

2. Journalists and aid workers – an ambivalent relationship

COMMENTARY

The relationship between the news media and humanitarians remains extremely important as both play a key role in terms of shaping of what we know and how we experience armed conflicts of which most of us have no first-hand knowledge. By shaping public perceptions these two actors also influence the actions taken by governments and the international community to put an end to or alleviate the suffering caused by wars. Yet, as this keynote address at the Reporting Wars conferences in Sydney and Wellington in May 2009 seeks to explain, there is nothing automatic about this process.

Keywords: advocacy tool, CNN effect, conflict reporting, Geneva Convention, humanitarian law, international relations, public agenda, Red Cross, war reporting

FLORIAN WESTPHAL

International Committee of the Red Cross

THE RELATIONSHIP between the media and humanitarians remains extremely important as both play a key role in terms of shaping of what we know and how we experience armed conflicts of which most of us have no first-hand knowledge. By shaping public perceptions these two actors also influence the actions taken by governments and the international community to put an end to or alleviate the suffering caused by wars. Yet, as I will try to explain there is nothing automatic about this process.

It may seem strange to you to have someone from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) commenting on this issue. After all we have the reputation—unwarranted in my view—of being reluctant to engage with journalists. In fact, however, we deal with media worldwide on a daily basis which is proof that what I have termed an ambivalent relationship between journalists and aid workers is at its base a mainly positive relationship, even for a supposedly media-shy organisation like the ICRC. But as is always the

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case, even in good relationships there are always some ‘issues’ to sort out. The humanitarian sector is as diverse as the media—therefore it is always difficult and risky to generalise. For now it should just be noted that contrary to what is widely believed, journalists and aid workers do not necessarily pursue the same aims. Aid organisations are supposed to help people in need on the ground while the media aim to inform about the reality of war while also succeeding in an increasingly difficult and competitive economic environment. This matters because it shapes how we see and relate to each other.



PHOTOTHEQUE/ICRC

The Battle of Solferino, June 1859. Painting by Carlo Bossoli, Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento, Turin, Italy.

Historically, there have always been strong links between the media and humanitarian organisations. The Battle of Solferino in 1859 and the subsequent birth of the Red Cross more or less coincided with the invention of photography and the introduction of the telegraph which for the first time allowed news to spread fast and worldwide. The first photograph in the ICRC’s archives dates from 1863. It shows a scene from the American civil war—happening literally at the moment the organisation was born. Meanwhile, newspaper reports about the Crimean War motivated Florence Nightingale to act to help—and to advocate for more action.

Humanitarians quickly realised the immense potential of using the media as what we would now call an 'advocacy tool'. The founder of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant, launched his idea for the creation of relief societies who would assist the sick and wounded on the battlefield (today's Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) by writing a book about what he had seen at Solferino where thousands of soldiers died and suffered without any care. After publishing *A Memory of Solferino* (1939) at his own expense, Dunant managed to convince the royals and politicians who were Europe's power brokers at the time to read it. The book—which incidentally is a brilliant piece of war reporting—was Dunant's tool to mobilise support for his ideas including that of a first Geneva Convention.

Television and war

The Biafra war in the late 1960s marked another important turning point as the first fully televised conflict with international TV crews on the ground covering the fighting and its impact on people in eastern Nigeria. More than ever before TV brought civilian suffering in a far-away place into Western living rooms. This reporting potentially made a difference sparking off public revulsion and clamours for action. Take for example the BBC's reporting of the Ethiopia famine of 1984 which eventually led to Live Aid. For the first time television also offered aid organisations an unprecedented opportunity and platform to appeal for donations from the general public and to raise their profile among decision-makers.

Biafra also marked a major change in the aid world with the advent of Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF), founded by the now French foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, among others, and its conviction that humanitarian organisations could not remain silent in the face of suffering. In marked contrast to the ICRC at the time, MSF and others advocated that apart from helping people, humanitarians also had to speak out in order to pressure those in power to put an end to the suffering. The media played a key role to get the message across.

But Biafra was also a first example of how easily the humanitarian-media coalition could be manipulated. It is now widely suspected that rebel forces deliberately kept people including children on the verge of starvation to maintain the world media's attention on Biafra.

Why do aid organisations need the media?

The best-known and most concrete answer is fundraising: media are a key factor when it comes to mobilising the largesse not just of the general public but also of governments.

But apart from the money, aid organisations also pursue a far more elusive goal through media coverage: public awareness. The famous war photographer, James Nachtwey, explained this as follows:

Through the experience of covering wars, I've come to realise that nothing in society exists in a vacuum, that solutions begin with shared awareness, that consciousness evolves into a sense of conscience, and that once our collective conscience becomes engaged, solutions—though they may take time and resources and a lot of hard work—become not only possible but inevitable.

Even the most ardent sceptics could not refute that this is what happens. Public awareness, 'our collective conscience', often does result in political action. The public feeling that 'something has to be done to stop this' can be a powerful factor to stimulate action on armed conflicts that a few weeks earlier appeared to be merely local problems in faraway places.

However, there is nothing automatic about this. The so-called 'CNN effect' doesn't always work. Governments don't always agree to act following public pressure and public attention is fickle moving quickly from one subject to the next. And even when governments are ready to act to influence other peoples' wars, there are limits to what they can do. These are dictated by the uneven balance of power between states and the continuing importance of national sovereignty as a guiding principle of international relations which holds that there are strict limits to 'interfering' in another country's business. Together they mean that generally only the most powerful states manage to impose 'humanitarian' interventions against the will of governments in countries affected by war.

Apart from needing media for fundraising and mobilising global public opinion aid organisations in war zones are slowly realizing that local media also play a key role for them. If they support our work they can help us win the acceptance and access to victims that we need. The flipside is that negative local reporting can also have a severe impact on our ability to help. We need to pay more attention to local media and journalists.

Obstacles to the humanitarian-media alliance

In view of the tangible potential benefits of successful cooperation between the media and humanitarian organisations, how come there is not more of it? How come we as aid organisations are not more successful when it comes to pushing the reality of conflict in Somalia, the Philippines or Colombia—to name but a few of the conflicts whose humanitarian impact is rarely covered—onto the public agenda?

The first answer to this concerns the increasing risk of working in and covering wars. There has been a significant increase in the number of media personnel killed while covering wars and of aid workers in armed conflicts. And, as is the case for journalists, local aid workers are now just as much if not more at risk as international staff.

There are several explanations for this: Crime and banditry are a huge problem, especially in situations where public order has effectively collapsed because of war. Wars have become less structured and organised, and more chaotic. Journalists and aid workers often face factions, militias and rebel groups who have no clear command structure and whose motives are unclear, making it ever more difficult to get the security guarantees both of us need to do our job.

The lack of acceptance or even outright rejection of our presence in conflict zones is a major challenge both for international humanitarian organisations and media. In some wars aid workers have come to be considered as being part of a 'Western' political agenda rather than selfless do-gooders. Their insistence on issues often perceived as 'political' such as compliance with human rights or international humanitarian law is considered as unwelcome interference. Mismanagement and outright criminal activities by a minority of organisations have tarnished the whole sector. One example is the Arche de Zoe affair in Chad where a French NGO stood accused of kidnapping children for adoption.

This is also a problem of our own making as our message is far from uniform and quite often frankly contradictory. In Afghanistan, for example, some aid organisations like the ICRC insist on their neutrality and independence from conflict parties while others are working closely with the government and its international supporters and at times openly support their objectives.

Several recent conflicts—for example in Sri Lanka and Gaza where media access was restricted—show that the media are also facing the acceptance

challenge. As conflict parties everywhere invest more time and effort into the battle for hearts and minds they are less willing to accept the presence of independent observers likely to challenge their propaganda. Whether journalist or aid worker—whoever is seen to be countering conflict party spin risks being subjected to restrictions or in the worst cases even being attacked.

Let me now turn to the internal factors that hamper the impact of both media and aid organisations when it comes to communicating about wars.

There are clearly limits to how the media cover wars and disasters. Like their audiences, many journalists are subject to compassion fatigue which means there is limited scope for the number of crises covered simultaneously and certain exhaustion when it comes to dealing with seemingly never-ending, never-changing wars like Somalia.

And how do media decide which war makes headlines and which doesn't? Many factors play a role here: the proximity of a crisis, the availability of pictures, the presence of nationals on the ground who can explain the situation in the broadcasters' language and the legacy of historical or colonial links. Besides, the current economic crisis means that there is generally a lot less money available for foreign coverage.

But it would be too easy to blame the media alone for the fact that we hear so little about places like the southern Philippines, for example, where years of conflict and violence have killed, wounded or displaced hundreds of thousands of people. If, as humanitarian organisations, we take a critical look at our own communication, we have to admit that we do not really talk that much about the places outside the headlines either, or that when we do we are often not very good at it. We have become so efficient in adapting to the news-making process that we risk only pitching the stories that are already on the news agenda, leaving out the more difficult ones that ought to be told.

Often the story of victims of war is a never-changing tale of suffering that is difficult to illustrate in new and interesting ways. How can one transmit through the lens of a camera the sheer drudgery, boredom and never-ending misery experienced by people who have been displaced for decades? They may no longer be directly at risk but their plight continues unchanged and is at the core of our concerns as aid organisations. Yet we struggle to get their story out and noticed.

And even where interested aid workers and journalists manage to get these stories out their approach is often very limited. Let me give a few examples of what I mean:

All too often our stories feature the central character of the 'victim'—people affected by war who are essentially without hope and at the mercy of events, looking for salvation which comes, almost inevitably in the form of an expatriate aid worker. This storyline conveniently ignores the fact that most aid is actually provided by the victims' families and communities.

We tend to go for simplistic tales of good and evil; for the 'human interest' story that focuses on the individual rather than giving the necessary bigger picture which may include a complex but necessary analysis of a conflict—not always easy to digest but crucial. We like stories peopled by 'innocent' civilians and 'evil' war lords or 'terrorists'. One of the most blatant examples of this remains the genocide in Rwanda which, contrary to how it was initially—and continues to be—described by so many, was not a blind outburst of tribal hatred but a well-planned campaign of systematic murder. Too often we oversimplify rather than foster understanding.

International humanitarian Law

Yet what needs to be known is not always easy to explain—or to understand. This is particularly true when it comes to international humanitarian law (IHL)—which is one area where the media and humanitarian and human rights organisation can play a key role to raise awareness.

Recent years have seen increasing interest in this body of law which protects those not or no longer taking part in fighting and regulates the permitted means and methods of warfare. Media extensively covered the debate about the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to what has been termed the 'war on terror' and last year's conflicts in Gaza and Sri Lanka have led to extensive public discussion about whether or not the conflict parties complied with their obligations under the law. Other no less important developments such as the work of the International Criminal Court and efforts to restrict the use of weapons such as landmines and cluster munitions has been widely covered.

A certain basic understanding of the law is a core ingredient of professional foreign reporting. As Britain's Channel 4 foreign editor Lindsey Hilsum said about her own reporting of the Rwanda genocide:

Had I realised right from the start that I was witnessing not anarchy but genocide, I would have reported differently. In that first terrible week, I could have explained that under international law governments had an obligation to stop it.

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Knowledge of the law ensures that terminology is used correctly—not every mass killing is automatically genocide—and as a result reporting is credible (Gutman & Rieff, 1999).

On a slightly different note international humanitarian law is also important for journalists covering war because it offers them specific protection, defining them essentially as civilians who must not be directly targeted.

New media

Most aid organisations are now using so-called ‘new media’, including social networking sites—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—to engage new audiences, many of whom have been turning away from more traditional media, and to consolidate their relations with existing supporters. One challenge for aid organisations is these relays require a new way of communicating, of interacting with our audiences. This means actually opening us up more to scrutiny and to dialogue, thereby giving supporters more of a say in what aid organisations do and how they do it. To be quite honest: this is not something that comes to us naturally and it is something we will struggle with occasionally.

Crowd sourcing websites like Ushahidi offer the exciting possibility of allowing those most directly affected by armed conflict to tell their own story and contribute to reporting without having to rely on journalists or aid workers as intermediaries.

For established media these new outlets are interesting because they offer additional possibilities of getting content to audiences while benefiting from user-generated material which is free and often available within minutes of a major event taking place. But they also present a challenge. How do media ensure editorial standards especially when dealing with potentially explosive material about armed conflict transmitted as user-generated content whose authenticity and veracity cannot be checked?

Conclusion

To some this brief snapshot of the relationship between media and aid organisations may appear to be too bleak. I admit I have perhaps been focusing excessively on problem areas in a relationship that remains fundamentally sound and important—at least for as long as we continue to believe that it makes sense to generate public awareness of conflicts and their impact in

faraway lands. Humanitarian organisations often make it possible for journalists to cover the story. In return, the media feature their activities and make public their concerns. A good deal all round one might say.

However, things will continue to change and not necessarily for the better. Decreased expenditure on foreign reporting has made it that much more difficult for media to cover 'our' stories. In turn aid agencies invest increasing sums of money producing their own TV footage, writing blogs, hiring photographers and financing media trips. There is nothing wrong with this for as long as the media remember—and explain to their audiences in all transparency—that aid workers are not journalists, that we also have a story to 'spin' and that even if it is the right story it is the job of journalists to ensure that they are not manipulated by aid organisations.

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Florian Westphal has been head of public and media relations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) since March 2007. He leads a team of 11 media relations staff working with a global network of more than 60 offices. Prior to taking up his current role based in Geneva, Westphal worked for the ICRC in Southeast Asia. From 2002 until 2006, he was the ICRC's deputy head of media, handling public communication on key issues including the Iraq war and ICRC visits to detainees held at Guantanamo Bay. Before joining the ICRC, Westphal spent seven years working as a radio journalist and producer for the BBC World Service and Swiss Radio International.
fwestphal.gva@icrc.org

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