 54 NGO groups we surveyed do not have a Web site. But sites for two others were not operating for long stretches in September and October 2003 while we were initially surveying. Both were running in January 2004.

English is featured on most (27 of 34 as of January 17, 2004) of the sites we looked at in detail. But we did find seven sites with no English section or only a small partial translation into English.

Most organizations of this type, even regional offices of international groups, have their own domain name, but about one-quarter of their sites were housed only on other sites.

As for NGOs, Web inquiries by journalists, searching on the Web for journalists who write stories on crisis and humanitarian aid issues, personal contact and directories such as Bacon's are the most common methods of building their lists. Oddly enough, no NGO official mentioned trading contacts with other groups. When we pressed, headquarters staffers admitted that there is of course competition among groups for publicity. In December 2003, Bacon's Information absorbed MediaMap, another large directory operation.

Based on our responses and on our research, we offer several detailed suggestions.

NGO Field Staff Training

Good training is always a key goal. But how are training materials to be created? And how might they be delivered to remote sites, and to NGO field-office staffs that suffer high turnover rates? What's more, most field offices are staffed by in-country nationals, personnel not always familiar with the needs of journalists serving media in developed nations.

It is clear that there is much money to be saved by having a single developer for the bulk of the training materials – ideally an international organization that already does course development as part of its operations. Such materials might be digitized and provided on CD-ROM discs, or delivered online. There is certainly a place for in-person training, but much of the training should be done using distance-learning technology. Such technology includes Web-based classes, as well as older, proven methods such as videotaped lectures, local teaching assistants, and telephone hookups.

We're not recommending uniformity in training materials. NGOs will always have to customize their training by region and by situation, as well as to take into account their own policies with regard to press relations. NGOs must clarify their objectives for media coverage. If the aim is for more public and financial support, it makes sense that they would be more deliberate and that headquarters staff would be more active and strategically guide field staff and train or hire with experience.

But common materials, delivered to NGOs for their own use and supplemented by the NGOs' own customized training materials, could save 80% to 90% of the course development cost for individual NGOs and thus make training more affordable and more available.

Other approaches that might be tried include an organization providing paid consultants to check and critique press releases and marketing materials for NGOs.

Bring Journalists Together

There are three core issues that must be addressed:

- Because journalists are typically assigned to cover a crisis on an ad hoc basis and not all NGOs respond to a given crisis, we need a faster, more reliable way to allow NGOs and journalists to find one another quickly when a crisis occurs.
- There is always a need to make coverage more professional and insightful, especially for chronic problems.

- We need an independent mechanism for funding some journalists' expenses for coverage, especially if necessary to aid coverage from countries having media with inadequate resources.

There are three models. One is a freestanding organization such as the Society of Environmental Journalists or the Association of Health Care Journalists. Another would add responsibility for running such a group to the duties of one of the umbrella informational organizations such as AlertNet or perhaps a vastly expanded ReliefWeb. A third would house such a facility at a University-based school of international relations or government.

Because the need is greatest outside North America, any such facility would best be placed outside North America. The key requirement would be a location offering low operating costs and good access to the Internet.

An independent group – an International Society of Humanitarian Aid Journalists, if you will – could attract funding to award reporting fellowships, host conferences and sponsor training while not making awardees and members beholden to the aid groups they cover.

But a facility that is part of an existing group such as AlertNet or ReliefWeb is likely to have lower overhead and more expertise that can be used quickly than any new organization would have. It might also have more credibility with funders due to an existing track record.

Groups such as SEJ (www.sej.org) and AHCJ (<http://www.ahcj.umn.edu/>) are independent but have strong university ties. This gives them credibility without having to pay high university overhead. In North America at state-supported institutions, overhead can be 20% to 40%. Overhead is even higher at private universities.

We believe that the best strategy to start with would be to attract an existing organization to add these functions to its current program:

- Journalist training.
- Journalist quick-reaction fellowship program for funding coverage.
- Communication to journalists via a weekly LISTSERV digest that would include news from NGOs and could publish more frequently during crisis periods.
- A mechanism for journalists to communicate with each other and mentor each other (via blogs or LISTSERV, perhaps).
- Maintenance of Web-based background materials.
- Maintenance of an archive of photos, video, and audio.
- NGO training, as previously discussed.

Better NGO Use of the Internet

The World Wide Web has increased opportunities for international visibility of humanitarian aid organizations. But the potential of Internet technologies has barely begun to be exploited:

- Few humanitarian organization's Web sites have internal search engines.
- Not a single person we talked to among NGO officers had a formal procedure in place to check on a continuing basis whether their Web site is easily found on the various international versions of Google, Yahoo, and other search engines. Several assumed that their Webmasters or other "technical" personnel handled such chores.
- Many cannot be fully searched "from the outside" by search engines such as Google, either because the pages are sparse on text or because they are "framed." Framed pages load faster when bandwidth is low, but cannot easily be found and indexed by search engines.
- Most sites include only the basics – mission statements, organization history, summary news of current projects. Many do not include press contacts.
- Newer Web technologies such as streaming video and blogs (Weblogs; online newsletters by individual or corporate reporters) are virtually ignored.
- Older Internet technologies that predate the Web are sparsely used. These include chat rooms, LISTSERVs and Usenet newsgroups.
- Often missing are press release archives, online video and still images for use in journalists' stories, and links to stories written by journalists.
- Groups often use e-mail to send press releases, but build their distribution lists in a haphazard manner. They use fax and regular mail as well, despite the costs and potential for errors in distribution. E-mail is clearly underutilized, perhaps because address lists are poor.

We propose a mechanism for providing technical aid for Web site creation and maintenance to NGOs, especially to NGO field offices. This aid would include easy-to-use site templates, funding of local Web designers, and housing Web sites on a free or inexpensive server. Such organizations exist (see, for instance, <http://www3.wn.apc.org/africa/projects.htm>) but could use increased visibility.

Define Press Relations Versus Marketing and Fundraising

Only 9 of the 54 NGO respondents in our survey said they had a specific budget for press relations within field and regional offices. The business is remarkably ad hoc, even though a good press relations operation has political and fundraising benefits in addition to increasing opportunities for public education. Said one: "The idea of actually investing money in this... Everyone knows the more we raise visibility the more we can solicit

money. But the programs themselves don't budget [press relations] in their proposals. They want headquarters to do it. Maybe we will try to get a grant for people to start gaining visibility. It is still not a priority for the development department, so there will have to be a cultural change."

Said another: "I went [from the USA] to Liberia for two weeks. There was a small window, lasted a month, and then media interest is gone. The night I arrived I went to the hotel where all the journalists stayed, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and so forth, arranged interviews with everyone in a few days."

Clearly, the field needs metrics developed for defining success. It also needs a more formal mechanism for sharing best practices.

