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A REPORTING DISASTER?

The interdependence of media and aid agencies in
a competitive compassion market

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The author

Besides being a freelance radio journalist and producer for the Austrian broadcaster ORF, I have also worked periodically as emergency aid worker for the Caritas network¹, most recently during the Pakistan floods in 2010, where I was communications coordinator. All observations and comments in this research are personal and do not represent the views of Caritas.

My combined career as a journalist and emergency aid worker has allowed me to understand the challenges we face when confronted with a humanitarian disaster and the need to report it.

¹ Caritas Internationalis is a confederation of 165 Catholic relief, development and social service organisations operating in over 200 countries and territories worldwide.

1 Introduction: The state of disaster reporting and its challenges

The title had an explosive word in it: truth. “Haiti and the Truth about NGOs”², a 45min radio documentary aired on 11th January 2011 on BBC Radio 4. The timing was no coincidence, exactly one year after a massive earthquake hit the Caribbean Island. Around 250,000 people had lost their lives and another 1 million were affected. A year on, BBC radio journalist Edward Stourton travelled to Haiti to look at problems in the aid industry. “How far has the way we help gone bad?”³, he asked himself, concerned that the billions of dollars of donations and aid pledges were not reflected in the living conditions of survivors. “Is what has happened in Haiti symptomatic of a wider crisis of humanitarianism?”⁴ The radio documentary generated strong debate in online discussion forums amongst aid agencies. “It went for the jugular”⁵, wrote John Mitchell, director of the humanitarian think tank ALNAP⁶, on AlertNet⁷. “It seemed to me that Stourton was persuading the listener the humanitarian system, in Haiti and by implication elsewhere, is a system that has lost its moral compass and is tired if not completely broken.”⁸ Amongst many other responses to the programme was one by former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Sir John Holmes, saying that he too thought that the Stourton piece was unnecessarily negative.⁹ Dame Barbara Stocking, Chief Executive of Oxfam GB felt that the “absolute lack of recognition of what has been achieved in the last year” was “irresponsible and misleading”.¹⁰

Six months later the BBC dispatched TV news presenter Ben Brown to a disaster area. He reported on a drought the public was largely unaware of. On 4th July Brown sent a 2:05min report¹¹ from the world’s largest refugee camp, Dadaab in Kenya, to a Western viewership.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00xcc0k>.

³ Edward Stourton, “Haiti and the Truth about NGOs”, *BBC Radio 4 Documentary*, 11 January 2011.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John Mitchell, “Media and Humanitarianism – Haiti and the media”, *AlertNet*, 12 January 2011: <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/blogs/media-and-humanitarianism/haiti-and-the-media>.

⁶ The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) is a network, which incorporates many of the key humanitarian organisations and experts from across the humanitarian sector. It was established in 1997, following the multi-agency evaluation of the Rwanda genocide. See: <http://www.alnap.org/>

⁷ AlertNet, established by the Thomson Reuters Foundation Service, is a newswire dedicated to humanitarian issues. See: <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/>

⁸ John Mitchell, *op.cit.*

⁹ Sir John Holmes, 13 January 2011: <http://www.alnap.org/blog/23.aspx>.

¹⁰ Dame Barbara Stocking, 14 January 2011: <http://www.alnap.org/blog/23.aspx>.

¹¹ Ben Brown, “Horn of Africa hit by worst drought in 60 years”, 4 July 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14020452>.

The report showed emaciated children's bodies with flies around their eyes, and suffering, speechless adults. This time there was no public criticism from aid agencies, although the report used images of hunger which ignore a basic principle of aid agencies, to "recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects"¹². But this report came at the beginning of an untold crisis, which needed the eye of a big broadcaster to get seen. Four days later, Brown's report "Horn of Africa: 'A vision of hell'"¹³ was accompanied by the news that the UK Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC)¹⁴ had launched an emergency appeal to help the more than 10 million people affected by severe drought. On the BBC website a "To make a donation"-information including a direct donation call number was added to the report.¹⁵

These two events are symptomatic of the relationship between aid agencies and the media: a mutual need and mutual mistrust mark their complex interdependence. Either the audience is given simplistic donations stories which don't give time or space to question the how, or the audience is confronted with sharp, and increasingly polemical criticism of aid agencies.¹⁶ Neither of these two extreme attitudes helps to understand the complex realities on the ground.

Aid agencies are desperate to raise awareness and public funds for their humanitarian work and the news media are determined to generate readers, ratings and revenue. This interaction is conducted in this evolving and increasingly globalised and contested communicative space, say Simon Cottle and David Nolan.¹⁷

Who cares? Many people, according to two recent studies on the UK public's understanding of aid, commissioned by the British Red Cross¹⁸ and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)¹⁹. Apparently the majority of the population is interested in finding out more about

¹² The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief:
<http://www.sphereproject.org/content/view/146/84/lang,English/>.

¹³ Ben Brown, "Horn of Africa drought: 'a vision of hell'", 8 July 2011: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14078074>.

¹⁴ The Disaster and Emergency Committee (DEC) unites the 14 leading UK agencies in their efforts to finance relief for people suffering major disasters in poorer countries.

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14078074>, op. cit.

¹⁶ See: Alan Little, "The Truth about NGOs", BBC World Service, 3 part series (Malawi, India, Haiti), December 2011, January 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00mmn26>.

¹⁷ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, "How the media's codes and rules influence the ways NGOs work", in: NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 16 November 2009: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/simon-cottle-and-david-nolan-how-the-medias-codes-and-rules-influence-the-ways-ngos-work/>.

¹⁸ Harriet Penrose, "Attitudes towards humanitarian aid amongst the UK general public", *Dispatches from Disaster Zones*, British Red Cross, press@redcross.org.uk, 30 September 2011.

¹⁹ Johanna Lindstrom and Spencer Henson, "What does the public think, know and do about aid and development?", *Institute of Development Studies*, October 2011:

disaster aid. For instance 74 percent of the British people want to know how a community is coping three, six and twelve months after a disaster has struck.²⁰ Another key finding is that the public strongly supports international development charities. “Charities providing overseas aid and disaster relief are the most popular cause for regular individual charity donations.”²¹ Does this imply that instead of “compassion fatigue”²² we are entering a new era of compassion regard? The huge success of the DEC appeal for East Africa surprised both media and aid agencies.²³ The appeal has raised the third highest total of any in the charity’s 45 year history. It is also the highest total ever raised for a food crisis, and the largest for any African appeal.²⁴

The world looks likely to face an increasing number of catastrophes in future. The World Disasters Report 2011²⁵ looks back on a decade of catastrophes concluding that more people died as a result of disasters in 2010 than in any other year in the last decade²⁶. In two years alone, we were confronted with four major disasters: the Haiti earthquake, flooding in Pakistan, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami and the famine in East Africa. With the last of these not included in the report, it still concludes that these disasters “mark an ‘exponential change in crisis scale and impact’ and foreshadow a time of increasingly complex crises and multiple, simultaneous disasters”²⁷. Does this mean that disaster reporting will be more important than ever? Glenda Cooper believes so.²⁸ But what are the conditions for a disaster becoming newsworthy? Amongst many studies on this issue, one summarises the complexities of communicating distant suffering with these strong, radical words: “Western self-interest is the pre-condition for significant coverage of a humanitarian crisis’ and national political and economic interests are a better guide to press interest than human suffering.”²⁹

<http://www.ids.ac.uk/idspublication/what-does-the-public-think-know-and-do-about-aid-and-development>.

²⁰Harriet Penrose, op.cit.

²¹Institute of Development Studies, op.cit.

²²Susan D. Moeller, „Compassion Fatigue. How the media sell disease, famine, war and death“, London, Routledge, 1999.

²³Helen Magee, „The East African Famine. Did the media get it right?“, International Broadcasting Trust, London, 1 December 2011:http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research/EastAfricanfamine.pdf.

²⁴Brendan Paddy, “Public give £72m for East Africa, 30 October 2011:

<http://www.dec.org.uk/blog/public-give-%C2%A372m-east-africa>.

²⁵World Disasters Report 2011, IFRC:

<http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/WDR/WDR2010-full.pdf>.

²⁶Claire Provost, “The deadliest disasters of the 21st century”, *Global Development*, The Guardian, 22 September 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/datablog/2011/sep/22/deadliest-disasters-data>.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Glenda Cooper, „Anyone here survived a wave, speak English and got a mobile? Aid agencies, the media and reporting disasters since the Tsunami“, *The 14th Guardian Lecture, 2007*, Nuffield College Oxford, p.17: <http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/Guardian/Nuffield%20Guardian%20Lecture%202007.pdf>

²⁹The CARMA Report on Western Media Coverage of Humanitarian Disasters, CARMA International, January 2006: http://www.imaging-famine.org/images/pdfs/carma_%20report.pdf.

The amount of attention a disaster receives also influences how much humanitarian assistance and donations it attracts.

At the same time, it is well established that foreign news reporting is facing turbulent times. “Are foreign correspondents redundant?”³⁰ asks Richard Sambrook in his study about the changing face of international news. “The economic pressures of maintaining overseas newsgathering have seen the numbers of bureaux and correspondents persistently reduced by major Western news organisations over the last 20 years or more.”³¹ This lack of foreign news coverage directly affects aid agencies’ ability to communicate from disaster zones. Their focus lies in transmitting the aid message to a Western audience of potential donors. So will disasters continue to be covered in the media, and if so by whom?

Aid agencies have become cleverer, “turning themselves into reporters for the mainstream media, providing cash-strapped foreign desks with footage and words gratis”.³² While there is an increasing void in foreign reporting by the conventional media, there is a hugely competitive compassion market. On the one hand the major humanitarian agencies have become slicker, PR-focused media operations, which want to feed a content-hungry disaster news market. On the other hand, the disaster area has become much more crowded. The last two decades have witnessed the rise of new aid agencies, especially MONGOs,³³ of which many have been described as “cowboy agencies”³⁴.

At the same time, the changing nature of technology opens up new and diverse ways of collecting and distributing information for both reporters and aid workers in the field. Live blog formats - which journalist Dan Gillmor defines as the “1440-minute news-cycle” - are replacing the TV-based 24-hour news-cycle,³⁵ writes Nicola Bruno in his research for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Bruno quotes Joshua E. Keating in *Foreign Policy* that the earthquake in Haiti was the first “Twitter Disaster”³⁶.

³⁰ Richard Sambrook, “Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant? The changing face of international news”, *RISJ Challenges*, Oxford, 2010.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

³² Glenda Cooper, “From their own correspondent? New media and the change in disasters coverage: lessons to be learnt”, *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, Oxford, May 2011, p.28: http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Working_Papers/From_Their_Own_Correspondent.pdf

³³ MONGOs (acronym for “My Own NGO”) are small NGOs that are set up by anyone who wants to help according to Linda Polman, “Die Mitleidsindustrie. Hinter den Kulissen internationaler Hilfsorganisationen”, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 2010, p.65.

³⁴ John Mitchell, *op.cit.*

³⁵ Nicola Bruno, “Tweet first, verify later? How real-time information is changing the coverage of worldwide crisis events”, *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, Oxford, 2011, p.66. http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/fellows__papers/2010-2011/TWEET_FIRST_VERIFY_LATER.pdf

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

Where does this leave us? Although the use of social media in covering news is much discussed, there is much less analysis of the impact on the quality of information we get. “News is also, what journalists make it³⁷”, reaffirms Natalie Fenton of Goldsmiths in “New Media, Old News”. “Their working environment is shaped by economic, social, political and technological factors, all of which form a dense inter-meshing of commercial, ethical regulatory and cultural components.”³⁸ These are the challenging conditions in which humanitarian organisations and news media meet nowadays in disaster zones.

Research questions

Are we getting ethical information (which I define below) when reporters and aid workers are so dependent on each other in a disaster zone? Both are communicating disasters in a media market which is in transformation. While the ethics of journalism in disaster zones is widely discussed, there is a lack of research into the relationship between aid agencies and the media, and the implications of this. This is the main topic of my research.

In chapter two I analyse this symbiotic relationship. Where does it stand? I illustrate how this relationship feeds a content-hungry disaster news market, with the role of NGOs increasingly as citizen journalists and the “beneficent embedding”³⁹ of reporters. This term, developed by Simon Cottle and David Nolan, refers to a journalist’s immersion through a NGO in the field. He sees this as a positive development, because it allows in-depth reporting, but I see dangers which I will explore.

In chapter three I discuss the consequences of the relationship between media and NGOs for ethical reporting. Are we getting ethical content from aid agencies and the media? Can the whole story be told? If not, why not? What are the concerns of reporters and aid workers?

In chapter four I’ll draw some conclusions and give recommendations for the future conduct of aid agencies and the media.

Defining ethical standards

³⁷ Natalie Fenton (ed.), “New Media, Old News. Journalism & Democracy in the Digital Age”, SAGE Publications, London, 2010, p.3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.3.

³⁹ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, “Global Humanitarianism and the changing aid-media field”, *Journalism Studies*, 8:6, 2007, p.875:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14616700701556104>

When humanitarian organisations and news media meet nowadays in disaster zones, there is some interesting common ground. Both aim for public reach and a rapid response to events. And both have ethical motivations. Natalie Fenton argues that in a world of communicative abundance the ethical horizon is still pertinent: there remains a sense that there are many things news journalism ought to be doing – to monitor, to hold to account and to facilitate and maintain deliberation.⁴⁰ If this is true for media organisations, it's equally so for humanitarian organisations, which theoretically have an ethical imperative incorporated in their mission. Standards of behaviour are established in the Code of Conduct⁴¹ for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in disaster relief. For the purpose of my research the virtues required of someone covering disasters for the news media are best defined by Philips, Couldry and Freedman: accuracy, sincerity and hospitality. Accuracy is the disposition to take the necessary care to ensure so far as possible that what one says is not false. Sincerity is the disposition to make sure that what one says is what one actually believes. Hospitality considers the role of media in sustaining a common space where diverse groups, who may differ radically in identity, religion, historical interests and values, can be recognised as social and moral agents.⁴²

Methodology

My research is based on semi-structured interviews with communication managers working for aid agencies and with journalists. In addition, current literature offers in-depth analysis from both reporters and aid workers.

⁴⁰ Natalie Fenton, *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁴¹ <http://www.sphereproject.org/content/view/146/84/lang,English/>.

⁴² Angela Philips, Nick Couldry, Des Freedman, "An ethical deficit? Accountability, norms, and the material conditions of contemporary journalism", in: Natalie Fenton, *op.cit.*, p.54.

2 Aid agencies and the media: How their symbiosis feeds a content-hungry disaster news market

2.1 Looking back, moving forward?

Have we learned anything since the 1980s? That is the question which underlies the latest research by the International Broadcasting Trust⁴³ (IBT), in which media and NGO representatives reflect on the coverage the East Africa famine generated. Some of the findings in the area of tone and context suggest little has changed since the famine in Ethiopia nearly 30 years ago: “Simplistic and stereotyped coverage”⁴⁴ (say the aid workers), “reluctant to address some of the more difficult problems of operating in conflict zones”⁴⁵ (say the journalists).

This mutual suspicion lies at the heart of a complex, multifaceted relationship, described very differently by various interviewees. “It’s crucial”⁴⁶, says Brendan Gormley, Head of the DEC. “It’s quite clear that NGOs have to raise money for their causes. And to raise money, they have to show what the problem is they are trying to confront, what they are able to do about it, and in a light that makes it possible for the viewer or listener to see, what is special or different about a charity.”⁴⁷

Steve Herrmann, editor of the BBC News Website, finds that “there is a history of strong relationship between the two for obvious reasons, because they are often the only people on the ground in the aftermath of a disaster.”⁴⁸

For Sarah Jacobs, Head of News at Save the Children, it’s a “mutually dependent relationship”⁴⁹. “Obviously we desperately need attention as fast as possible. And if it’s a big emergency, then journalists need us for access to be able to cover the story, to get the kind of human impact, the real sense of drama and need behind what’s happened.”⁵⁰

Ian Bray, Senior Press Officer at Oxfam sees it as a “positive relationship”⁵¹. “We need to let people know what’s happening in the world, and especially what’s happening to vulnerable people. And one of the ways of informing the public what is happening, and also putting

⁴³ Helen Magee, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid.,p.5.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁴⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

pressure on governments to do something about it, is to get the oxygen of publicity through mainstream media, usually news media. That is a very powerful tool we can engage with.”⁵² For Ron McCullagh, who worked for BBC Radio and TV before founding Insight News TV⁵³, it is an “unhealthy partnership. But obviously it has to exist between journalists and NGOs on occasion, because without that, the NGOs don’t get what they want - publicity. The journalists don’t get what they want - a story.”⁵⁴ For McCullagh, the problem is that we don’t see enough honesty, neither from aid agencies nor journalists. “What we see is a beautified version of ‘we are good people, we are here to help, and we are, in some ways, ourselves heroic in the sacrifices we make to be here, to care for these people’. And there is truth in that, but not all the time. And it’s certainly not the whole story. The whole story is often about bloody awful politics, it’s about deals being done with people you don’t want to do deals with, because you have to be pragmatic. And many journalists would find out about stuff like this and would immediately accept that it would be a bad idea to report about it. And why? Because they themselves would be part of the problem. And we all get caught up in it.”⁵⁵

In 2004, the Fritz Institute⁵⁶, together with AlertNet conducted the biggest ever report about humanitarian relief and its struggle to make the news agenda.⁵⁷ The report showed some fundamental problems in the relationship between aid agencies and the media. Tim Large, Editor-in-Chief at AlertNet, isn’t convinced that they have gone away since then.⁵⁸ “The focus the NGOs put on the need to satisfy donors, whether that’s the need to raise money or to show donors what they are doing, means the main focus is on international media.”⁵⁹ But Large argues that the humanitarian response needs to be opened up much more to local media, since most of the work is done by local players. “Given that it is so trendy to say we work with local partners, there is still very little attention paid to local media.”⁶⁰

Media-savvy NGOs

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Insight News TV specialises in telling global stories from a local perspective. Whether through the reporters or the characters in the films, Insight aims to bring the audience closer to understanding new perspectives through firsthand accounts.

⁵⁴ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The Fritz Institute is a nonprofit organization based in the USA that works in partnership with governments, NPOs and corporations to find innovative solutions and facilitate the adoption of best practices for rapid and effective disaster response and recovery. See: <http://www.fritzinstitute.org/>

⁵⁷ Steven Ross, “Toward new understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage”, 2004, San Francisco, Fritz Institute: http://www.fritzinstitute.org/PDFs/Case-Studies/Media_study_wAppendices.pdf

⁵⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

To understand the current situation, it is important to clarify that in one specific area, behaviours have changed a lot. The Fritz report talks about a “lack of PR skills amongst NGOs”⁶¹. There is room for NGOs “to improve on some of the basics of media communications”⁶². The picture looks completely differently nowadays, as Liz Ford, Deputy Editor of the Guardian’s Development website, explains. “Based in London, the NGOs are almost your first port of call. You need to get the less political side of things, because obviously everything is political. You want to get what is going on, on the ground. And you know the NGOs are there. You don’t even need to go to them; they are coming straight to you. They are very good at getting all these kind of things together. There are people who are ex-reporters, now working for them. They really know exactly what they would want, if they were working for a news organisation.”⁶³

The aid agencies/media interaction is experiencing a transformation which is not yet complete. “Mainstream media and NGOs have long had a symbiotic relationship, with the media using NGO experts for news tips, quotations, and access”⁶⁴, says Kimberly Abbott, who is North America Communications Director for the International Crisis Group⁶⁵. She summarises that “with many foreign bureaux of major news outlets shuttered, and the simultaneous growth of more media savvy NGOs, the agencies are doing even more: researching and pitching stories, sharing contacts, developing content and providing logistics, guidance, analysis, opinion and, in some cases, funding”⁶⁶.

Blurring the lines

It is interesting to see that not only are roles changing, but also the language. Those seeking a job nowadays rarely find the term “News Editor” in the media section, but it appears regularly under charities jobs. Save the Children was recently looking for a “Senior News Editor”⁶⁷ with “first class journalistic skills”, a “flair for news, story-spotting and excellent reactive abilities”. “Yes, we act like a newsroom”⁶⁸, says Head of News, Sarah Jacobs. Most

⁶¹ Steven Ross, op.cit.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁶⁴ Kimberly Abbott, „Working together, NGOs and journalists can create stronger international reporting“, in: NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 9 November 2009: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/kimberly-abbott-working-together-ngos-and-journalists-can-create-stronger-international-reporting/>

⁶⁵ The International Crisis Group is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict. The CEO is Louse Arbour, former UN High-Commissioner for Human Rights. Their headquarters is in Brussels. See: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>.

⁶⁶ Kimberly Abbott, op.cit.

⁶⁷ Internal document.

⁶⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

of her team are ex-journalists, “because it works much better, in terms of knowing what journalists need”, confirming the previous comments of Liz Ford from The Guardian. However, Sarah Jacobs is keen to point out that when ex-journalists start to work in the media unit of her NGO, they are not journalists anymore, because they are working for the advocacy policy of the organisation.⁶⁹ At the same time it is interesting to hear that she sees their role also as “the neutral deliverer of information, because you become an authority on things. You are using your knowledge and skills, helping journalists in whatever children’s vulnerabilities we encourage them to talk about, and often people just use us for information”⁷⁰.

Natalie Fenton finds that NGOs take on the role of the neutral deliverer of information to gain widespread acceptance by the mainstream media, in what she calls “news cloning”. “Rather than release the potential for increased advocacy through publicity, new media seems to have amplified the pressure on NGOs to emulate mainstream news, encouraging them to act as pseudo journalists in simulated newsrooms.”⁷¹

Sarah Jacobs knows from recruiting people for the media unit, that it’s a big jump for a journalist to adopt the new role. “It can be frustrating for people, because they are like, oh my god, it’s an amazing story and you are like, well, it’s not what we can do, because either we are not working on it or it’s going to endanger people or staff; it’s not one of our priorities. It’s a totally different job relying on the same skills.”⁷²

Information in the new media age

The challenge of new media is to ensure that your organisation is seen and recognised, in an infinite space of information. NGOs are now expected to embrace all the opportunities available to them in the digital world, says Natalie Fenton – from blogging, podcasts, and social networking sites to their own online news platforms and beyond – all requiring investment of time, money and technical skills.⁷³ “The days of a couple of phone calls, a few press releases and maybe a press conference are over. This world of source-journalist relations is faster and greedier than ever before.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Natalie Fenton, op.cit., p.156.

⁷² Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Natalie Fenton, “Has the Internet changed how NGOs work with established media?“, in: NGOs and the News: Exploring a Changing Communication Landscape, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 23 November 2009: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/natalie-fenton-has-the-internet-changed-how-ngos-work-with-established-media-not-enough/>.

For media and aid agencies, it is a big challenge to feed the content-hungry disaster news market. They are both under pressure to produce more information in less time. With recent budget cuts, fewer journalists are left to gather information, especially in foreign reporting. Since the 1980s there has been a “relentless paring back of international resources by Western news organisations”⁷⁵, states Richard Sambrook. As a consequence of this situation, the roles of information deliverers are shifting. With the rise of new media, everyone takes control of information flows, if they have access to the tools.

“NGO practitioners are becoming sources of news for the wider public, in ways that weren’t present before, without the mediation of journalists”⁷⁶, says Lilie Chouliaraki from the London School of Economics. “Objectivity turns into a multi perspective narrative. So disaster journalism today is listening to the many different voices of the field. It’s the journalists, it’s the NGO, it’s the voice of the people who are in the location of the disaster.”⁷⁷ However, for the journalists I interviewed, it’s important to remember that the media and aid agencies have different functions and goals. “There may be some overlaps”⁷⁸, says the BBC’s Steve Herrmann. “But we are there to report on what is happening accurately and impartially, retaining our editorial independence as we are doing that. The aid agency is there to get support, food or whatever it is to the population, to address the immediate need. But clearly there are areas where we can work together. Having people on the ground who may have very good local knowledge, a very good network of contacts, very good communications, potentially a security environment which we can work within, all can be immensely helpful.”⁷⁹

Competitive compassion market

Aid work takes place in a competitive compassion market. A 2011 British Red Cross report shows there is a clear sense of in-sector competition for media relationships, “with multi-briefings by different agencies on the same disasters and reticence about sharing journalists on location with other aid agencies (especially if their flights and accommodation had been paid for)”⁸⁰.

In order to remain on the fast-moving media carousel, aid agencies run high-visibility campaigns to attract public awareness. Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the genocide in Rwanda, Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the Tsunami, or Port-au-Prince after

⁷⁵ Richard Sambrook, *op.cit.*, p.25.

⁷⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ TW Research for British Red Cross, “Exploring attitudes to media coverage of humanitarian crisis”, *Dispatches from Disaster Zones*, press@redcross.org.uk, September 2011, p.16.

the earthquake in Haiti disappeared in a sea of flags and organisation logos, which Dutch journalist Linda Polman calls “landmarks in a struggle for attention”⁸¹. For aid agencies, it is essential for survival to brand their work, since “at root the charity model is a competitive one”⁸², says Brendan Gormley from DEC. “You have to build up a relationship with a supported base and you do it on the basis that you are bringing something special and unique to a context. In order to bring in a core support to your cause, you need to get the message out. And the media in the broadest sense is the way you do that.”⁸³

Those involved in the aid sector are aware of these tensions, but still many hesitate to admit it publicly. It goes against the charitable nature of an aid organisation to compete in a highly competitive market. The name of the game is: “Be there, or die”. The non-governmental and non-profit character of an aid agency mean they rely on donors, which moves the focus to: “Be there loud, or die”.

Sarah Jacobs from Save the Children sees it pragmatically. “At the beginning of an emergency, if you are doing your job properly, you will get coverage anyway. There is enough space out there. It’s up to you, once it first dies down, to keep that story going. That’s where you have to be cleverer, that’s where you have to have better stories, more interesting things to say - the big celebrity trip or where you do stuff with bloggers”⁸⁴. It’s tough.”⁸⁵

An emerging frustration

So we see an expression of frustration on both sides of the relationship. This is strongly articulated in the studies from the International Broadcasting Trust and also British Red Cross.⁸⁶

Frustration with coverage of the Horn of Africa famine is representative of an ongoing dilemma when it comes to attempts to pitch stories, both internally in aid agencies, and also from journalists in the field. The reasons given in the IBT report for stories being rejected, included timing (too early/strong competing news stories); fatigue (“we have done enough

⁸¹ Linda Polman, “Der Hilfe-Supermarkt. Humanitäre Organisationen, Geschäfte, Medien und Kriegsparteien”, in; *Lettre International*, Berlin, Summer 2005, p.25.

⁸² Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ In September 2010, Save the Children ran a very successful Twitter campaign using three “mummybloggers”. The background to the campaign was Save the Children’s desire to raise awareness for the Millennium Development Goals summit. See: Glenda Cooper, “From their own correspondent”, op.cit., p. 31ff.

⁸⁵ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁸⁶ TW Research for British Red Cross, op.cit., p.12 and Helen Magee, op.cit, p.9.

aid”); practical difficulties (interviews with Somali staff); and lack of interest (“where is the story?”)⁸⁷.

Many anecdotal reports also show a level of tension within the organisations, especially between headquarters and the field, because the perspective is so different. What’s important in the field is not always viewed the same way by the reader (which means potential donor), according to the desk in headquarters, which determines the priority of stories.

Gavin Rees, Director of the DART Centre Europe⁸⁸, expresses the tensions between the journalist in the field and the desk as follows: “If there is somebody 2000 miles away, they don’t really have any personal and emotional investment in the people being described. They may have a theoretical idea of a person suffering, but that’s a different kind of rationality to actually sitting there and deciding which starving child to interview. Distance gives a sense of isolation, insulation from people; it’s about proximity and distance.”⁸⁹ This scenario is also applicable for aid agencies. “You often have to deal with big internal backlash”⁹⁰, says Sarah Jacobs from Save the Children, especially after a major disaster, like in East Africa. “The country programme teams are exhausted, they never want to see media again, because it was so chaotic and so massive. They were totally swamped by endless media crews, like in Dadaab. Programme people and media people are in some ways the least compatible. That’s why relationships are so important.”⁹¹

2.2 NGOs as information donors

It is well established that in future, international news reporting will involve fewer reports from foreign correspondents. Ethan Zuckerman from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, argues that it will include more content from citizen media⁹², from local media reaching international audiences through websites, and from NGOs, reporting news either as their primary focus, or to support their primary activities.⁹³

⁸⁷ Helen Magee, op.cit.

⁸⁸ The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, a project of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is dedicated to informed, innovative and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict and tragedy. See: <http://dartcenter.org/>

⁸⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁹⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Reports from ordinary citizens via blogs, Twitter, photo- and video-sharing services.

⁹³ Ethan Zuckerman, “Advocacy, agenda and attention: Unpacking unstated motives in NGO journalism”, in: *Nieman Journalism Lab*, 19 November 2010: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/01/ethan-zuckerman-advocacy-agenda-and-attention-unpacking-unstated-motives-in-ngo-journalism/>

NGOs as citizen journalists

There is no consensus on whether the information aid agencies provide, can be described as citizen journalism or not. In his analysis above, Ethan Zuckerman distinguishes NGOs as content-deliverers from citizen media. Charlie Beckett from the LSE calls citizen journalism networked journalism, a synthesis of traditional reporting and new media participatory processes, with potentially far reaching potential consequences for both media and society.⁹⁴

Lilie Chouliaraki argues that NGOs acting as citizen journalists have to be accepted as part of the ongoing changes taking place in the broader field of new media journalism. Journalists cannot have a monopoly anymore. They have found new ways “to harness and accommodate diverse voices, including the very authoritative and experiential voices of the NGO practitioners in the field, into their own narratives of disaster reporting. Live blogs are one of the ways in which mainstream journalism is accommodating the citizen journalism of NGOs”.⁹⁵

Audio bites, video footage, articles and other forms of media, are now sent to the Guardian’s development website from aid agencies, once an emergency begins, says Liz Ford. But she wouldn’t call it citizen journalism, because it’s usually their country directors or their representative who is in the area delivering the content. At the same time Ford acknowledges that some of the NGOs produce very professional content. You wouldn’t know you were watching a NGO video till right at the end, when it comes up. But they make it very clear that this is coming from a NGO and in a piece they would say, “...according to...”.⁹⁶

Ian Bray from Oxfam struggles with “this wonderful thing called citizen journalism. What is it? We do our blogs, nobody reads them, maybe 20 people might, probably all in the organisation. They are quite dull, boring, they don’t offer a great deal as far as journalism is concerned. Personally I don’t like them. I don’t think they are well written. Some shine through and those which shine through will probably be read much more than others.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Charlie Beckett, “NGOs as gatekeepers to ‘local media’: networked news for developing countries”, EDS Innovation Research Programme, LSE, London, 2009:

<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/units/innovationresearch/pdf/edsdp021/edsdp021.pdf>

⁹⁵ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁹⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁹⁷ Interview with the author, November 2011.

The diary of an aid worker or a nurse working in a hospital, these are the formats that work well for the BBC online, says Steve Herrmann. They commission them, because “it gets you a perspective of the event which is different to the one we bring from our reporters. You are closer to the people who are going through the impact and the consequences of a disaster.”⁹⁸

During the 2010 Pakistan floods the BBC carried an aid worker’s diary (an Oxfam public health engineer) on their website.⁹⁹ The choice of which aid worker’s diary to put on the site depends on the circumstances, says Herrmann. “Who is there? Are they in a position to do it? Do we think they are going to be a good writer? Are they going to tell the story vividly?”¹⁰⁰ They advise the diary writers to be “our eyes and ears there, describe what you are seeing, how it is for you, how your organization is coping with this and what are you hearing.”¹⁰¹ Ian Bray from Oxfam, who doesn’t want to dismiss all Oxfam blogs, but who finds them hit-and-miss, admits that “you get a great deal of benefit by using the BBC, because it reaches a lot of people and because it makes that quality jump.”¹⁰² The capacity to reach a significant number of people is limited for NGOs, says Bray, whereas news media give them a broader reach. “The fact that the media is reporting what you are saying, doesn’t necessarily mean that they are therefore saying you should agree with it, but it does imply that what the organization is saying, is important and should be heard.”¹⁰³

AlertNet uses material from a network of about 500 NGOs, says Tim Large. They encourage NGOs to actively share information by publishing on their site. But what surprises him is that despite them wanting greater exposure, it is quite hard to get them to use the site.¹⁰⁴ This observation suggests that aid agencies tend to go to big media platforms for reach and validation in order to raise as much public awareness as possible, especially in the fast moving disaster news market. Natalie Fenton argues that the sheer amount of news space and multiplicity of platforms available has led NGOs to seek out and prioritise the traditional, trusted forms. She sees two reasons: “First, they believe that the high-profile, high-status news platforms will provide a springboard to all other forms of news dissemination, including all online news as other news organisations constantly feed off these sites; and second, they believe that these outlets are still the most trusted news sites by the general public and the most closely watched by the powerful.”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

⁹⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10898817>.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁰⁵ Natalie Fenton, “Has the internet changed how NGOs work with established media?”, op.cit.

Aid workers' diaries as blogs are frequently offered to the Guardian's development website. They do use some, says Liz Ford, but they need to be strong. However NGOs are often not keen on coming out with a strong line, because "they have to protect all their interests"¹⁰⁶. In theory, says Liz Ford, it's good to have that kind of extra commentary, "but it is better for us, if we can speak to someone on the phone, write our own piece. That would be our preferred thing."¹⁰⁷

A wider variety of media resources, for instance placing content on news websites, allows aid agencies to engage differently with their potential donors. Andy Shipley, News Editor at Plan International UK, says in the report for the International Broadcasting Trust, that Plan was able to do a live web chat on the Guardian's development website during the East Africa famine coverage, which is an exciting initiative for NGOs. "We can run stories that the mainstream media wouldn't. We did a live discussion with our country director in Ethiopia and someone in Dadaab camp."¹⁰⁸

Placing entire articles or reports in newspapers is much appreciated by aid agencies, but also welcomed by editors on cash-tight foreign desks. In a survey of national newspapers, carried out by Glenda Cooper for the 14th Guardian Lecture, a third of newspapers disclosed that they would carry such articles.¹⁰⁹ Such a deal is especially fruitful for both sides during crises which are difficult to communicate. In 2005 I worked for Caritas Austria in Niger, responding to a food crisis which had hit the country, because of several complex circumstances - drought, swarms of locusts and a lack of appropriate political administration (food shortages, high food prices).¹¹⁰ The international response was small. Any public awareness was desperately needed. When I wrote a report about the work we did for the Caritas website, the same article was offered and published in the national broadsheet newspaper "Die Presse"¹¹¹ giving the impression that I was reporting for the newspaper as a foreign correspondent. Reference to the organisation was only given through me naming it in the article, but it wasn't visible as the source. Nevertheless it was fruitful for both sides: the newspaper got free foreign news content, and the aid agency got coverage of its work in Niger, which few people were aware of.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Andy Shipley cited in: Helen Magee, op.cit., p.9.

¹⁰⁹ Glenda Cooper, op.cit, p.11.

¹¹⁰ See: Simon Robinson, „When aid is not enough“, TIME Magazine, 07 August 2005: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1090834,00.html>

¹¹¹ Monika Kalcsics, "Wir müssen Blätter essen", Die Presse, Wien, 12 August 2005, p.6.

Television remains the most attractive medium to aid agencies, because of its reach and the power of pictures and here also the lines are blurring. Aid agencies frequently offer themselves as a co-producer in the field. Kimberly Abbott writes that in 2005, Ted Koppel, the presenter of ABC's *Nightline* (a highly respected American news programme) opened one of his broadcasts with a disclaimer that the report the audience was about to see was produced in partnership with a non-profit, non-governmental organisation, the International Crisis Group.¹¹² It was a piece about the organisation's work in Uganda. The report was a win-win for everyone involved, states Abbott: "Nightline got a story nobody else had; Crisis Group got a platform on which to discuss ongoing regional conflicts."¹¹³

Aid agencies acting as reporters and producers for TV, newspaper and online may help alleviate scarcity, but the trend also opens a set of questions about reliability.

Journalists' immersion in the field

Embedding with aid agencies is a way for journalists to get a disaster story, particularly in places where it's logistically very difficult and expensive to go.

Simon Cottle and David Nolan call this immersion in the field "beneficent embedding", arguing it means "depth reporting".¹¹⁴ The academics find it one of the few positive developments in the changing aid-media field.¹¹⁵ I see this analysis as misguided, since it misses out on the complexities of being embedded on the ground with an organisation. The stories one gets are those the agency chooses and are told from the perspective of that particular institution, argues Lillie Chouliaraki. This is why, according to Chouliaraki, the whole question of embeddedness is a controversial one. "On the one hand, you get the first hand, immediate, 'authentic' experience of those involved, on the other hand, the question of course is, have you got the necessary distance to be reflective and to produce judgment about the experience you witness."¹¹⁶

For Kate Wright from Roehampton University, being with NGOs, like being with an army, creates all sorts of complicated dynamics.¹¹⁷ While the implications of embedding of reporters within the military are widely discussed, there has been hardly any analysis of the role that aid agencies play in embedding journalists. Ever since the Vietnam War, governments and the military have experimented with different methods of "controlling" and

¹¹² Kimberly Abbott, op.cit.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, op.cit.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹¹⁷ Interview with the author, November 2011.

“managing” the media, says Howard Tumber in “Prisoners of news values?”¹¹⁸ The embedding of reporters was a key development of the communications set-up in the 2003 war in Iraq, says Howard Humber. There was a deliberate plan set out by the US Defence Department of Defence in consultation with news organisations for journalists to be “situated” within various parts of the military.¹¹⁹ Tim Large of AlertNet argues that, just as being embedded with military gives reporters a partial view, so the same has to be true with aid agencies.¹²⁰ Ron McCullagh agrees. He finds that we talk of embedding in terms of being with the military, in war. “But the truth is, when you are with an NGO, you are embedded.”¹²¹

All interviewees, whether journalists or aid workers, have been involved with forms of embedding reporters in the aid field. It’s not a new phenomenon. McCullagh was several times embedded with various NGOs in the 1980s and 90s. In 1990 he made a report on Save the Children’s work in Somalia at the end of the Siad Barre regime. Neither the BBC nor ITN were interested in it. McCullagh considered what Save the Children was doing there was the most important work by any outside agency. At the same time he admits that he was in the “Save the Children system”, unable to talk to ordinary people – with good reason, as anywhere else would have been too dangerous. “Sometimes we tell the story, because it’s so important, but we can’t tell it properly. But it’s more important to let the story out rather than to tell it properly.”¹²²

Katy Migiro, based in Nairobi for AlertNet, tells: “I went with World Vision to Wajir this year and to Dadaab three times with UNHCR and to Mozambique last month with UNFPA.”¹²³ She says that she did not feel constrained in reporting by being taken with an NGO, but UN agencies do tend to be “territorial” in Dadaab if you are on short trips as a reporter. “We couldn’t get to see malnourished kids on one trip, because the agency we went with didn’t work in the part of the camp. They usually have the mindset of showing you their work, rather than asking themselves ‘what is a story for the journalists?’, which can be frustrating.”¹²⁴ However Migiro can see that security is an issue in Dadaab, which means keeping reporters on a “tight leash” makes sense.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Howard Tumber, Prisoners of news values? Journalists, professionalism, and identification in times of war“, in: Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (eds.), “Reporting War: Journalism in wartime”, Abingdon, Routledge, 2004, p.190.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹²¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ E-Mail to the author, November 2011.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Liz Ford from The Guardian agrees that to get into Dadaab refugee camp you need to go with an organisation, to help with logistics and safety issues. “The challenge is, you are not free to just go off and do your own stuff and you are restricted to time. You need to trust them, because they know the land much more than you do. But as a journalist you have to have that kind of cynical, sceptical eye. That’s what we are supposed to do. Yes, you are listening to what the NGOs are saying, but you also can see, what it going on.”¹²⁶ At the same time, Ford recognises that despite embedding having negative connotations, sometimes you do have to listen, what NGOs are doing and to get into these places, going with a NGO is often the only way. Steve Herrmann from the BBC Website agrees that NGOs can get access to places which otherwise would be inaccessible. Working with NGOs is something they would always consider.¹²⁷

Oxfam does beneficent embedding, says Ian Bray. “The BBC wanted to follow the aid effort for Dadaab refugee camp. They wanted to follow it from the beginning through to the end, starting with filming the aid leaving Oxfordshire. How does the aid effort work? We were more than pleased help to facilitate that. British Airways gave us free space for the cargo, they gave the BBC free passage on that flight. They followed the aid when it arrived in Nairobi and then they followed it moving to Dadaab.”¹²⁸ Generally Oxfam would not offer any financial support, but they facilitate accommodation on the ground. And if the reason, the story is not being told is a budget constraint in the media, then they would consider it, but it’s extremely rare, says Bray. “We would consider it bad practice.”¹²⁹

Sarah Jacobs from Save the Children says they don’t pay for flights, but they cover in-country costs for journalists. “If it’s the BBC or a bigger media company they would pay on their own, but we would pay the guest houses, you have the journalists travelling in our cars, etc. But we minimise it as much as possible. Especially in emergency situations, often journalists won’t pay for their full costs anyway, because they are wanting to help what’s going on on the ground. But in terms of how much fund raising comes off in the back of it, we have to have these journalists.”¹³⁰

Both Liz Ford from The Guardian and Tm Large from AlertNet agree that some of the big NGOs offer the full package, including flights. Tim Large says AlertNet has a policy to pay for their own flights.¹³¹ Liz Ford feels more comfortable paying if not all of the costs, at least a

¹²⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹²⁷ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹²⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹²⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹³⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹³¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

chunk of them. “When a disaster begins, I think we would go out there and pay to go out there. And maybe later on, as media attention dies down, but NGOs want to keep the information flowing, they would come back and say, we are going out there, would you like to come?”¹³²

Having analysed the current relationship between aid agencies and the media, in the following chapter I will discuss whether we are getting ethical content when media and aid agencies communicate distant suffering. I will base the discussion on the following questions which arose in this chapter:

- Why is there still very little attention paid to local media?
- What are the consequences of a competitive compassion market for the way aid agencies and the media communicate with the public?
- What determines which stories from emergencies are picked up?
- Are there issues of reliability when aid agencies act as reporters?
- What picture of an emergency situation does the public get from journalists embedded with an aid agency? And do they know who is speaking to them?

¹³² Interview with the author, November 2011.

3 Communicating distant suffering: Are we getting ethical content?

Should we care? In a world of information overload and one-click communication news matters, says Natalie Fenton. She believes that interrogating the nature of news journalism is one of the most urgent challenges we face in defining public interest in the contemporary media age.¹³³

3.1 Getting the message out

Being embedded with an aid agency means a reporter must operate in a closed territory, whether because of security issues, a lack of time, or loyalty to the agency which financed the trip. Journalists accept these closed relationships to get the stories out, says Ron McCullagh.¹³⁴ Being embedded with the military requires that the media make it clear the story being told, is a limited. This is common practice. The same needs to apply for being embedded with an aid agency. It should be definitely credited, says Lillie Chouliaraki. "It's part of the rules of transparency of journalistic practice."¹³⁵ "Just tell the audience", finds Abbott from the International Crisis Group. "That frankness with the audience encourages honest debate."¹³⁶ Trust, transparency, and credibility are critical to producing successful relationships, finds Abbott.¹³⁷

But there seems to be a double standard here. Public criticism of reporters embedded with the military is widespread, whereas being embedded with an aid agency exists in a very grey area. Tim Large from AlertNet makes the point that being embedded with a NGO is viewed benignly "They do good work, so it doesn't matter. But psychologically, it is the same thing. If you are with an organisation for days on end, working alongside them, eating with them, talking to them, and you develop a relationship with them, are you really objective? Are you influenced by whatever agenda they might have? Is it anything more than a partial view?"¹³⁸ Ron McCullagh did not credit Save the Children in his report from Somalia in 1990, but now he would. "I think it's a question of allowing the struggle for objectivity to be obvious to the audience. I don't think we can hide that anymore. I think the 21st century has brought us a

¹³³ Natalie Fenton (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.3.

¹³⁴ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹³⁵ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹³⁶ Kimberly Abbott, *op.cit.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

new relationship with the audience, a more mature and sensible relationship. And I don't think it's right of us to pretend that this struggle isn't happening."¹³⁹

Where does this leave the aid agencies? To build up a relationship of trust, transparency and credibility with the audience, as Abbott suggested, there needs to be more openness amongst aid agencies about the difficulties in giving aid. "What we try to do is show the truth of the situation"¹⁴⁰, says Sarah Jacobs from Save the Children. But which truth? Does this truth include showing the struggle giving aid under an impartial principle?¹⁴¹ It is a familiar story, hearing aid agencies complain that the media puts them under pressure to present overnight cures. Uli Post, from German aid agency *Welthungerhilfe*, writes that he was troubled by an article in the magazine "Spiegel", published just four weeks after the 2004 Asian tsunami, with a table of how much aid agencies had spent so far, thus not acknowledging that aid is a long term affair.¹⁴² But what do the aid agencies do to show that it's impossible to achieve everything overnight?

"We self-edit"

When the international president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Unni Karunakara returned from Somalia in September this year, he condemned other organisations and the media for "glossing over" the reality, in order to convince people that simply giving money for food was the answer. He said aid agencies needed to start treating the public "like adults".¹⁴³ "There is a con, there is an unrealistic expectation being peddled that you give your £50 and suddenly those people are going to have food to eat. Well, no. We need that £50, yes; we will spend it with integrity. But people need to understand the reality of the challenges in delivering that aid. We don't have the right to hide it from people; we have a responsibility to engage the public with the truth."¹⁴⁴

This openness is not to everybody's taste. Ian Bray from Oxfam responded that it was unhelpful for aid agencies to be seen to be arguing with each other. He said Oxfam is being honest with its donors and always has been.¹⁴⁵ "We don't go around to people saying we have a magic wand, give us £5 and we will make Africa feed itself. We do say give us £5 and

¹³⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁴¹ "When we give humanitarian aid it is not a partisan or political act and should not be viewed as such", is the first principle in the Code of Conduct of aid agencies, op.cit.

¹⁴² Uli Post, "Aus den Augen, aus dem Sinn", in: *Zeitschrift für Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit*, 01/2006: http://www.inwent.org/E+Z/content/archiv-ger/01-2006/trib_art2.html

¹⁴³ Tracy McVeigh, „Charity president says aid groups are misleading the public on Somalia“, in: *The Guardian*, Global Development, 3 September 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2011/sep/03/charity-aid-groups-misleading-somalia>

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

we won't use it to give you a history of Somalia, but we will use our expertise to save lives. This is what the bargain is we make with our donors. If you support us, we will do our level best to alleviate the distress for those people in most dire need."¹⁴⁶

Does this attitude still reflect what the public wants? According to the British Red Cross study into the public's understanding of aid, most British people want more information on how humanitarian aid is spent. 64 percent want to know more about the difficulties in providing disaster relief.¹⁴⁷

Dominic Nutt, Associate Director of Communications and Campaigns from World Vision, a former journalist, and one of the rare self-critical aid voices, admits that they self-edit and only allow some stories to get out. "We know that a big donor will stop us talking about ... an oil company in Burma. All of us are scared of being thrown out of Ethiopia so none of us will stand up and say the government is responsible for starving children and others."¹⁴⁸ Nutt adds that aid agencies are not being adult about the complexities and the difficulties they face.¹⁴⁹

When Katy Migiro worked as press officer for a NGO, before joining AlertNet, she felt frustrated with the way they tailored their reports to make an advocacy point.¹⁵⁰

Ian Bray acknowledges that when blogs from Oxfam appear on the BBC website, like the aid worker's diary from Pakistan, there is an issue with sign-off, in terms of the organisation calling this is an "authentic piece of Oxfam"¹⁵¹. "If it's thinking that is the authentic voice of Oxfam, then it has to go through quite a lot of filtering, before it's finished, and that filtering would probably kill any spontaneous personal insights. And that's why it comes over as rather worthy, dull and not offering any unique insight." To show the human and therefore natural struggling of an aid worker trying to set up professional aid, would help get rid of the media image they are complaining about: the ministering aid angel in her self-sacrificing efforts to assist the victims.¹⁵² Liz Ford of the Guardian also sees the dilemma that NGOs are not so keen on coming out with a strong line, because they have to protect their interests.¹⁵³ Brendan Gormley from DEC feels that it is aid agencies' job to tell it as it is, and to be wise in the way they put out success and failures. At the same time, he is reassured that there is a new maturity, because with more recent disasters, from the Asian tsunami onwards, if there

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Harriet Penrose, op.cit.

¹⁴⁸ Dominic Nutt cited in: Katy Nguyen, "Can aid agencies afford to be honest?", AlertNet News Blog, 4 October 2011: <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/blogs/alertnet-news-blog/can-aid-agencies-afford-to-be-honest/>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ E-mail to the author, November 2011.

¹⁵¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁵² Susan D. Moeller, op.cit., p. 108.

¹⁵³ Interview with the author, November 2011.

has been corruption, you found organisations going public with it first, and not the media. And in one sense, finds Gormley, it is because the agencies have got communication specialists inside their organisations that are helping those agencies to be more honest.¹⁵⁴

Simplistic communication

Honesty is not only about telling the public when failures happen - it needs to start much earlier in the communication process, to present a more realistic picture of the situation on the ground. The Red Cross study found that most British people expect food, shelter and clean water to be available within days of an emergency.¹⁵⁵ Where does this expectation come from? It maybe the goal of every agency to achieve this, but in many situations, the process is slowed down due to circumstances on the ground. The main message from aid agencies to donors remains, from the first moment on, that your aid is reaching the vulnerable. Aid agencies tend to exaggerate at two stages while communicating from a disaster area, in both cases to attract donors: at the beginning, about the dimension of the disaster, and then about the agency having everything under control. Dominic Nutt from World Vision thinks that the aid agencies “are guilty of destroying the nuance that we so want, of destroying the complexity that we want in our media messaging. We can’t have it both ways”¹⁵⁶.

At the same time, Nutt acknowledges that it’s all very well wanting to present a more truthful picture of aid with all its problems, but it wouldn’t quite square with the way aid agencies continue to market their work – “two pounds a month will save the world”¹⁵⁷.

Save the Children’s Sarah Jacobs says that when they market their work, they use easy language, because people respond to it. “It’s pulled down to the human detail, we are talking about children, mums and dads, working with language which is very untechy, which targets the emotional heart strings of parents in the UK.” Mark Turner from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) finds that “the simple tale of ‘give a pound, save a life, here’s a child with a begging bowl’ is still far and away the most effective fundraising exercise”.¹⁵⁸

While communicating simple stories may be the most effective for fundraising, where does it leave us? It stands in opposition to the conviction expressed by Abbott, Nutt and McCullagh to treat the public like adults. If not, we continue to have a constant flow of images, giving the sense of hopeless, helpless, hungry people with their hands out begging for more, says

¹⁵⁴ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Harriet Penrose, op.cit.

¹⁵⁶ Dominc Nutt, cited in: op.cit.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Mark Turner, cited in: Katie Nguyen, op.cit.

McCullagh. “I often see NGOs as a kind of vending machine. You put your money in and out comes a glossy picture of starvation and a child in a terrible condition and at the bottom it basically says, give more money. And so it’s a very one way experience for the donors, basically getting this plasticated reality of aid and doing something useful, when what is really going on is much more interesting to me, when you look behind the fundraising.”¹⁵⁹

Emotive pictures

Lilie Chouliaraki from the LSE has a problem with the way NGOs fall back on traditional ways of reporting emergencies. The dominant pictures from the Horn of Africa have been the usual clichés – emaciated bodies, desperate mothers, the traditional icons of suffering, which we are all familiar with, says Chouliaraki. “I think the reflexivity around representation of suffering has been much more intense when it comes not to emergencies, but to permanent campaigns. Because with permanent campaigns, there is a kind of temporal leeway, where you can think about how you want to represent, you think about your brand, you think about who you are as an organisation, and you try to project perhaps a new message, a new image.”¹⁶⁰

Brendan Gormley sees two reasons for the continued use of clichéd images: on one hand you have the journalists who put the pictures in. Aid agencies often don’t have control over it. On the other hand, he believes that fundraising is getting more competitive. “In the jargon, it’s a mature market place, so competition is getting more acute between the charities. The UN is starting to advertise. Why? The charities are spending more and more. Recently with the East Africa crisis, I have seen more pictures which ten years ago we stopped using. If you go back to when the Code of Conduct was written, that was to say, let’s stop this.”¹⁶¹

The Guardian’s Liz Ford confirms that when the famine stories from East Africa came out, NGOs sent them very emotive pictures, of a starving child with flies around its eyes. Ford says they avoid using them. “It’s acceptable to use it in context occasionally, but we would always look for alternatives. If it’s reality, we would use a hard-hitting image, but try to avoid that whole starving child thing. But NGOs would always like to use that in order to get the maximum response to appeals. But having said that, there is always a bit of tension within the organisation, the picture desk might be saying, it’s a great picture!”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶² Interview with the author, November 2011.

New media ethics

Within the ongoing discussion about disasters coverage¹⁶³, Lillie Chouliaraki analyses the dilemma of how media and aid agencies communicate distant suffering, through deeply rooted western behaviours. “Media and NGOs cannot but draw on what are historically established huge traditions of Western forms to represent suffering. They don’t invent these conventions. These conventions exist, they have been inherited to us through generations. This is how the modern European West understood itself as a moral actor since the 18th century, when we became compassionate individuals. We are locked into historical representations of suffering. So journalists and NGOs, and whoever else is involved in the practice of making human vulnerability a cause for public action, has to draw on them.”¹⁶⁴

The stereotyped picture of suffering is the easiest one to use, says Ron McCullagh. “When we arrive with our ethnocentric attitude into the midst of a desperate situation, the first reaction is utter shock and surprise at the suffering and the death, indeed, that is happening before our eyes. In many ways, the camera is driven by that raw emotion, almost not believing what we are seeing. I think it’s always been that way: shock, driven by this approach. And there is nothing wrong with it, other than we simply have to move further on.”¹⁶⁵

For Chouliaraki, the question is how, within the reporting, we can insert two key requirements that are absolutely necessary for the ethical practice of reporting “which are to make us, the West, feel for them, without feeling there can be no connection. But at the same time, to keep a certain distance from what we feel, so that we are able to judge. So, empathy and judgement are the two key civil requirements for responding ethically to distant suffering.”¹⁶⁶

Since aid agencies operate as reporters, thanks to new media, they have it in their power to influence the way emergencies are told, but also actively to change it. Natalie Fenton from Goldsmiths criticises the NGOs’ new media role so far: “While it appears that the internet has given NGOs more opportunity to peddle their wares and get their voices heard, those voices have been trained to deliver what mainstream organisations are crying out for – news that conforms to established news criteria and provides journalistic copy at little or no cost. The

¹⁶³ See: Jonathan Benthall, „Disasters, relief and the media“, I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 1993. Luc Boltanski, “Distant suffering. Morality, media and politics“, Cambridge University Press, 1999. Susan D. Moeller, 1999, op.cit. Susan Sontag, „Regarding the pain of others“, Penguin Books, London, 2004.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶⁶ Interview with the author, November 2011.

line between the professional PR agency and the large-scale campaigning NGO has blurred into near extinction.”¹⁶⁷ How can we move further on?

For Lilie Chouliaraki, transparency is a key principle of a new ethical formulation. “We at least need to be able to say, this is what I did and that is how I did it.”¹⁶⁸ This position corresponds to the ethical standards of accuracy and sincerity defined in the introduction. Chouliaraki says furthermore that the key here is not so much to attach ourselves to particular versions of the truth or impartiality alone, but to think about the way in which we report, particularly disasters, the question of human suffering.¹⁶⁹ This corresponds with the third ethical standard defined in the introduction: hospitality. This is particularly relevant as media messages increasingly address multiple territories at once, where this virtue is needed from those who report in an unstable and intensely connected world.¹⁷⁰

3.2 Are the locals heard?

In 2011, members of The Sphere Project looked back on more than a decade of humanitarian work. Launched by a group of humanitarian NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, The Sphere Project is an initiative to define and uphold standards by which the global community responds to the plight of people affected by disasters.¹⁷¹ From a very early stage it was recognised that the quality of humanitarian response did not depend solely or even primarily on a set of technical standards, but also on an approach and philosophy of action that listened and responded to the opinions of people affected by disasters. Hence the terms “quality” and “accountability” have become very closely associated, to the point of becoming almost inseparable. However, they come to the conclusion that this message has not always been easy to communicate. “Many agencies claim to work ‘to Sphere standards’¹⁷², by which they mean little more than observing the quantitative indicators in the Sphere Handbook. This poor adoption of Sphere has been exacerbated over the past decade by the entry of many new actors into the humanitarian arena. Many are organisations that do not come from the same humanitarian tradition as Sphere’s proponents, such as the military or private contractors. Others, such as some religious organisations or local citizens’ groups, may share the same

¹⁶⁷ Natalie Fenton, *op.cit.*, p.166.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁷⁰ Angela Phillips, Nick Couldry, Des Freedman, in: Natalie Fenton (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.54.

¹⁷¹ See: <http://www.sphereproject.org/>

¹⁷² The Sphere Handbook has been translated into 25 languages.

values, but lack the operational experience and capacity to do justice to the Sphere standards.”¹⁷³

Principle 10 of the Code of Conduct about standards of behaviour says, “we will avoid competing with other disaster response agencies for media coverage in situations where such coverage may be to the detriment of the service provided to the beneficiaries or to the security of our staff or the beneficiaries.”¹⁷⁴.

The self-regarding of media and aid agencies

Where do the aid agencies stand with the above principle? The latest British Red Cross report showed a clear sense of in-sector competition for media relationships. For Simon Cottle and David Nolan, a big problem lies in “regionalising global humanitarianism”¹⁷⁵, which means regional media emphasising “home” connections in disaster reporting.¹⁷⁶ Aid workers in a disaster area must come from your own country, because “we give aid!” An aid worker from the same organisation, but a different nationality, though speaking the same language, is unsuitable for reports back home, where donors want to identify with the person in the field.

And to share the same nationality is not enough for regional newspapers which want to present an aid worker from the same region. Aid agencies play the game of personalising aid perfectly, having learnt this from the media, say Cottle and Nolan. It has implications for ideas of global humanitarianism. “When we are invited to see the world of disasters and human need through a mediated national prism that splinters the category of global humanity into ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘nationals’ and ‘foreigners’, ‘active saviours’ and ‘passive victims’, the active agency of indigenous aid workers (and survivors) is minimised, and a Western-led and Western-centric view of humanitarianism is reinforced.”¹⁷⁷ This attitude prevents the establishment of a relationship which allows empathy and judgement, defined by Chouliaraki above.

Initiatives like the Disaster Emergency Committee in Britain and equivalents in European countries (“Nachbar in Not” in Austria, “Aktion Deutschland hilft” in Germany, etc.) try to bundle media work to support a collaborative model instead of a competitive model. Part of the collaborative model, says Brendan Gormley of DEC is that “we can offer to the

¹⁷³<http://www.sphereproject.org/content/view/91/58/lang,english/>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, op.cit., p.869.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.870.

¹⁷⁷ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, „How the media’s codes and rules influence the ways NGOs work“, op.cit.

broadcaster one person to talk to, rather than having 15 agencies saying me, me, me and I'm better than the other one"¹⁷⁸.

Nevertheless, aid agencies continue waving their flag to strengthen the brand and to show they are there to help, instead of reflecting on the question, 'are we needed? Or might we be duplicating resources in a crowded aid situation?' Five communicators from the same NGO line up to give the same message to their respective home audiences.

The self-regarding nature of international media and aid agencies in communicating a disaster leads to local voices still being surprisingly rarely heard. This applies not only to local aid workers and beneficiaries as Cottle and Nolan suggest, but also local media, which play a key role in informing the local population in the aftermath of a disaster.

What surprises AlertNet's Tim Large about this is, "with all this lip service about accountability to beneficiaries, lip service to working with local partners, all this sort of stuff, you would think this would be just basic - communication with affected populations via local media. But it's still seen as a radical idea, not at all mainstream."¹⁷⁹ He finds this exclusion of local media manifesting itself in still very basic ways. With "big disasters like in Haiti - I was there - you go to the UN Cluster meetings¹⁸⁰, and it's all in English, not a single Creole translator, nor even a French translation. I think, for a Haitian journalist to walk in the room would be almost impossible, they have to know about it. How would they even know that it's happening, they'll have to speak English. The system is extremely complicated. So just on that structural level, from the Kashmir earthquake onwards to the start of the Cluster system, there needs to be sort a systematic approach to opening up the humanitarian response to local media."¹⁸¹

One of the dangers of international media being self-regarding is that they think they have the solutions, says Gavin Rees from the DART Centre Europe. Whereas, he believes, there are possibilities for solutions all the way down the line, and there is also responsibility, if the Western media portray the other as incapable and as victims. The media still use a lot of clichés, he says, citing an example: "Mohamed is lying by the side of the road next to his dying donkey. This isn't just a story of Mohamed. There are thousands of other Somalis just like Mohamed."¹⁸² If the person writing this story is getting closer to Mohamed's experience

¹⁷⁸ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁸⁰ Since 2005 the UN Cluster System aims to strengthen overall response capacity as well as the effectiveness of the response between the UN agencies, including the NGOs. See: <http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination/overview>

¹⁸¹ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁸² Interview with the author, November 2011.

and closer to understanding what's going on, then that may be useful, says Rees, but the problem with that kind of talk is that it can draw us away from what really is going on.¹⁸³

Many of the mistakes in approaching the victims of a disaster occur when journalists rush into situations without considering how to handle them properly, with people who are often traumatised, says Rees. "My answer is, we always have time to breathe, to stop and to think about what we are doing."¹⁸⁴ The problem for Rees is when people start to dig into things, and try to stir up feelings. "The classic one is: How do you feel? What do you feel like seeing the death of your child? It's really bad. It's stupid from a journalism view-point, because you get worse answers. Normally you ask these questions and the person is bursting into tears. It's important to know how people feel. But to get that, it's better to ask very simple questions. The who, when, what questions. What happened to you? What did you see next? Who was there with you? I guarantee that I can get more of a sense of how someone feels without asking the how do you feel question. The journalism output of people who know trauma-sensitive interviewing techniques are more revealing, and more interesting than what you get by asking very triggering questions."¹⁸⁵

Environment of mistrust

The issue of aid agencies as money-raising organisations, which therefore focus their strategies on messaging the outside world, raises another important question for Gavin Rees. The local journalists want information, says Rees, because people in their affected communities want to know, where it is safe to go, where there will be food. "Now if the international aid agencies say, we only speak with the government's spokespeople, we won't speak to you, that creates an environment of mistrust, in which local reporters immediately assume that something underhand is happening. Instead of being the voice of the collective efforts to deal with local problems, they change hats to become investigative journalists, finding out why aid is going to one village and not to the other village. And reading conspiracies into what is happening. And sometimes aid is going to one village and not to the other, because there are political interests."¹⁸⁶

For Brendan Gormley from DEC it's crucial that a charity is able to reassure the host community of the legitimacy of what they are trying to achieve. "And this is for me the weaker side that a lot of the relationship with the media has been building up a trusted supported

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

base in the North, crudely. But I see it as equally important that they build up and use local media to inform, reassure, explain, communicate with survivors, with host populations, with governments etc.”¹⁸⁷ Referring to the Horn of Africa famine, Gormley says: “In Dadaab there are real tensions between the host Kenyan community who see the incoming refugees as a threat to their land, to their water, to sustaining their own lives. And who is explaining to both, the host population and the people who are coming in from Somalia, what awaits them, what choice they need to make in order to survive and rebuild their lives, while others actors, the transitional government, the Kenyan government, Al Shabaab, Al Qaida, are all putting out messages about the context. I think that the humanitarian community has been slow in explaining and hence ensuring their legitimacy. And even more importantly, helping survivors make intelligent choices about how they are going to survive.”

In February 2011 an *infoasaid*¹⁸⁸ team began two months of research in Haiti, to find the ways in which aid agencies shared information with and listened to those affected by the earthquake. The report¹⁸⁹ presents striking findings: those affected by the disaster stressed, again and again, the importance of communications as a process, not just the transfer of information. They placed huge value on being listened to, being able to contact humanitarian organisations, and were very sensitive to and appreciative of efforts by agencies to communicate. The agencies and organisations that delivered most effectively on communications were those that invested in dedicated, technical capacity, and in funding for basic communications tools. This is, according to *infoasaid*, linked to another finding, that agencies who invested in communication discovered a close link between good communications work and improved operational delivery. Some actors went so far as to say their projects would have been impossible without communications support. Another interesting key finding is that disaster survivors were more knowledgeable about the technology of communications and how they were popularly used in Haiti, than humanitarian agencies.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁸⁸ The *infoasaid* project is managed by the BBC World Service Trust and Internews (funded by UKaid from the Department for International Development, DfID). The objective is to improve how aid agencies communicate with disaster-affected communities, with a focus on providing humanitarian information. The emphasis is on the need to deliver information, as aid itself, through the most appropriate channels. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/whatwedo/issues/emergencies/2011/07/110726_infoasaid_project_overview.shtml

¹⁸⁹ Imogen Wall with Yves Gerald Chéry, “Ann Kite Yo Pale or Let Them Speak. Best practice and lessons learned in communication with disaster affected communities: Haiti 2010”, BBC World Service Trust/UKaid/Internews Europe, November 2011: http://infoasaid.org/sites/infoasaid.org/files/IAA_Haiti_2010_0.pdf

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

Two-way flow of information

The *infoasaid* report clearly shows that to prove legitimacy, rapid needs assessments by aid agencies need to include in future questions about information technologies, for example the number of working radios, radio stations etc. In 2009 a network for *Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities*, CDAC¹⁹¹ was formed from aid agencies, media development agencies and humanitarian initiatives, who believe in the need to integrate two-way communication with affected populations into humanitarian work. One of the outputs of the *infoasaid* project is to strengthen the network. These initiatives are only successful once they become mainstream, for both the media and aid agencies. Communication towards the local population needs to be as natural as to the outside world.

Instead of looking at the situation from top down, try looking it from the bottom up, says Ron McCullagh.¹⁹² This approach is true for both aid agencies and the media, since both communicate from disasters. Instead of “regionalising global humanitarianism” (as Cottle and Nolan stated above) the media and aid agencies need to include local voices. “We have got to share the stage more with local journalists”¹⁹³, says McCullagh. “We need to put foreign into foreign correspondent”, he adds. “We’ve really got to work hard at helping people to tell their own story, but in helping them to tell their own story; we will then hear stories, the like of which we have never heard before.”¹⁹⁴

New communication technologies have the potential to allow new voices from a disaster area. Will we read more local aid worker’s blogs in future? The disaster in Haiti was described as the first Twitter disaster, as stated in the introduction. It is certainly a positive development that the flow of news and the scope and skill of voices around disasters is now becoming “democratised”, says Lilie Chouliarakis. More and more people can talk about it, and we have more imagery and more experiential accounts of what is going out there. “I think it’s definitely a good thing, because I do believe that seeing suffering is a big part of beginning to respond to it. Non-visualising, not hearing about suffering is bad news from a journalistic perspective as an ethical practice. On the other hand, there are certain conditions upon which that democratisation has taken place. First of all citizen journalism is a Western practice. And it is domesticated by major global networks, like the BBC, which means that a

¹⁹¹ See: <http://www.cdac-haiti.org/en>

¹⁹² Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁹³ Interview with the author, November 2011.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

lot of what has been reported out of this proliferation of voices again is being filtered through very specific criteria of newsworthiness. The question to ask here, okay, there is more to see and more to hear about global disasters nowadays, but who is actually speaking to us? Are we perhaps having the same voices reiterating their own values, their own norms, their own strategies under the guise of a much more democratic process of reporting?"¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Interview with the author, November 2011.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Disaster reporting will be more essential than ever in the future, I believe, because disasters have consequences in an interconnected world. The internet has shrunk the world. We now see pictures of despair instantly, through diverse communication technologies, and hear unmediated voices from chaotic situations. There are flows of people around the world following many of these catastrophes, and those who arrived in previous waves may well influence a country towards reporting and contributing to the rescue of those affected. People travel more these days and may well have experience of countries in which disasters unfold. And there will in future be more disputes over vital resources we all share, such as water, food, oil and habitable land.

With reduced reporting budgets, media outlets are naturally interested in free content from locally experienced sources, such as NGOs. And they operate as co-producers, embedding reporters in the disaster field, as discussed in chapter 3. When aid agencies become content providers, complex issues arise. Can we always be sure who is speaking to us? Aid agencies and the media can fulfil their role as a source of information and deliverer of content by incorporating into their work the concepts of accuracy, sincerity and hospitality¹⁹⁶, as defined in this research. These three standards can serve as a base to transport ethical information from a disaster area.

With the changing role of content deliverers, it should become standard practice to clearly credit how the information was gained. For Lillie Chouliaraki from the London School of Economics, transparency is a key principle of a new ethical formulation. She stated in this research that “we at least need to be able to say, this is what I did and this is how I did it”¹⁹⁷. This transparency would allow the building of a relationship of trust and credibility with the audience. It would lead to treating the public like adults. And just as important, it would lead to less unrealistic expectations about giving aid. There is no instant cure in responding to a disaster. However aid agencies still use easy language to communicate the complexity of a situation. Journalists rehash this language by reporting on an emergency from the perspective of a white aid worker and her/his effort in reaching the distant sufferer with no time or space to question the how. Only later do the media focus on what went wrong,

¹⁹⁶ Angela Philips, Nick Couldry, Des Freedman, in: Natalie Fenton, op.cit.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with the author, November 2011.

confronting the audience with sharp and often polemical criticism of aid agencies. Neither of these two extremes helps to understand the multifaceted realities on the ground.

To understand this situation we must recall that aid work takes place in a competitive compassion market. Aid agencies fight each other for media coverage and therefore donations. This competitive market encourages a false picture of the disaster to be shown. Aid agencies are tempted to overstate both the scale of a crisis and subsequently, how successful they have been in relieving suffering, in both cases to attract donors. Those involved in the aid sector are aware of these tensions, but many hesitate to admit it publicly. They feel it is inappropriate for NGOs to be seen to compete in the market place.

One way to escape the competition is to allow each agency to show a realistic picture of the everyday ups and downs on the ground, instead of the glossy pictures. It avoids media portraits of aid angels in their self-sacrificing efforts to assist the victims. One of the aid agencies' arguments against a more nuanced message about delivering aid is that they would raise less funds. But it has not yet been demonstrated that this is the case. Research needs to be done in this area in future. Aid agencies have changed their communication in development aid by treating the audience more like adults. The same should be tried in communicating emergency aid.

I don't see a compassion fatigue, but the public is tired of misery, caused by the repetitive representation of suffering, which comes through in the studies from the International Broadcasting Trust and the British Red Cross¹⁹⁸. This reaction could be altered through a new and grown up relationship established by aid agencies and media in the way they communicate disasters. It could lead to a compassion regard based on the two key civil requirements for responding ethically to distant suffering: empathy and judgment, according to Lillie Chouliaraki¹⁹⁹. This narrative could also lead to less frustration between aid agencies and the media, because a more honest understanding of communicating aid would characterise the relationship.

The competitive compassion market requires "regionalised global humanitarianism"²⁰⁰, the Western audience's desire to see people like them delivering aid, because "We give aid!". Donors want to identify with the person in the field, but this tendency can serve to separate "us" (saviour) and "them" (victim), and to reinforce stereotyped images. Aid agencies play the game of personalising aid perfectly, having learnt this from the media themselves.

¹⁹⁸ TW Research for British Red Cross, op.cit., and Helen Magee, op.cit.

¹⁹⁹ Op.cit.

²⁰⁰ Simon Cottle and David Nolan, op.cit., p.174.

Instead of regionalising global humanitarianism, a process which gazes at the world from a Western perspective, the media and aid agencies need to include more local voices. It has become common for aid agencies to say they work with local partners, yet there is little attention paid to local media, who are central to informing the population in the aftermath of a disaster.

Media organisations should put the foreign into foreign correspondent. It makes sense for stories to be told from the perspective of journalists familiar with the situation on the ground. Parachute journalism from a Western perspective reinforces the Western-centric view of humanitarianism and it prolongs the cliché picture of the “active white saviour” and the “passive indigenous victim”.

Communicating from disasters is experiencing a transformation, not only because of new media. For the future of information gathering, it is interesting to note that the reduction of foreign bureaux is principally a Western phenomenon, according to Richard Sambrook. “In Asia, with the prospect of major economic growth, news organisations may be set for an era of expansion. And in the developing world countries and continents are building their own journalistic capacity – with long-term consequences for the global flow of information and the character of public debate.”²⁰¹

Aid agencies can reaffirm their legitimacy to the host community by communicating with the local media. I have noted that in 2009 a network for *Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities* was formed to build interactive communication with affected populations in humanitarian work. There is an increasing number of initiatives aimed at communicating with “voices from the south”, for the local market (such as the *infoasaid* project from BBC World Service Trust and the US organisation Internews). However this type of initiative can only be successful when it becomes mainstream, for both media and aid agencies.

Since aid agencies operate as reporters, thanks to new media, they have it in their power to influence the way emergencies are told, but also to actively change it, by integrating the initiatives mentioned above into their communications for reports back home. Both media and aid agencies should use such initiatives in communicating distant suffering, because communication is part of the aid process. It would allow a sustainable transformation in the way the public views disasters, and those affected.

²⁰¹ Richard Sambrook, op.cit., p.1.

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