



Study Identifies Ways News Organizations, Aid Groups Can Improve Crisis Coverage

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Media coverage of humanitarian crises would improve if more journalists specialized in crisis coverage and if relief workers in the field had better training in press relations, according to a study sponsored by the Fritz Institute and Reuters AlertNet.

Few journalists have the financial resources or specialist knowledge of the local culture in a given crisis to cover humanitarian relief efforts thoroughly, and humanitarian organizations' field staff do not have the training needed to be better resources to these journalists, the study found.

Journalists and aid workers assess coverage trends differently, so they describe the challenges to more thorough crisis coverage differently, according to results of the survey of 290 journalists working in 40 countries and 54 humanitarian relief officials worldwide.

There are problems on both sides, said Steven S. Ross, professor at the Columbia School of Journalism and author of the study, but "the problems aren't as big as we think they are."

The study found that aid organizations often fail to distinguish between press relations and marketing or "branding" efforts, and that local aid staffers in field offices often have no training in how to deal with the Western press. Additionally, aid organizations do

not take full advantage of Internet tools, the study found.

Mercy Corps, which has a floating communications officer in the field who is trained to act as a spokesperson to the press, has had a great deal of success in expanding media coverage of its efforts. Cassandra Nelson, their field spokesperson, files reports to their Web site and participates in interviews with reporters at the scene of humanitarian crises and Mercy Corps relief operations.

Mercy Corps press officer Eric Block said they formalized Nelson's position as floating press officer because "we saw some of the success it can have with private fund-raising." This rationale is one reason why many organizations do not get media coverage of their issues, according to the study.

Since there is no clear measurement of successful press relations, media outreach often becomes a vehicle for fund-raising efforts. This leads to strategies featuring celebrity spokespersons and marketing programs, which cannot generate long-term news interest.

This tendency is unlikely to change "unless the bosses and boards value" a distinct press relations strategy for field operations, said Ross. Press officers for nongovernmental organizations and journalists disagree on coverage trends,

according to the study, which may be one reason why NGO leadership often doubts the value of extensive press relations training and work.

While press officers said coverage of humanitarian issues has declined and is increasingly replaced with war coverage, reporters and editors said it is increasing. An analysis of English-language publications worldwide showed that, while coverage of chronic problems remains limited, the number of articles mentioning AIDS jumped from 3,607 in 1998 to 19,375 in 2003, and that reporting on famine in Africa increased greatly in 2001 and 2002.

In the survey, humanitarian officials also said that journalists have become less competent and ruder. Journalists disagreed. "There is an adversarial relationship, there is skepticism, but it is overrated," said Ross.

He recommended "cooperative mechanisms" for creating press relations training materials that would be easy to send to aid workers in remote locations, provide financial resources for journalists, and compile directories of field offices.

The study, "Toward New Understandings: Journalists and Humanitarian Relief Coverage" is available at the Fritz Institute Web site www.fritzinstitute.org.