

## Role of Media in Covering Humanitarian Conflict

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BY Shaili Chopra

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Accurate, balanced and accessible media coverage of looming conflicts and humanitarian crises is necessary for any national and international understanding of the situation. However, cursory coverage or blanketed reporting of many frontline issues such as the genocide in Rwanda or war crimes in Vietnam questions the role of media in treatment of humanitarian emergencies.

A combination of international editorial indifference and the physical dangers of visiting Rwanda meant there was virtually no international media coverage of the unending murder and terror producing about 10000 deaths a day. From 1993 through 1996, the prolonged bloodshed in Burundi illustrated the impotence of media in reporting conflict.

Media coverage raises public awareness of an issue, at the same time bringing the concern to the attention of policy makers and international governing bodies. Images of dead bodies and deserted streets, the genuine uncertainty over what was happening are bound to coerce a reaction. Linked to this, is the tendency of the international media to miss the subtleties of an issue and report superficially such as in the case of Yugoslavia during the Great Lakes crisis. The events were reported as the conflagration of age-old ethnic hatreds rather than a current power struggle, unaffectedly urging a different reaction from the international community than it would have, if the real situation were conveyed.

There is also a tendency among the media to portray a bleak image of helplessness and play up the matter. For instance, in Current Events, a mini-magazine for middle school students published by Weekly Reader, a report carried a story "six 'infants' were killed in the Aug. 9 bombing at the Jerusalem pizzeria." While six Israeli children between the ages of two and 16 were tragically murdered, no infants were killed. Incidents such as these add

fuel to the fire in previously sensitive subjects such as the ongoing discord in Israel. The capability to report from the world's formerly inaccessible zones of conflict has not necessarily been matched by a qualitative improvement in information flow. Less-than-well-informed coverage often leads to partial news analysis and obstructs impartial and truthful comprehension of any crises. Broadcasts by local media may help better understanding the problem but there are higher chances of it being politically biased during national unrest. For instance in Rwanda, a Hutu-controlled radio station broadcast the goal of killing all Tutsis in Rwanda throughout the genocide. In Bosnia, a Serb-controlled television station reported on the "plan" of the Muslims to take over all of Bosnia and oust the Serbs from the country.

As an intermediate, it is crucial for the media to highlight the capacities of people and their ability to cope with crisis, thus acting as a platform for informed international support and not just sympathy. Also, traditionally, there is a causal link between media coverage and the extent of resources allocated. Increased media coverage helps attain-

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ing a sustainable momentum and mediation-support mechanism for non-governmental organisations. "Field Presence" for humanitarian crisis legitimises the work of relief agencies world over. In fact increased media coverage increases aid supplies toward the place. The problem of

many NGOs to work only in "media-attracting" activities could be thus addressed.

There is a need for the media to distance themselves from official sources and propaganda and seek out for in-depth coverage of any conflict. Perhaps an effort toward

future examination of the media can be strategically used to further enhance humanitarian relief operations rather than undermine them.

Till we connect again...

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