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REPORT

From their own correspondent? New media and the changes in disaster coverage: lessons to be learnt

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1 Introduction

To anyone in the MontJoli-Turgeon area..... Jean-Olivier Neptune is caught under rubbles of his fallen house ... he is alive but in very bad shape, please please please hurry and get there as soon as you can, and please put this info in your statuses. 8 rue Mont-Joli Turgeau! URGENT.¹

(text received by Ushahidi website, Haitian earthquake)

Mummy bloggers: We need 100,000 Britons to stop children dying

In a world first, Save the Children took three of the UK's top mummy bloggers – Sian To, Josie George and Eva Keogan – to Bangladesh to raise awareness of the scale of child mortality in developing countries. The mums have already created a storm in the digital world talking about #bangladesh – over 10 million people have read and/or retweeted their blogs and tweets, including Stephen Fry, Katy Hill and Richard Bacon. The three mums landed back in the UK on Sunday

(Save the Children press release, 7 September 2010)

The Haitian earthquake in January 2010. A man grabs a bloodied boy and drags him away to safety from a mob.² Another performs brain surgery on a 15-year-old girl, and single-handedly staffs a field hospital overnight after other medical staff withdraw for fear of safety.³ A third, roused by the suffering there, uses his might to raise \$1 million in aid for the earthquake in a matter of days.⁴

Typical behaviour in a desperate situation for aid workers. But what was atypical was that none of the three people mentioned above was in fact an aid worker. The first two – Anderson Cooper and Dr Sanjay Gupta (a trained medic but working for CNN as a reporter) – were employed by an American TV network; the third, Wyclef Jean, a hip hop star who used the power of social media, in particular Twitter, to get people to donate to his fund.

Meanwhile, much of the breaking news was actually provided by non-journalists. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* noted, new media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Skype were crucial in delivering early

¹ J. Smith, 'Tufts project delivered aid to quake victims', *Boston Globe*, 5 April 2010: http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2010/04/05/tufts_project_delivered_aid_to_quake_victims/?page=2

² A. Cooper, 'In the midst of looting chaos', CNN blog, 18 January 2010: <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2010/01/18/anderson-in-the-midst-of-looting-chaos>

³ K. Blaze Carlson, 'CNN reporter Sanjay Gupta becomes part of the story in Haiti', *National Post*, 18 January 2010: <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/world/story.html?id=2461040>

⁴ J. Siegel 'Wyclef Jean's Haiti relief tweets raise \$1m', ABC News, 14 January 2010: <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/HaitiEarthquake/wyclef-jean-haiti-relief-raises-million-twitter/story?id=9563592>

information about damage and relief efforts.⁵ Many websites such as the *Guardian* ran live blogs and Twitterfeeds, allowing those on the ground to tell their own story.⁶

Cooper wrote powerfully on his blog of the moment when he decided to intervene. Caught in a *melée*, he saw a young boy hit on the head with a chunk of concrete, and unable to get away. 'I was afraid he'd get killed. No one was helping him,' he said of his decision to hurl himself into the fracas and drag the boy to safety.⁷ Meanwhile Gupta had made clear – via Twitter – that he would help anyone who needed his medical care: 'Yes I am a reporter, but a doctor first,' he tweeted in response to queries.⁸ The cameras rolled as he was handed a 15-day-old girl with a suspected skull fracture and, having established – with help from a producer – it was only a cut, bandaged her head with gauze.

He was not the only doctor there performing a dual role – CBS's Jennifer Ashton wore scrubs and reported from a clinic while ABC's Richard Besser was filmed delivering a baby.

On the 19 January, the website Gawker.com described it as a 'strange apotheosis' in coverage, with staff writer Adrian Chen saying:

*Things got weird tonight as the news/newsmaker barrier was dramatically breached.... On AC360 [Anderson Cooper's show], Anderson Cooper and Sanjay Gupta played a team of roving superhero reporters, covering the news but only after saving everyone's lives. (Imagine if somebody could be Clark Kent and Superman at the same time.) ... At what point does this go from 'CNN's Excellent Haiti Coverage' to 'CNN's Excellent Haiti Adventure?'*⁹

For those journalists who did not cross the line, but remained as conventional newsgatherers, there was criticism too. Brendan O'Neill, in the *First Post* website, articulated concern over 'titillat[ing] disaster porn' in the way respected news media such as the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and *Channel 4 News* reported the disaster – in particular their attempts to bring the impact of devastation to a Western audience's consciousness. O'Neill wrote:

This reveals what lies at the rotten heart of the Haiti horror-porn: journalists' obsession with themselves, their desire to show off both their creative-writing skills (such as they are) and their emotional intelligence. They're so vain, they think this quake is about them... Many hacks now appear more interested in

⁵ C. Brainard, 'New media crucial in the aftermath of Haiti', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 13 January 2010: http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/new_media_crucial_in_aftermath.php

⁶ M. Bunz, 'In Haiti earthquake coverage, social media gives victim a voice', *Guardian*, 14 January 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/jan/14/socialnetworking-haiti>

⁷ A. Cooper, 'In the midst of looting chaos', *op. cit.*

⁸ K. Blaze Carlson, 'CNN reporter Sanjay Gupta becomes part of the story in Haiti', *National Post*, *op. cit.*

⁹ A. Chen, 'Anderson Cooper saves boy as Haiti coverage reaches strange apotheosis', *Gawker.com*, 18 January 2010: <http://gawker.com/5451459/anderson-cooper-saves-boy-as-cnns-haiti-coverage-reaches-strange-apotheosis>

*describing their own reactions to events than uncovering the facts about those events... In place of a cool, stand-back analysis, the media is giving us visceral, violent coverage designed to jolt us into feeling some kind of emotion. We are being provided, not with information, but with morbid entertainment.*¹⁰

Yet while journalists crossed the line and acted like aid workers, aid workers too found their role changing. In particular, they discovered the power of harnessing new media not only to raise awareness of the consequences of the quake, but also to raise funds.

According to the Twitter-tracking service Sysomos, 2.3 million tweets included the words 'Haiti' or 'Red Cross' between 12 and 14 January.¹¹ There were also 189,024 tweets that included '90999', the number that could be used to text message a donation to the Red Cross.¹²

This finding is backed up by the Nielsen company, which found that the Twitter account for the Red Cross, which had been adding 50–100 followers a day before the quake, added 10,000 within three days and that by Friday morning (the earthquake happened on the Tuesday), donations to the Red Cross had exceeded \$8 million.¹³ To put this in context, the previous biggest amount raised in the same way was \$190,000 after Hurricane Ike in 2008.¹⁴ Social media had proved its worth – not just in helping disasters get to the top of the news agenda, but getting help to victims as well – a phenomenon that was repeated in the Pakistan floods of the summer of 2010, when, angry at European delays over committing funds, 4,000 people contacted their political representatives in the space of 24 hours.¹⁵

Coverage of humanitarian disasters changed on the 26 December 2004. Dan Gillmor has described the tsunami as a 'turning point'.¹⁶ While not the first event to produce user-generated content, it was perhaps the first disaster where the dominant images we remember came not from journalists but from ordinary people.

The camera jerking as the wave crushes the wall of a restaurant; tables and chairs set for a wedding breakfast pushed aside; often a lack of comprehension on the part of onlookers at the scale of what they are watching

¹⁰ B. O'Neill, 'Haiti earthquake journalists are titillating us with disaster porn', *First Post*, 19 January 2010: <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/58588,news-comment,news-politics,haiti-earthquake-journalists-are-titillating-us-with-disaster-porn-media-coverage>

¹¹ M. Evans, 'Haitian earthquake dominates Twitter', Sysomos blog, 15 January 2010: <http://blog.sysomos.com/2010/01/15/haitian-earthquake-dominates-twitter/>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 'Social media and mobile texting a major source of info and aid for earthquake in Haiti', Nielsen Wire, 15 January 2010: http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-and-mobile-texting-a-major-source-of-info-and-aid-for-earthquake-in-haiti/

¹⁴ J. Wortham, 'Burst of giving via cellphones nets millions for Haiti', *New York Times*, 14 January 2010: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/technology/15mobile.html?scp=1&sq=sysomos&st=cse>

¹⁵ 'Pakistan floods: the first social media emergency?', Oxfam blog, 23 August 2010: http://www.oxfam.org.uk/applications/blogs/scotland/2010/08/pakistan_floods_the_first_soci.html

¹⁶ D. Gillmor, 'Tsunami and citizen journalism's first draft', Dan Gillmor's blog, 6 January 2005: http://dangillmor.typepad.com/dan_gillmor_on_grassroots/2005/01/tsunami_and_cit.html

that makes for painful viewing today. 'I hope they can swim,' one man half-jokingly comments on one piece of footage as they film people caught up in the wave.

Tom Glocer, the head of Reuters, pointed out that on the 26 December none of Reuters' 2,300 journalists or 1,000 stringers were on the beaches the moment the wave struck. 'For the first 24 hours,' he said, 'the best and only photographs came from tourists armed with telephones, digital cameras and camcorders. And if you didn't have those pictures, you weren't on the story.'¹⁷

When I started researching the relationship between aid agencies, the media and coverage of disasters for the 14th *Guardian* Research Fellowship in 2006–7 at Nuffield College Oxford, this change was very much in its infancy.¹⁸ A new website called YouTube had made it possible for videos to be shared in this way. Blogs were utilised to spread information. Message boards on media websites spread information about those who had survived – and those who had not.

But at that time Facebook was restricted to university students, Twitter had not been invented; nor had the mash-up Ushahidi, a website that used crowdsourcing to pinpoint acts of violence following the Kenyan elections. The 'turning point' that Gillmor refers to was just that – a turning point. If anything revealed how far social media and disaster reporting had moved on from the tsunami, it was the earthquake in Haiti five years later.

But where do these innovations leave the reporting of disasters – for those who have traditionally been the intermediaries? Journalists have found their work and priorities questioned; aid agencies have discovered increasingly articulate clients who are not content silently and gratefully to accept aid as they are granted it, but are able to highlight shortcomings, and raise stories of their own. Both sides are still grappling with the new issues that new media has brought to the fore.

At the same time, there has been a shift in aid agencies towards proactive advocacy, complementing aid delivery. The agencies are now more than simple providers – they are working as political pressure groups or as policy institutes. This changes their message and their relationship with the media as a result, although the public and media have not always recognised that NGOs now see advocacy as a key part of their work.

A critic such as Professor Simon Cottle of Cardiff University has described this as NGOs becoming 'embroiled within a "media logic" that is

¹⁷ T. Glocer, Tom Glocer's blog: tomglocer.com/blogs/sample_weblog/archive/2006/10/11/98.aspx

¹⁸ G. Cooper, 'Anyone here survived a wave, speak English and got a mobile? Aid agencies, the media and reporting disasters since the tsunami', 14th *Guardian* Lecture, 5 November 2007, Nuffield College, Oxford: http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Nuffield_Guardian_Lecture_2007.pdf

far removed from the ideals and aims of humanitarianism'.¹⁹ But as Ian Bray, senior press officer at Oxfam, says: 'In a changing world looking at the causes of poverty and suffering, we do not believe aid changes the world – politics does.'²⁰

So this research discusses how disaster reporting has changed since the 2004 tsunami and how a duet – aid agencies and the media – has become a trio with the introduction of user-generated content into the lexicon.

In Chapter 2, the research considers the difference that media coverage makes to fundraising and action when a disaster occurs – how the mass coverage of the tsunami meant that there was 50 times more money given per survivor than to those who survived the worst funded crises the same year. In Chapter 3, the research looks in particular at how this was aided by the growth of user-generated content, which gave a new immediacy to the coverage and helped personalise it – and at how this has developed further in disasters since then, as social networking and microblogging sites such as Twitter have been harnessed. How this has altered the symbiotic relationship between NGOs and the media and how NGOs have adapted to survive is discussed in Chapter 4, which also examines the problems of blurring of boundaries as NGOs attempt to act like reporters, and the mainstream media fail to make clear when they are using aid workers as their writers and filmmakers on the ground.

The research concludes with a series of policy recommendations which suggest how developments in user-generated content, the 'professional' humanitarian, and increasing budget constraints on reporters can still result in strong journalism that accurately reflects what is going on in such crises in an imaginative way that treats those affected with dignity and respect. Finally, it calls for a form of 'media social responsibility' inspired by the idea of corporate social responsibility.

¹⁹ S. Cottle and D. Nolan (2009), 'How the media's codes and rules influence the ways NGOs work': <http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/simon-cottle-and-david-nolan-how-the-medias-codes-and-rules-influence-the-ways-ngos-work/>

²⁰ Interview, Oxford, April 2007.

2 Death and money: How and why media coverage of humanitarian disasters affects aid

Not long after the 2004 tsunami, the then UN Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, Jan Egeland, acidly summed up the way that the world's disaster victims are treated.

They are, he told the American TV station ABC, caught up in a 'kind of humanitarian sweepstake in which ... every night 99 per cent of them lose, and one per cent win'.²¹

The tsunami survivors were, in these terms, the 1 per cent winners – and what winners they were. In the aftermath of the disaster money poured in – so much that the charity Médecins Sans Frontières even put out a press release on the 4 January 2005 requesting that no more donations be given.²²

Egeland's analogy is what aid workers privately call the game of 'disaster top trumps' and a reason that has often been used by the media to justify their (sometimes intrusive) presence at the scene of disasters.

It has also been utilised by NGOs themselves who, in recent times, have fallen over themselves to work with the media in order to get coverage for their pet disasters, even if this means colluding with the worst media clichés. Simon Harris, a researcher and an aid worker in Colombo who has worked for two of the major UK agencies, spoke of how he had been visited by the media department of one of them and had been asked to push all the beds in a hospital into one corner so that it would look more overcrowded, and thus make more dramatic pictures.²³

But do dollars/pounds/euros really flow to the scene of disasters in the wake of media reporting, or is the so-called CNN effect – as the New Zealand researcher Douglas Van Belle argues – overstated?²⁴ Are the sums of money that NGOs now invest in their public relations departments justified for the amount of aid their clients receive in return?

And is money what they are actually looking for – or influence?

2.1 The figures

Certainly for the major disasters, there appears to be strong evidence that media coverage has an effect on aid. The Red Cross's *World Disasters Report 2006* says that the media, 'whether we like it or not', exerts a strong influence over where resources flow.²⁵ It estimates that in the case of the tsunami, those

²¹ ABC News, 'The sympathy gap', *Nightline*, 11 January 2005.

²² Reuters report, 'Doctors Without Borders says stop sending us money', 4 January 2005: <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines05/0104-10.htm>

²³ Interview, Colombo, 20 April 2007.

²⁴ Van Belle, D., 'Agenda setting and donor responsiveness to humanitarian crisis and development aid', paper given at Harvard–World Bank workshop, Harvard Kennedy School, 29–31 May 2008.

²⁵ J. Walter, *World Disasters Report 2006*, IFRC, December 2006: <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2006/index.asp>

affected received on average \$1,241 per survivor – 50 times as much as the worst funded crises in that year.

The amount of media coverage appears to correlate directly to aid given, as seen in one of the report’s tables:

	<i>TV coverage (minutes of airtime)</i>	<i>Print media coverage (articles)</i>	<i>Donation per person helped (US\$)</i>
Tsunami	250	34,992	1,241
South Asia quake	86	n/a	300
Democratic Republic of Congo	6	3,119	213
Somalia	0	n/a	53
Côte d’Ivoire	0	n/a	27

Table 2.1: Media coverage and aid ²⁶

So, while the South Asia quake attracted 86 minutes of TV coverage on US networks in 2005 and raised over US\$300 for every person helped, Somalia and Côte d’Ivoire – both also the subject of UN appeals in 2005 – attracted no TV coverage at all. They raised respectively just US\$53 and US\$27 per person helped.

The same effect can even be seen by comparing countries affected by the tsunami. Table 2.2 shows the death toll in the tsunami as judged by the UN special envoy, and the numbers of stories written in British newspapers as recorded by Lexis Nexis from a week before to three weeks after.

	<i>Dead/missing</i>	<i>Number of stories 19.12.04– 16.01.05</i>
Indonesia	167,000	343
Sri Lanka	35,000	729
Thailand	8,200 ²⁷	771

*Table 2.2: The 2004 tsunami: Death toll and media coverage*²⁸

²⁶ Source: UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery

²⁷ Source: UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

²⁸ Source: analysis of Lexis Nexis stories

The death toll in Indonesia dwarfs that of Sri Lanka and Thailand – put roughly, it is around 20 times that of Thailand – yet the coverage is barely half. Did that difference translate into the amount of aid? It appears it did. So many aid workers poured into Sri Lanka after 26 December 2004 that they were dubbed a ‘second tsunami’ according to Harris.²⁹

The first-year evaluation of the Disasters Emergency Committee funds noted that Indonesia had suffered 60 per cent of the damage but received only 31 per cent of the funding.³⁰ Undoubtedly, much of this was due to more projects already being up and running in Sri Lanka, but the evaluator still felt the need to emphasise that the state of affairs should change.³¹

The tsunami is an extreme example, but one reflected in more recent disasters. The stunning amounts of money raised for Haiti were not repeated for the Chilean earthquake, which happened a month later. According to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Oxfam America raised \$3,499 in the three days after the 2010 Chilean earthquake compared to \$2.9 million in the three days after the Haitian one.³²

However, while vast and terrible events such as the tsunami will always prove newsworthy, how interested are the media in disasters in general? Over the years, there have been many ingenious attempts to quantify what kind, and how big, a disaster needs to be in order to trigger a media response.

One of the most recent was in 2007, when Eisensee and Stromberg published a compelling study in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* entitled ‘News droughts, news floods and US disaster relief’.³³ The researchers, from Stockholm University, looked at the US government response to 5,000 disasters that occurred between 1968 and 2002, claimed 63,000 lives and affected nearly 125 million people.

Eisensee and Stromberg concluded that US relief depended on what other newsworthy events were happening at the same time – such as the Olympic Games or the Colombine shootings – and that the only plausible explanation was that relief decisions are driven by the intensity of media coverage of disasters.

²⁹ Interview in Colombo, 20 April 2007. Also see S. Harris, ‘The congestion of humanitarian space, disaster response, peace and conflict in post tsunami Sri Lanka’, working paper, Bradford University, February 2006: <http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/confres/papers/pdfs/CCR16.pdf>

³⁰ The Disasters Emergency Committee is an umbrella organisation made up of 13 major UK humanitarian agencies. It launches and co-ordinates responses to major disasters: www.dec.org.uk

³¹ http://www.dec.org.uk/uploads/documents/dectsunamievaluationfinalboardreportdec_Y1F1A.pdf.

³² N. Wallace, ‘Fundraising efforts for Chile off to a slow start’, *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 1 March 2010: http://philanthropy.com/article/Fund-Raising-Efforts-for-Chile/64430/?sid=&utm_source=&utm_medium=en&loc=interstitialskip

³³ T. Eisensee and D. Stromberg, ‘News droughts, news floods and US disaster relief’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 2007, vol. 122, no. 2, pp. 693–728.

There are of course notes of caution. The more severe the disaster, the more 'newsworthy' it is. And if NGOs or governments choose to raise awareness of certain disasters, that can also show a correlation.

But by using econometric calculations, the researchers concluded that other news pressures significantly reduced both the probability that networks would cover a disaster, and thus the probability that the disaster would receive relief:

The implied effects are that 2.4 extra minutes spent on the first three news segments [in a US TV news bulletin] decrease the probability that a disaster is covered in the news by four percentage points and the probability that the disaster receives relief by three percentage points. Recall that around 10 percent of all disasters are covered in the news and that 20 percent receive relief, and so the effects are sizeable.³⁴

Looking specifically at the example of the Olympics, they concluded that 'a disaster occurring during the Olympics is 5 percent less likely to be in the news and 6 percent less likely to receive relief, on average.'³⁵

Like earlier studies, Eisensee and Stromberg find that the number killed or affected does not necessarily affect newsworthiness of stories (perhaps the most famous example of this is William J. Adams' 1986 study in which he measured the amount of coverage that disasters received in the American media compared with the miles that they were distant from New York City).³⁶ They also find that the type of disaster – the dramatic as opposed to the long-term – has a direct affect on its 'newsworthiness' and thus on aid flow.

They write:

For every person killed in a volcano disaster, 40,000 people must die in a drought to reach the same probability of media coverage. Similarly, it requires forty times as many killed in an African disaster to achieve the same expected media coverage age as for a disaster in Eastern Europe of similar type and magnitude.³⁷

Put bluntly, to follow Eisensee and Stromberg's econometrics: if you are stuck in a disaster and want to receive some relief, then you need to be caught up in an earthquake or volcano during the silly season (not during a major event

³⁴ Eisensee and Stromberg, op. cit., p. 708.

³⁵ Eisensee and Stromberg, op. cit., pp. 708–10.

³⁶ W. Adams, 'Whose lives count? TV coverage of natural disasters', *Journal of Communication* 36 (Spring 1986), pp. 113–22:

<http://www.gwu.edu/~pad/202/readings/disasters.html>

³⁷ Eisensee and Stromberg, op. cit., pp. 694–5.

like the Olympics or the conclusion of the O.J. Simpson trial) and be located in Europe or South or Central America, rather than Africa or the Pacific.

A disaster story can also be ignored because of another disaster occurring at the same time, or occurring so close to it that it captures the media spotlight more effectively (a good example being Hurricane Stan, which devastated Guatemala but which was largely ignored in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans in August 2005, a month earlier).

There is what Jonathan Benthall has dubbed the 'funnel effect'. In his book *Disasters, Relief and the Media*, he states that the news system aspires to have only one disaster at the time in order to 'wrack the public's conscience' and quotes a French television journalist as calling this the '*phénomène de l'entonnoir*' – a funnel effect where there is 'only one room for one overwhelming emotion a day or a week.'³⁸ (What was extraordinary about the coverage of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and Cyclone Nargis was that for once two disasters of similar severity in faraway places were covered extensively side-by-side, at least in the British media.)³⁹

2.2 How important is the media?

Yet, how significant is the media's influence – and has it changed? In his 2008 paper 'Agenda setting and donor responsiveness to humanitarian crisis and development aid' given at a Harvard–World Bank workshop, Douglas Van Belle argues that while during the Cold War the media had an important effect on responses to aid, around 1990 media influence declined and the so-called 'CNN effect' was only ever illusory.

He argues that belief in the 'CNN effect' came about due to the US intervention in Somalia, where media coverage was a huge factor in decision making because it was no longer limited by the constraint imposed by likely or potential Soviet reaction, in a state that had served as a proxy conflict in the developing world.

Yet Somalia just happened to be the first prominent foreign policy event after the removal of Cold War constraints and so the idea that the media defined the world took hold as a cognitive framework; as Van Belle argues, had it been the Rwanda/Burundi genocides, 'we could have spent a decade arguing about a *laissez faire* effect'.⁴⁰

His argument was that post-Cold War, the world entered a period of '*ad hoc*' policies in international politics, so that rules used for allocating disaster aid shifted dramatically, almost randomly from case to case. This was not to argue that the media had no role; rather that during the Cold War, a

³⁸ Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, a leading French news anchor man in the film by Patrice Barrat, *Famine Fatigue or the Power of Images* (1991), as quoted in J. Benthall (1993), *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (London: IB Tauris), p. 28.

³⁹ See also G. Cooper, 'Disaster cap-it-all-ism', *Guardian Unlimited*, 20 May 2008:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/20/disastercapitalism>

⁴⁰ Van Belle, op. cit., p. 105.

small amount of media coverage in influential places – a single story in the prestigious *New York Times*, for example – could make a real difference in terms of aid.⁴¹ Whereas now, in a more diffuse media environment, only a story that ‘was extremely salient’ in the news media would mean a president or prime minister would step in.

The problem, as Van Belle points out, is that the role of the news media in response to disasters is frequently configured in terms of extraordinary disasters such as the tsunami. ‘We imagine,’ he says, ‘the norm in terms of the most extreme of the rarest and most unusual events.... These extreme cases lead us to believe that media is an overwhelming influence on aid or that it is typical for top-level officials to be involved in the aid response.’⁴²

Yet Eisensee and Stromberg argue that it is in the marginal disasters that the media can make a huge difference: ‘To sum up, the average effect of news on relief is unlikely to be larger than 16 percent. However, in the subgroup of disasters that are marginal in the news decision, the estimated effects are higher, around 70 percent.’⁴³

A particularly compelling example is that of the Niger crisis of 2005. Droughts and locusts during 2004 had led to harvest failure in Niger and by mid-2005, the World Food Programme was warning that 2.5 million people were on the brink of starvation. On 16 May the UN launched a \$16 million appeal. It was greeted with what Jan Egeland called ‘near deafening silence’. By 14 July, nearly two months later, only \$3.6 million had been raised. The problem was that Niger is a place where, as one aid worker who had worked there says, ‘every year is awful’.⁴⁴

Then, on 18 July, Hilary Andersson of the BBC started her series of reports on the ongoing food shortage in Niger. They were broadcast on the flagship *Ten O’Clock News* and the web. By 27 July, just over a week later, \$17 million had been committed in and outside the UN appeal.

This was not an uncontroversial story. Niger’s president, Mamadou Tanja, then accused the growing numbers of journalists of exaggerating the crisis.⁴⁵ He was widely condemned as making excuses and biting the hand that fed his people. Yet the incident raises an important issue.

The BBC coverage happened by accident. Kevin Bakhurst, then editor of the *Ten O’Clock News*, had spotted pictures of a feeding centre in Niger when looking through Reuters photos to illustrate a *Live 8* news package. So struck was he that he asked Andersson, then Africa correspondent, to

⁴¹ Van Belle (p.102) estimates that during the Cold War every *New York Times* story covering a lethal natural disaster led to an increase in aid of US\$1.76m.

⁴² Van Belle, op. cit., p. 96.

⁴³ Eisensee and Stromberg, op. cit., p. 715.

⁴⁴ Personal correspondence, December 2006.

⁴⁵ H. Aistier, ‘Can aid do more harm than good?’, 1 February 2006: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4185550.stm>

investigate.⁴⁶ The first report went out on the 18 July 2005 and was the lead item on the *Ten O'Clock News*. It began: 'In one of the most inhospitable deserts on earth, the rains came too late. And now famine is stalking Niger...'⁴⁷

Andersson chose her words very carefully. She did not say there *was* a famine. But the impact of the pictures and their position on the news meant there was a *Scoop*-like stampede by other news organisations to get there.

The problem was that droughts and locusts were only part of the story. Niger did have food – but exporting it had caused prices to rocket. As the *Guardian* newspaper's reporter Jeevan Vasagar pointed out, there were markets full of food.⁴⁸ But many journalists either felt that the story could not be stood up, or simplified it to a degree that it did not accurately reflect what was going on.

The aid worker from Niger can't see the problem: 'No one is normally interested in Niger,' he says. 'The reality is this got air time, it got to the decision makers, and it mobilised global resources. That was a great outcome, no matter what questions we have about the process and quality.'⁴⁹ But is it a great outcome no matter what?

2.3 Disaster coverage: Emotion recollected without tranquility

In the past, disaster coverage, as Susan D. Moeller says, at its most extreme has been a kind of moral bellwether for the nation: how much we care, how can we live with ourselves.⁵⁰ And aid agencies, eager to raise funds or awareness, have often been happy to collude with journalists in pushing this approach. So when covering famines or earthquakes or tsunamis, the media has not always prioritised establishing objectivity – as they might do when covering international diplomacy or politics. This has led to the 'disaster porn' that Brendan O'Neill complained of in relation to the Haitian earthquake referred to earlier.

Such debates have happened for as long as disasters have been reported. Paul Harrison, who filmed early footage of the 1984 Ethiopian famine, talked of 'feel[ing] a bit of a prostitute, hawking famine and death in these corridors of power' [referring to visiting the BBC and ITV].⁵¹ And it is worthwhile remembering the criticism of Kevin Carter, one of the members of the 'Bang Bang club' of South African photojournalists who went to Sudan in 1993 to record pictures of the war and famine occurring there. Carter

⁴⁶ Interview, London, 19 January 2007.

⁴⁷ H. Andersson, 'Niger children starving to death', *BBC Ten O'Clock News*, 18 July 2005: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4695355.stm>

⁴⁸ J. Vasagar, 'Plenty of food, yet the poor are starving', *Guardian*, 1 August 2005: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/famine/story/0,,1540214,00.html>

⁴⁹ Personal correspondence, December 2006.

⁵⁰ S. Moeller (1999), *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Famine, Disease, War and Death* (London: Routledge).

⁵¹ P. Harrison and R. Palmer (1986), *News Out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid* (London: Hilary Shipman).

produced one of the most iconic pictures of the famine: a small emaciated girl collapsed on the ground with a vulture waiting nearby.

Carter waited for 20 minutes to see if the vulture would spread its wings, and thus make a better image. It did not, and he eventually chased the bird away, leaving the girl to resume her struggle to a nearby feeding centre. After the image appeared in the *New York Times*, Carter was praised for the photograph and condemned as heartless for not rescuing the girl himself. The following year, two months after winning a Pulitzer prize for the image, Carter committed suicide, having told a friend: 'I'm really really sorry I didn't pick the child up'. As Moeller comments: 'Being close enough to photograph the starving child meant being close enough to help. The responsibility to bear witness does not automatically outweigh the responsibility to get involved.'⁵²

Yet things have changed in what is seen as acceptable 'involvement'. In one BBC report on the tsunami – regarded as controversial at the time – reporter Ben Brown appeared on an Aceh beach, walking alongside a woman who had lost her husband and four children in the tsunami. As Brown spoke with her through an off-camera interpreter, she started to weep and put her head on Brown's shoulder. Brown, looking slightly uncomfortable, put his arm around her and carried on filming the segment. 'Should he have carried on doing what he did?' asked David Loyn, developing world correspondent for the BBC, speaking in a debate at the Frontline Club, London a couple of months later. 'Should he have pushed her off? Should he have not used the footage afterwards?'⁵³

In five short years, we have gone from that to Anderson Cooper rescuing children or Sanjay Gupta allowing the cameras to keep rolling as he treated patients. Or, at the very least, we are now showing pictures that would not have been seen before.

In a well-argued piece following the Haitian earthquake, Philip Kennicott of the *Washington Post* argued that coverage of Haiti showed much more graphic images of the victims than had been seen before – the same kind of coverage that O'Neill complained about. Kennicott singled out the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the BBC as media outlets which had used graphic and disturbing images, making the point that this was not some kind of excess that was confined to tabloid media. Instead, he wrote that since the 2004 tsunami, the camera has been used as a 'seemingly transparent window on misery':

What's changed? There are obvious answers: the slow numbing effect of the past decade, which also included devastating images from New Orleans and

⁵² S. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, op. cit.

⁵³ *Covering the Tsunami*, a Frontline Club discussion, London, March 2005: <http://dartcenter.org/content/covering-tsunami-0>

*Sichuan, China, may simply have lowered the threshold of what is acceptable to show. The easy availability of the most graphic photographs and videos online may have changed the equation for everyone.*⁵⁴

The sheer power of the tsunami moving images has injected what appears to be mandatory emotionalism into reporting disasters. Yet, just because bad things happen, critical faculties should not be suspended. As the BBC's David Loyn says: 'I would make a plea for disengaged journalism. We need to keep ourselves intact. We are faced with daily horrors and a thousand dilemmas.'⁵⁵

These horrors and a thousand dilemmas, however, are ones that journalists and aid workers are having to grapple with – and getting it wrong can be a matter of losing aid and political action where it is needed.

⁵⁴P. Kennicott, 'Media offers full, blunt, hideous picture of trauma caused by the Haiti earthquake', *Washington Post* 16 January 2010:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/15/AR2010011503745.html>

⁵⁵ Speaking at the same Frontline Club discussion on the tsunami, London, March 2005.

3 User-generated content: A new tool for disaster reporting?

Oh shiet [sic] heavy earthquake right now! In Haiti!

(tweet by Haitian Fredo Dupoux, one of the first to alert the world to the Haitian earthquake)⁵⁶

Researchers at Yahoo analyzed tweets after the Chilean earthquake earlier this year and found evidence that the Twitter community works like a 'collaborative filter,' questioning reports that turn out to be fake and confirming those that are true

(Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, 'Twitter after a disaster – Is it reliable?', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 August 2010)⁵⁷

The media world has changed – and the humanitarian world with it. How we report, where we report from and who is doing the reporting is changing due to the Internet and cheap mobile phone technology.

This is happening when the mainstream media is withdrawing from foreign bureaux. In 2009, the think-tank POLIS and the charity Oxfam published a report warning of the risk that international coverage by public sector broadcasters will decrease.⁵⁸ The previous year, the *Daily Mirror* said that as part of the latest round of job cuts they were abolishing the role of foreign editor entirely.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the *Daily Telegraph* cut rates for foreign stringers by 40 per cent to £60 for a 400-word story, according to the *Guardian*.⁶⁰

(The only area where money has flowed into covering stories around humanitarianism is courtesy of the Gates Foundation, which gave money to ABC News to set up a global health project and to the *Guardian* to set up the global development section of the paper's website – a project which the *Columbia Journalism Review* claims 'blurs the line between journalism campaign and advocacy campaign'.)⁶¹

When it comes to humanitarian disasters however, citizen journalists and NGOs have been rushing to fill this new gap – and the mainstream

⁵⁶ L. Macleod, 'New media vital in breaking Haiti earthquake story', BBC website 22 January 2010:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/worldagenda/2010/01/100122_worldagenda_haiti_monitoring.shtml

⁵⁷ The *Wall Street Journal* report is referencing M. Mendoza, B. Poblete and C. Castillo, 'Twitter under crisis: can we trust what we RT?', 1st Workshop on Social Media Analytics (SOMA '10), 25 July 2010, Washington, DC.

⁵⁸ P. Harding, *The Great Global Switch-off: International Coverage in UK Public Service Broadcasting*, POLIS and Oxfam, 29 January 2009.

⁵⁹ S. Brook, 'Jobs to go in Daily Mirror cutbacks', *Guardian Online*, 3 September 2008:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/sep/03/mirror.pressandpublishing>

⁶⁰ S. Brook, 'Telegraph slashes stringer fees to £60', 5 January 2009:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/jan/05/daily-telegraph-media-group-newspapers>

⁶¹ R. Fortner, 'The web grows wide', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 8 October 2010:

http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/the_web_grows_wider.php

media, receiving free stills, film and reporting from the ground, often sees this as a win-win situation.

But how does this new relationship between NGOs, the mainstream media and citizen journalists affect reporting of humanitarian disasters? Are such crises now reported differently thanks to these new entrants? Does this mean we are seeing more diverse stories or hearing more diverse stories? And what dangers are there in this?

3.1 The tsunami and after

The timing, scale and location made the 2004 tsunami unique. It happened at Christmas – a slow news period and a time when the public and even hard-bitten news executives are inclined to be charitable. The scale was epic and it happened in places well known to Westerners – and just as importantly involved Westerners.

As Philip Kennicott of the *Washington Post* recalls:

Although the tidal wave struck in poor countries, it also affected wealthy Westerners living and vacationing on the coasts of the Indian Ocean, and it was their imagery that defined the tragedy in the public memory. These were horrifying, dynamic images of the tragedy in motion, of waves surging onto beaches, over sea walls, through streets. There were images of bodies, too, but to see the devastation in motion was more seductive and mesmerizing, and it made the stronger impact.⁶²

These images were quickly spread around the world. One blog created just after the disaster called waveofdestruction.org created by the Australian blogger Geoffrey Huntley logged 682,366 unique visitors in just four days. The BBC received 400,000 messages on its message boards in the first week alone.⁶³

‘The power of the Internet and emails was demonstrated for the first time [with the tsunami],’ says Kevin Bakhurst, controller of the BBC News Channel. ‘The BBC website suddenly became a major source of information where people were trying to find out about friends and relatives. It became a public service in that way, but also just in terms of us getting in contact with people telling their stories ... it became a real resource as well.’⁶⁴

But at the time of the tsunami, some commentators believed that it would be a ‘one-off’; that such huge amounts of user-generated content (UGC) were only down to rich white Westerners with camcorders. Just how wrong this was proved with the South Asia quake ten months later.

⁶² P. Kennicott, op. cit.

⁶³ Information provided by BBC Interactivity Centre.

⁶⁴ Interview, London, 19 January 2007.

Within eight minutes of the quake hitting Islamabad on the 8 October 2005, the *Talking Point* portal on the BBC website received this email:

*It was like the entire world was suddenly spinning and rattling. I was so scared that I ran down not realising I did not even have any shoes on.... May Allah have mer!cy [sic] on all of us.*⁶⁵

In early 2005, the BBC received, on average, 300 emails a day. Four years later they were receiving 12,000 on average with spikes around popular stories. The 'UGC hub' set up by the corporation has also gone from employing a 'handful' of people in 2005 to 29 people today.⁶⁶

The 'Have Your Say' page on the BBC website (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/have_your_say/) has proved particularly fertile ground for journalists at the UGC hub, according to research carried out by Wardle and Williams in 2008. As one hub journalist told the researchers:

*I would imagine if you had published 1,000 messages on one story, you have perhaps 50 to 100 of them read out as messages on various outlets whether it's Five Live or News 24. Likewise, out of 1,000 messages you may get a couple of dozen case studies that could be used which we pass on to programmes. So the ones which we get on air would be perhaps half of that.*⁶⁷

The research also found that UGC allowed producers to access people in hard-to-reach countries more quickly. As one producer told the researchers:

*When you're trying to turn around a programme in three hours, trying to get a normal person from Sierra Leone can be problematic, especially when the phones are so disastrously difficult. This way, with a little bit more time, we can see the thing coming up, we can get a post form up on a related story and we have time to talk it through with these people and if there is a story you can get some really good stuff.*⁶⁸

People are telling stories through whichever media they can. For example, Twitter broke the news of the Sichuan earthquakes, whereas the bloggers of Burma used Facebook in the 2007 protests. And it was not only governments and reporters who had to adjust to this new source; aid agencies themselves found themselves dealing with articulate beneficiaries who were now finding

⁶⁵ Email provided by BBC Interactivity Centre.

⁶⁶ C. Wardle and A. Williams (2008), 'ugc@thebbc: Understanding its impact on contributors, non-contributors and BBC news':

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/cardiffone.pdf>

⁶⁷ Wardle and Williams, op. cit.

⁶⁸ Wardle and Williams, op. cit.

outlets to describe the aid they were – or were not – receiving (see box: *Using media in Banda Aceh*).

In the case of Cyclone Nargis, those who did try to get information out used the email account gmail and in particular Google Talk – because, according to the BBC producer Samantha Dissanayake, ‘the junta found gmail more difficult to monitor.’⁶⁹

A huge leap forward – similar to that that took place with the tsunami – was the use of the microblogging site Twitter during coverage of the Haiti earthquake in January 2010.

3.2 Haiti and UGC

According to the New Media Index, produced by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) for 11–15 January, 43 per cent of the news links in blogs were about Haiti, with a staggering 82 per cent of links on the Thursday and Friday after the quake.⁷⁰

But, as the PEJ points out, Twitter was where the really interesting stuff was happening. On Twitter, two different levels of activity emerged. In terms of posts that linked to other reports, Haiti was the second largest topic, receiving 15 per cent of the news links for the entire week (and 36 per cent for the two days of Wednesday and Thursday). But another phenomenon was occurring as well: tweets that didn’t link people to fuller news accounts, but instead gave them direct access to take action, usually by donating money or supplies.

This mobilisation of online donation was seen by further research by Nielsen towards the end of the month, carried out jointly with the social networking site Facebook, which found 39 per cent of Facebook users in the USA, UK and Australia said they had donated to the Haiti appeal, 13 per cent via SMS (short message service, text messaging).⁷¹

What was also interesting about the use of social media in the Haitian earthquake, and which could point to future use, was the way it could mobilise aid in real time. First, with the conventional phone lines down, Twitter and Facebook were used by aid workers to contact each other. Jason Cone, communications director of Doctors Without Borders (the US name for Médecins Sans Frontières) started tweeting when the aid group was unable to land their planes carrying vital supplies. Eventually this was picked up both by the US Air Force, and also by the NBC anchor Ann Curry, who had also

⁶⁹ Interview, London, 7 May 2008.

⁷⁰ ‘Social Media Aid the Haiti Relief Effort’, PEJ New Media Index 11–15 January 2010: http://www.journalism.org/index_report/social_media_aid_haiti_relief_effort

⁷¹ ‘Survey: Global Facebook users generous texters for Haiti, but unprepared themselves’, Nielsen Wire, 22 January 2010: http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/survey-global-facebook-users-generous-texters-for-haiti-but-unprepared-themselves

read the tweets, and landing slots for the Doctors Without Borders planes were given a priority⁷².

Meanwhile, online mapping tools were used to show the destruction and then sources of aid and accommodation. Openstreetmap, a volunteer collaborative project, used satellite imagery to help aid workers map their way through the destruction.⁷³

But the main innovation was Ushahidi – the mapping tool first developed in 2007 which used SMS and Google Earth to map post-election violence in Kenya. In January 2008, Ushahidi (which means ‘witness’ in Swahili) was set up by four bloggers and technological experts. The mash-up used Google Earth technology to map incidents of crime and violence with ordinary people reporting incidents via SMS, phone or email. (A mash-up is a web page or application that uses and combines data, presentation or functionality from two or more sources to create new services.) As Ory Okolloh, one of the founders, says ‘We had personal stories that were not being shown in the media, and reports that were available to us before they hit the press.’⁷⁴

Since then, the template has been used in other places, most notably Haiti. The night of the quake, Patrick Meier, from Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, who had helped Ushahidi get US funding, called Ushahidi’s leading technology developer and they had a website up and running within an hour. Early reports included the one about Jean-Olivier Neptune quoted at the start of the Introduction to this paper.

The volume of information – first about damage and missing persons, then about hunger, water shortages and health – proved so overwhelming that Meier called for help from Tufts University. Around 300 students volunteered.

A couple of days after the quake, the *Boston Globe* reported, Katie Jacobs Stanton, a US State Department special adviser in the Office of Innovation, helped persuade Haiti’s cellphone companies to assign a temporary short-code emergency number – 4636 – to give the public a quick – and free – way to relay information that could be passed on to responders. Over the next few weeks, 20,000 text messages were received – many translated by 1,000 Haitian Creole speakers from the US, Canada and Europe recruited by Rob Munro, a doctoral student at Stanford University.⁷⁵ Reporting on the Ushahidi phenomenon for the *New York Times*, Anand

⁷² D. Cohen, ‘Social media and the Haiti disaster: Twitter helped save lives’. Panel given at the New York Social Media Week, 1–5 February 2010:

[newser/twitter/social_media_the_haiti_disaster_twitter_helped_save_lives_150691.asp](http://www.twitter/social_media_the_haiti_disaster_twitter_helped_save_lives_150691.asp)

⁷³ D. Schwartz, ‘How social media is changing the aid business’, CBC News, 31 March 2010: <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2010/03/30/f-haiti-rebuild-tapscott.html>

⁷⁴ Personal communication, September 2008.

⁷⁵ Smith, op. cit.

Giriandas pinpointed how this could change aid work in the future. He wrote:

Ushahidi suggests a new paradigm in humanitarian work. The old paradigm was one-to-many: foreign journalists and aid workers jet in, report on a calamity and dispense aid with whatever data they have. The new paradigm is many-to-many-to-many: victims supply on-the-ground data; a self-organizing mob of global volunteers translates text messages and helps to orchestrate relief; journalists and aid workers use the data to target the response.⁷⁶

This brings into question the idea of who bears witness to disaster in future. In the distant past, it was the historian, writing down so that those in future should not forget; then it became the journalist, reporting back to a shrinking world; then the aid worker acting as a journalist as budgets shrank and we entered the technology age. Now, in the Twitter age, is it finally the turn of those who experience the tragedy at first hand to tell their story?

3.3 Growth and limitations of UGC

Crowdsourcing in Haiti and Twitter in Chile could work so effectively because of the growth of access to mobile phones, which is transforming the developing world. The UN's International Telecommunications Agency (ITU) revealed in June 2010 that there had been nearly 2 billion additional mobile phone connections between 2006 and 2009 – of which 1.6 billion were in poor countries.⁷⁷

The ITU added that in many developing countries more than half of households now have a mobile, and in China and India, 90 per cent of villages have access to a mobile phone.

While Internet access was still restricted in the developing world, the ITU also noted that, by the end of 2008, there were more Internet users in the developing world than in the developed world, and in the four years to the end of 2009, fixed broadband penetration rates in the developing world almost tripled, and mobile broadband penetration rates grew more than tenfold, according to the statistics.

So with technology enabling new actors to enter the formerly privileged sphere of media-aid agency interaction, how is reporting changing? In some ways, positively. For example, Sanjana Hattotuwa of the Sri Lankan NGO, the Centre for Policy Alternatives, says, 'citizen journalists

⁷⁶ A. Giriharadas, 'Africa's Gift to Silicon Valley: How to Track a Crisis', *New York Times*, 12 March 2010: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/weekinreview/14giridharadas.html?scp=1&sq=ushahidi&st=cse>

⁷⁷ UN press release, 'UN agency reports phenomenal mobile phone expansion in developing world', UN News Centre, 23 June 2010: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35114&Cr=telecom&Cr1=&Kw1=ITU&Kw2=phones&Kw3=>

are increasingly playing a major role in reporting deaths, the humanitarian fallout and hidden social costs of violent conflict.⁷⁸

Global Voices, a non-profit citizen media project set up at Harvard in 2004, now has around 400,000 visits a month, 100 regular authors and 70 translators. It mainly links to blogs but is increasingly using Facebook, Twitter, Livejournal and Flickr as well – and got stories out from Myanmar (Burma) during Cyclone Nargis when international journalists were banned.

Even during the devastation of the Pakistan floods of July–August 2010, platforms such as Citizens Eye and Chowrangi.com collected content from citizen journalists working on the ground. Mudassar Khan, the founder of Citizens Eye, said:

Citizen journalists are more vocal.... [A]s governments typically believe more on mainstream media here in Pakistan, they use them for their image building as well. So newspapers and TV channels are giving government's perspective dominantly. At the same time, very few mainstream media channels and newspapers are also giving neutral perspectives.⁷⁹

However, one of the common criticisms levelled at user-generated content is that it cannot compete with traditional journalism in terms of accuracy. An interesting study carried out after the Chilean earthquake in February 2010 may challenge this, however. Researchers at the Internet company Yahoo analysed tweets after the Chilean earthquake.⁸⁰ They found that – as with Haiti – at the beginning, tweets about the earthquake itself and tsunami warnings dominated the first days. Then it switched to missing people and requests for help – using Twitter as a way of ensuring aid reached the right places.

What was particularly interesting about the Yahoo study was that it addressed the question of whether Twitter provides credible information. Whether social media can provide accurate and substantiated reports, compared with traditional media, has been a key debate. However, the researchers found that Twitter was acting in this case as a 'collaborative filter', questioning reports that turned out to be fake and confirming reports that were true.

Mendoza *et al.* did not find that information should be considered reliable just because it was tweeted or retweeted. However, what they did find was that when false rumours started to spread on Twitter, about half the

⁷⁸ S. Hattotuwa (2007), 'Who's afraid of citizen journalists?', chapter in *Communicating Disasters; An Asia-Pacific Resource Book* (TVEAP/UNDP).

⁷⁹ R. McAthy, 'Pakistan floods: mainstream media turns to citizen journalism', Journalism.co.uk, 5 August 2010: <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news/pakistan-floods-mainstream-media-turns-to-citizen-journalism/s2/a539954/>

⁸⁰ M. Mendoza, B. Poblete and C. Castillo, 'Twitter under crisis: Can we trust what we RT?', 1st Workshop on Social Media Analytics (SOMA '10), 25 July 2010, Washington, DC. http://snap.stanford.edu/soma2010/papers/soma2010_11.pdf

tweets referring to these rumours were denying that they were untrue. In contrast, for reports that turned out to be true, less than 1 per cent questioned their veracity.

For example, news of a tsunami after the quake on 27 February spread quickly through Twitter, 'while government authorities ignored its existence,' the authors wrote. That rumour turned out to be true. Meanwhile false news about a tsunami warning elsewhere in Chile also spread quickly through Twitter – but the vast majority of tweets mentioning it denied or questioned it.

(This is not to say that Twitter is all-powerful – a recent survey by AT Internet found that Facebook was more effective at driving people to news websites than Twitter was, although both still took a very small percentage compared to something like Google.)⁸¹

However, it is important to acknowledge limitations of UGC. Notwithstanding the Chilean study, verification is difficult. Hoaxing is an ever-present possibility. Such voices are also often framed in the traditional news structures rather than challenging them – and a wealth of material does not always elucidate. As Sarah Boseley of the *Guardian* reflected on her paper's three-year commitment to report on the Ugandan village of Katine, when the paper gave out disposable cameras to the villagers in the hope of getting a new perspective, 'most of them,' she said, 'just took pictures of their cows'.⁸²

The in-depth analysis of the BBC's use of user-generated content in 2008 also raised questions about how truly inclusive and democratic UGC was. Wardle and Williams found that while 23 per cent of people had submitted material to a news organisation, the typical profile of a contributor (according to an Ipsos MORI poll) was a white male aged 55–59, employed full-time and a non-manual worker. A typical BBC contributor was a 45–54-year-old male, employed full-time as a middle manager or professional.⁸³

And these words from Vincent Crosbie, the president of Digital Deliverance and an online news veteran, should be considered:

The concept behind 'citizen journalism' is noble, much like Karl Marx's vision of pure communism or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision of natural goodness or Ayn Rand's vision of objective individualism. However, I live in the world of real people. It's hard enough to find a professional journalist who can sit through 52 weeks of zoning board hearings and write intelligently about that,

⁸¹ R. Andrews, 'Twitter's impact on news traffic is tiny', paidcontent:UK, 29 September 2010: <http://paidcontent.co.uk/article/419-twiters-impact-on-news-traffic-is-tiny/>

⁸² G. Cooper, 'Katine offers new ways to campaign', *Guardian Unlimited*, 30 January 2009: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/katineblog/2009/jan/30/glenda-cooper-new-media>

⁸³ C. Wardle and A. Williams (2008), 'ugc@thebbc: Understanding its impact on contributors, non-contributors and BBC news': <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/cardiffone.pdf>

[let alone] finding an amateur who doesn't have a vested interest or axe to grind and who can sit through and objectively write about those hearings.⁸⁴

Citizen journalism may skew the definition of what is important towards the unexpected, the spectacular event. It often lends itself to the dramatic over the chronic; the earthquake over the long-term famine. As Thomas Sutcliffe of the *Independent* once commented: 'The problem with citizen journalists – just like all us citizens – is that they're incorrigible sensationalists.'⁸⁵

And if every citizen with a mobile phone or Internet can become a reporter, where does that leave journalists and aid workers?

Using media in Banda Aceh

Angry residents are confronting a housing contractor on an Asian Development Bank project. The mood is one of aggression; the contractor has his hands out trying to calm down the men who've come to complain.

Nothing unusual about that. Two years on from the tsunami when I visited the area, there was, understandably, frustration in Banda Aceh among people still waiting to be rehoused. Nor was it unusual that a photographer from the local newspaper, *Serambi Indonesia*, was on hand to snap the protest as it happened.

But the aid agencies that arrived in Banda Aceh after the tsunami to help rebuild the place that suffered the most devastation may not have been aware they were entering a society that was articulate and determined – and which has learned to use the media, particularly new media, to its own advantage. Similar scenes have been reported dozens of times by *Serambi Indonesia*, TV channel TVRI and 68H radio station.

'The community is smart in playing the media game,' says Christelle Chapoy of Oxfam GB in Banda Aceh. 'We have had *geuchiks* [village chiefs] and communities saying to us we will call the media in if you do not respond to our demands.'

All tsunami-affected countries were dogged by reports of reconstruction falling behind schedule. In Aceh, the ambitious target of rebuilding 100,000 homes by the end of 2006 was not met. The Aceh-Nias Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency (BRR) reported that 64,000 units had been built by March 2007. Thousands of people were left living in cramped barracks where sanitation is poor.

When I met him, Mr Hasbala was a tailor in his sixties who'd been living in barracks on the outskirts of Banda Aceh for more than two years. He was lucky: an NGO gave him a sewing machine so he could carry on his trade, and he received rice from the World Food Programme.

Yet he was left living more than 20 km from his original home, and feared he might never be able to return. As we spoke, flies buzzed around the trenches of water encircling the barracks. 'I'm worried about getting ill because I don't know if I'd be able to get treatment,' he said. 'We feel cut off here generally, far from the town and away from the main road.'

In April 2007, 300 people demonstrated outside the BRR in Banda Aceh, asking for the agency to be dissolved because survivors felt it was working too slowly. But the Acehnese are also using the media to put pressure on aid groups to get what they want.

⁸⁴ www.digitaldeliverance.com/blog/2007/02/citizen_journalism_is_but_one.html

⁸⁵ T. Sutcliffe, 'Ethics aside, citizen journalists get scoops', *Independent* 2 January 2007.

If a *geuchik* doesn't think his village is getting a fair deal, he will contact the local press to tell them so. One enterprising local in the Lely district of Banda Aceh daubed the graffiti 'Oxfam Bandit' after a disagreement with the aid agency, and it ended up in the media.

The situation can be exacerbated by the fact that journalists earn a very poor wage and so don't tend to spend a long time checking out both sides or writing stories. 'There is a problem with the media in Aceh – they often don't investigate too deeply, they publish one rumour and then apologise afterwards,' says Taufan Damanik of the Aceh Institute and the KKSP Foundation which works in Medan and Aceh.

'A journalist in Banda Aceh can often earn around 200,000 rupiah a month [around £11],' explains Yon Thayrun, previously a journalist and now also a spokesperson for Oxfam. 'To survive, journalists have to have another job and they don't have time to spend hours on a story.'

Some NGOs are concerned about the increasing use of advertorial – the practice of paying to place a story. According to T. Ardiansyah of the Kata Hati Institute, who monitors media coverage, half a page in a local newspaper costs about 15-17 million rupiah, with the journalist getting around 15 per cent.

Other NGOs say they've been rung up by a journalist and told that if they don't give the reporter some money, they'll run a critical story. Journalists also increasingly expect 'travel expenses' – an envelope of cash – if they turn up to a press conference.

'That's a no go for us,' says Oxfam GB's Chapoy, who feels her agency has made real efforts to co-operate with the media. 'If we have journalists ringing up asking for money, we say run the story but get our comments and run a balanced story.'

Increasingly for NGOs, one of the unexpected effects of the rise of citizen journalism may be that it's not so much the media they need to convince as the communities they're working with.

'What you have to understand about Banda Aceh is that it is a big part of the culture to sit in the coffee shops, read the newspapers and complain if they see something different from what they hoped for,' says Taufan Damanik. 'While in Java they may not want to say things straight out, in Aceh they are right in your face. They've been fighting for a long time, so their spirit is very strong.'

4 The changing relationship

The Times is going to have to compete with those who can very cheaply travel to those parts of the world [i.e. Africa] and upload their video news stories or blogs and trigger a news landslide in Niger.

(Gordon Weiss, UNICEF)⁸⁶

Communication has changed; everyone is a content producer and people take their information from lots of different sources in lots of different ways – on a mobile, via a blog, online. They are looking for authenticity of voice: peer to peer recommendation that can be just as powerful as journalism.

(Liz Scarff, Save the Children)⁸⁷

In the past, the rules of reporting were straightforward when a humanitarian crisis occurred. Agencies acted as gatekeepers to disaster zones; they got a name check in return for facilitating access for journalists. The result was a relationship in which it was to the advantage of both sides that the media ‘story’ was as strong and simple as possible. There are exceptions to this in other countries (see box below, ‘NGOs and the media in Sri Lanka’ on a fraught relationship) but in the UK, aid agencies have by and large enjoyed a cosy relationship with reporters.

While giving the 1997 *Guardian* Lecture on reporting in African wars, John Ryle summed it up thus:

There is a high degree of complicity between aid workers and journalists. News reporters draw on aid sources to a greater extent than they would use a single source in other situations. They are often physically dependent on aid agencies for accommodation in the field. Aid workers are liable to be their primary informants. Aid organizations, in their turn, are dependent to an unhealthy extent on journalists for publicity in order to raise money for their programs.⁸⁸

But with the growth of user-generated content, John Naughton, professor of public understanding of technology at the Open University, believes that control is changing. ‘There’s a kind of corrupt, symbiotic relationship between aid agencies and journalists and the narrative was shaped by that,’ he says. ‘The interesting thing is that UGC is now blowing that apart.’⁸⁹

What does that mean? After the Pakistan quake, a doctor called Irfan Noor was one of those who emailed the BBC about the work he was doing

⁸⁶ Speaking at an AlertNet debate, *Children, Crises and the Media*, 11 July 2006.

⁸⁷ Interview, London, September 2010.

⁸⁸ J. Ryle, ‘The hazards of reporting complex emergencies in Africa’, lecture delivered at Nuffield College, Oxford, 30 October 1997.

⁸⁹ Interview, Cambridge, 27 November 2006.

among the earthquake victims. When his details had been verified by one of the journalists who works in the UGC centre of the BBC, he went on to record a two-week diary for the corporation about his work in Peshawar, Odhi and Balakot.⁹⁰

The significance for aid agencies of this simple email to the BBC is as follows: this is the kind of information and case study they would have traditionally provided in the past. So the growth of UGC means that potentially NGOs are not as valuable to the media as they once were.

But aid agencies have recognised this potential threat – and they have moved to ensure they continue to get the coverage they want.

The cannies had in fact seen an opportunity before UGC took off, at the time of the 2000 US election. Many news organisations had seen their foreign budgets swallowed up, thanks to reporters and producers having to hang around in Florida while the hanging chads saga played itself out. And while some more money was made available for overseas reporting following 9/11 and then the Iraq war, many foreign correspondents found themselves restricted to going to Iraq and Afghanistan.

As Christina Lamb of the *Sunday Times* said:

I think the problem is that Iraq and Afghanistan means that the second tier disasters can suffer. I don't just mean financially because of budgets but because of what the correspondents are covering. I know if I want to go to Africa on a story about some kind of aid work the news desk are likely to say yes well but we would like you to go to Afghanistan – now that didn't used to be like that and that is definitely post 9/11.⁹¹

In short, there was a vacuum in foreign reporting – and the savvier aid agencies rushed to fill that gap, turning themselves into reporters for the mainstream media, providing cash-strapped foreign desks with footage and words *gratis*.

If you cycle all the way up the Cowley Road in Oxford, right on the outskirts you will eventually reach a large and rather soulless-looking business park which appears to be miles from anywhere except a Tesco store. Among the large boxy buildings is Oxfam House. The charity moved into the 85,000-square-foot open-plan building in 2003, leaving the nine rather haphazard buildings it previously inhabited around Summertown, north Oxford. The new building, with its clean open-plan design, coffee shop and play area, encapsulates how aid agencies have professionalised in the last decade.

⁹⁰ I. Noor, 'Doctor's diary: We need tents', BBC Online: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4328028.stm

⁹¹ Phone interview, August 2007.

After a strategic review in the late 1990s, Oxfam realised dramatic changes had to be made, according to Alex Renton, a former *Independent* and *Evening Standard* journalist who was appointed media and advocacy co-ordinator in Asia in 2001 (and who still works for the agency part of the year). Part of that review was to give each region a media/advocacy person on the ground – immediately doubling the size of the press operation.

But there was also the question of old-fashioned competition. Christian Aid had hired John Davison (ex-*Independent* and *Sunday Times*) and Dominic Nutt (ex-Press Association) to shake up their press office. ‘They were doing a lot of stuff, commenting on places where they didn’t always have big programmes, getting a lot of attention and running the press office like a newsroom,’ says Renton. ‘It raised a lot of eyebrows at Oxfam – and a lot of hackles.’⁹²

Oxfam fought back by appointing as head of media Paul Mylrea, a former Reuters bureau chief who had set up the humanitarian website AlertNet and who later went on to become head of communications at DfID. Along with Justin Forsyth (who later became an adviser to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and was then appointed chief executive of Save the Children in 2010), he led the change into a more newsroom-orientated environment, according to Renton, in particular by starting to use many of their press officers as ‘fireman’ reporters – that is, ensuring that press officers were on the ground as soon as possible after a disaster, not there just to passively facilitate media requests but also to take an active role in promoting stories, and writing/filming themselves. Today on the ground at a disaster, you are likely see an Oxfam press officer who is just as well equipped if not more so than a journalist. Oxfam protocol means that a press officer sent out to a disaster will take one international mobile and organise a local mobile while out there, a satellite phone, a laptop (capable of transmitting 300DPI stills and short video clips), and a digital camera, write a diary for the website every day that can be used as a blog and if possible arrange accreditation as press in order to ‘pass checkpoints, get into press briefings and so on’.⁹³ Most major aid agencies will do the same.

Aid agencies promoted themselves into the reporter role; instead of merely facilitating, they are attempting to influence the news agenda by providing the story themselves. The apogee of this approach occurred during Cyclone Nargis.

On 18 May 2008, the BBC’s *Ten O’Clock News* led with a remarkable account of the cyclone. The filmed package told the poignant story of one family left marooned in a sea of mud whose youngest member baby, Amoth, was found alive floating in amongst a sea of corpses. It was, said the BBC’s

⁹² Phone interview, 4 September 2007.

⁹³ *Guide to Media Work in Emergencies*, Oxfam internal document.

Andrew Harding, who had voiced the report, a unique glimpse into Burma's misery. But what was unusual was this 2-minute 27-second report at the top of the programme had not been filmed by the BBC or by Harding. All but 32 seconds had been filmed by Jonathan Pearce of the aid agency Merlin.⁹⁴

These developments mean there has been a potentially dangerous blurring of lines. In 2007, I carried out a survey of UK national newspapers as part of the *Guardian* Research Fellowship at Nuffield College Oxford. One of the questions asked was whether the media used aid workers as reporters (that is, for writing news stories rather than opinion pieces). A third of newspapers admitted that they would. Leonard Doyle – then of the *Independent* – was most explicit, citing his small staff and low budget.⁹⁵

Both the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* said that they would not use aid workers as reporters usually but would 'consider strong pieces from aid workers during the bigger disasters'. The *Guardian* said that they would rarely use them on the news pages; they were much more likely to use them for blogging or comment pieces, but did not rule it out.

It was the *Daily Mail* that took the strongest view that they would not take pieces from agencies because 'their news values are generally very different to ours'.

For many, this blurring is inevitable, because NGOs have become the main home of foreign reporting as mainstream media have retreated. The distinguished photographer Marcus Bleasdale said in 2008: 'Over the last ten years I would say 80–85% [of my work] has been financed by humanitarian agencies. To give one example, in 2003 I made calls to 20 magazines and newspapers saying I wanted to go to Darfur. Yet I made one call to Human Rights Watch, sorted a day rate, expenses and five days later I was in the field.'⁹⁶

Bleasdale has had a long and distinguished career and his abilities and impartiality are not in doubt. But what about what might happen in less experienced hands – what Dan Gillmor has called 'almost-journalism', when humanitarians try to act as reporters?⁹⁷ What agenda is being followed then? Gillmor warns: 'They're falling short today in several areas, notably the one that comes hardest to advocates: fairness.'

Dr Natalie Fenton of Goldsmiths has raised the opposite concern – that by conforming to the dominant media logic, these aid agencies are losing

⁹⁴ 'New evidence of cyclone horror', BBC1, *Ten O'Clock News*, 18 May 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/7407483.stm>

⁹⁵ Interview, London, 16 January 2007.

⁹⁶ Speaking at *The News Carers: Are aid groups doing too much real newsgathering?*, debate at the Frontline Club, New York, 28 February 2008.

⁹⁷ D. Gillmor, 'Helping the almost-journalists do journalism', 23 July 2008: <http://citmedia.org/blog/2008/07/23/helping-the-almost-journalists-do-journalism>

opportunity for advocacy and any credibility they possess by their distinction from the elite^{98 99}.

However, by producing camera-ready copy, are these agencies performing the basics of journalism, as we understand it: quoting those who disagree, and hunting hard for data and facts that both contradict and support their stand and then producing a nuanced conclusion? (Note: I am not claiming that all journalists do this, but this is the ideal.)

Certainly, in recent times, TV stations appear to be less *laissez faire* about using NGOs as their unpaid reporters. Using the Merlin package referred to earlier, the BBC mentioned its debt to the aid agency in the cue, script and aston (the on-screen caption).

So, aid agencies are adapting once more to utilise a fragmenting media by looking for imaginative ways to capture the media spotlight - or they are becoming citizen journalists themselves?

On AOL, there was a series of blogs from Sri Lanka written by someone called Anjali Kwatra – the Asia specialist in the Christian Aid press office at the time of the tsunami. The Disasters Emergency Committee in its Sudan appeal in 2007 persuaded the leaders of the UK's three main parties to each record a message that could be put up on YouTube.¹⁰⁰ To mark World Aids Day in 2008, the British Red Cross teamed up with the teenage social networking site Bebo to launch a campaign called 'What's the Story?'¹⁰¹ It aimed to raise awareness of HIV and the Red Cross among 15–25-year-olds, through videos, quizzes and an especially created soap opera. It achieved 39,000 views and nearly 1,000 people wanting to sign up to receive more information.¹⁰²

Perhaps the most striking example of this so far, however, is Save the Children's #blogladesh campaign conducted over Twitter in September 2010, utilising three so-called 'mummybloggers'.

The background to the campaign was Save the Children's desire to raise awareness for the Millennium Development Goals summit in New York in the same month, and achieve 100,000 signatures for the Press for Change campaign around pneumonia and diarrhoea. David Cameron was not attending because his fourth child was due to be born and Deputy Prime

⁹⁸ N. Fenton (ed.) (2009) *New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in a Digital Age* (London: Sage), debated at a seminar of the same name, British Academy, London, 19 November 2008.

⁹⁹ This was certainly an area of criticism that World Vision faced when it co-operated with the Channel 4 reality show *Millionaire's Mission*, a four-part series in which eight wealthy entrepreneurs went to Uganda to work with the charity and come up with different business plans to help raise a community out of poverty in ways that NGOs might not have thought of. The charity co-operated with Silver River productions to make the Channel 4 entertainment/reality show series when many other NGOs turned down the opportunity; the result was a 50% increase in traffic to their website after the programmes.

¹⁰⁰ DEC press release, 'Blair, Cameron and Campbell announce support for DEC appeal for Darfur and Chad', 25 May 2007:

<http://www.dec.org.uk/item/87>

¹⁰¹ www.bebo.com/hivwhatsthestory

¹⁰² Campaign information from British Red Cross, January 2008.

Minister Nick Clegg was attending instead. To interest journalists – and the public – in the substance of 10 UN-agreed goals was going to be a hard ask, as was putting pressure on Clegg.

Liz Scarff was the recently appointed digital media manager at Save the Children UK, tasked with looking for innovative ways to use social media to promote Save the Children's campaigns and profile. She attended a Cybermummy blogging conference in London in the summer of 2010 and believed that she had stumbled on to a particularly useful resource for Save the Children's needs. Scarff recalls:

I was actually not quite sure what to expect or what quality their [the mummy bloggers] writing would be like and I was really surprised how passionate these women were about writing – it was a real eye opener about what motivated them to do it and they had the confidence to get up and speak.¹⁰³

Convinced this could work well for the charity, she came up with the idea of taking three of them on a trip to see Save the Children's work and to let them use their blogs, tweets and online presence to reach Save the Children's target audience. 'It was a deliberate decision to go for mummy bloggers – they share the interest of the charity, they were perfect for their community – they were our target audience for Save the Children,' says Scarff. 'Who could be more powerful to tell stories about children than mothers who have their hopes and dreams for their own children?'

But it was more carefully planned than that remark might seem. Scarff selected three mummy bloggers to target who were already well established online and who had some kind of writing or PR experience: Sian To, Josie George and Eva Keogan tweeted under the names @mummytips, @porridgebrain and @nixdminx respectively. Each had around 2,500 followers on Twitter at the time.

To also ran a specialist parenting PR company, as Clear as PR, and helped organise the CyberMummy conference. George's blog sleepisfortheweak.org.uk was number 1 on the Tots 100 Index of UK Parents Blogs at the time and she also ran a weekly writing workshop for other bloggers. Keoghan, who had originally worked for the PR consultant Lynne Franks, now worked as a social media consultant and was also a high-profile lifestyle blogger, nixdminx.com. However, none of the three had done a press trip similar to what Scarff was suggesting – going to see aid agency work in a developing world context.

'I was upfront about Save the Children's agenda,' says Scarff, who invited the three to Save the Children's head office in Farringdon Road, London:

¹⁰³ Interview, London, November 2010.

We wanted to raise issues around the MDGs in order to put pressure on Nick Clegg. I didn't tell them what to write. They could say anything they liked – we gave up control. I was confident however that the Save the Children work was good enough. I believed in what we were doing.¹⁰⁴

The results surprised the aid agency. With the commitment of the mummybloggers, 40,000 people had been reached in one morning as the three started tweeting. Two days later – and a full week before the bloggers were due to leave – the #blogladesh hashtag had trended on Twitter.

The mummybloggers targeted well-known celebrities who tweet, asking them to mention #blogladesh. They included actor Stephen Fry (1.7 million followers), DJ Richard Bacon (1.3 million followers), TV host Davina McCall (375,000) and pop star Boy George (13,000). This inspired journalists such as India Knight to start tweeting, and interest from publications such as *PR Week*.

The three mummybloggers also kept up the pressure by uploading a huge amount of multimedia while out on their trip, which began on the 30 August 2010. They continued to blog, tweet and upload pictures to Flickr while out in Bangladesh – and took part in a webchat on the British Mummy Bloggers site.

Out there they were blogging, tweeting and took pictures,' recalls Scarff, who accompanied the mums. Josie did a blog for Sky and I did one for AOL. If we'd taken a journalist they would have just had one network to feed into. Here we had three [different women] and it was a live event.

Scarff says that the approach taken by Save the Children was as if it had been a press trip:

I think a lot of why it worked was that the bloggers were treated like journalists in many ways. If you read a lot of the approaches by product PR companies they are pretty patronising. So, even though in the field [the mummybloggers] didn't operate like journalists, giving them the same respect and treatment that you would a journalist, i.e. they still want to write about good stories, and they don't all want the same content, and understanding that their audience is just as important, was key.

By the time the three returned on the 7 September, major news outlets had picked up on the success of the social media drive. Interviews took place on Radio 4's *Today* programme, the ITV lunchtime news, 5 Live and World

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Service Radio. By now 10 million people had been reached, over 100 blogs had been written on the subject, the powerful website Mumsnet invited one of the three, Josie George, to its webchat with Nick Clegg, and Save the Children also decided to take Sian To to the MDG summit in New York, where she questioned Clegg. All for a cost of, Scarff estimates, around £5,000 outlay (mainly flights and accommodation for the three).

Why did it work so well? 'We entered a niche community,' says Scarff of the campaign's success.

The way I often think about social media is that it operates in a sense like local and regional newspapers used to. You can use social media in the same way. Of course you can't replicate exactly what we did – because it was a novelty – you can't do mummy bloggers again but you could do food bloggers or political bloggers.

In a fragmenting media world, where aid agencies are becoming increasingly competitive in how they raise awareness and attention, find and keep new donors, many more will look in this direction.

NGOs and the media in Sri Lanka

While UK agencies may complain about what they see as harsh treatment in the media – something that is not borne out by content analysis – they should be grateful that they do not have the same kind of treatment as NGOs in Sri Lanka.

There is a joke that goes round about aid agencies in Colombo. Try saying the acronym NGO in a Sri Lankan accent; it sounds very much like the word 'enjoy' – and that, say many journalists, is the attitude aid workers have taken to their work in the country.

Certainly that's how many Sri Lankan newspapers have tried to portray NGOs since the tsunami: as fat cats enjoying their dollar salaries, riding round in big cars and staying in the best hotels. Of course this is not an unfamiliar criticism: it's one that agencies come across in many different countries.

But the attacks on NGOs have been so sustained in Sri Lanka that in 2007, after the second anniversary of the tsunami, agencies in Colombo came together to talk about this.

Simon Harris, who has worked as a senior manager and consultant with international NGOs in Sri Lanka for over 15 years, says the local media took a hostile attitude to aid groups fairly early on.

'They began to refer to the NGO congestion of humanitarian space that was occurring as a "second tsunami" – that was a catchphrase that was used quite a lot,' he says. 'People started to ask what were all these people doing, what were the benefits of having them here? Added to that, Colombo hotels were at 100 per cent capacity, restaurants were full of white faces and people started to ask questions.'

Was that criticism justified? Ranga Kalansooriya of the Sri Lankan Press Institute says: 'The media is no different from the rest of society; it reflects it... There is still an island mentality attacking international institutions.'

And Harris believes that, while the rapid proliferation of international post-tsunami

NGOs undoubtedly complicated the delivery of humanitarian assistance, it also provided a convenient scapegoat for a politically partisan national media to distract domestic public focus from the shortcomings of the government's own relief efforts and the breakdown of the peace process.

But it didn't help that the hundreds of new international NGOs on the ground required staff – and often lured them with higher salaries from local NGOs, the military and government.

And aid agencies didn't always prove their own best ambassadors. Journalists in Colombo complain about the fact that agencies have offices on Gregory's Road (one of the smartest roads in Colombo), and as one journalist who works for an international media organisation puts it: 'Why are all the aid workers in the Gallery Cafe (one of the city's best restaurants) at lunchtime?'

The familiar white sports utility vehicles came in for particular criticism as a symbol of NGOs' high living. But as one aid worker working on the east coast in Batticaloa [then subject to a curfew and under fire] says in exasperation:

Why do NGOs have to travel in these kind of big vehicles? It's because of the security issues – and the government also imposes rules and regulations. NGOs can't simply use a commuter van to get around in – otherwise they are not immediately identifiable.

While many of the international NGOs worked hard after the tsunami to ensure their efforts in Sri Lanka were recognised back home, and media departments organised trips, footage and photographs to show donors that money was well spent, they did not always focus on explaining themselves so well to the Sri Lankan media, something that some NGOs now privately admit they needed to do.

The consequences of bad publicity in the Sri Lankan media were not just irritating – they could be dangerous, provoking riots or causing staff to come under attack. In January 2007, after the Dutch agency ZOA was accused of providing support to Tamil Tiger rebels (an allegation it strongly denied), an angry mob stormed its office.

Then in February 2007, diplomats from a dozen countries as well as UN agencies held a media conference to rebut this kind of allegation and warned that international NGOs were willing to quit the country if this kind of 'irresponsible' stories persisted.

But agencies have also turned to other ways to connect with the Sri Lankan people, including creating their own media. Television production company YATV (Young Asian Television) has formed partnerships with different agencies such as Norwegian Church Aid, CARE Sri Lanka and Plan International.

Concerned that tsunami stories in the press focused on aid efforts that were behind schedule or where things had gone wrong, the U.S. Agency for International Development helped fund a series of programmes called 'Coastal Rising'. It looked for unashamedly upbeat positive stories – what US Ambassador Robert O'Blake called at its launch 'the other side of the story – stories of hope, courage and success'.

The series, filmed in different parts of Sri Lanka, was made in Sinhalese, Tamil and English, and as well as TV programmes there were also radio programmes and articles in local newspapers to try to redress the balance.

USAID also helped support a trilingual YATV soap opera-style drama, *The East is Calling*. Set in the aftermath of the tsunami, it shows Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims seeking refuge from the wave in a Buddhist temple. The director, Sri Lanka filmmaker Asoka Handagama, said the idea was to plant 'culturally sensitive ideas' into the drama.

Plan International produced a video with YATV called *After the Big Wave*, which was specifically designed to explain the science behind the tsunami to the children who had suffered from it.

More conventionally, the Sri Lankan Press Complaints Commission has made it clear to NGOs that if they feel stories in the press are unfair they can complain to the independent body, which will then attempt to resolve the dispute.

The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, an umbrella group for NGOs, has formed a media working group. There is still a long way to go. One of their first moves was to organise an evening in which journalists were invited to meet members of NGOs in an attempt to help both sides understand each other better.

Those who attended that evening said there were lots of NGOs talking over the snacks and soft drinks, but – perhaps predictably – very few journalists.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

'The past two years have seen unprecedented attention lavished on disasters by the media, by the public and by aid organisations across the world,' concludes International Federation of the Red Cross secretary general Markku Niskala in an introduction to the organisation's *2006 World Disaster Report*.¹⁰⁵ Such attention has continued to grow in the aftermath of the tsunami – and new media has given the opportunity for imaginative reporting from disaster areas that would previously have remained off limits such as Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (Burma).

There is no room for complacency. But the indications are that both the media and NGOs are grappling with the challenges of new media and current public interest in humanitarian disasters to engage and keep that curiosity.

Traditionally, media and aid agencies have worked closely together; it has been in the interests of both that the story remains as strong and simple as possible. The public now have other means of hearing what is happening through user-generated content (UGC), and neither media nor NGOs can control the story as they once could.

Yet, due to the media's budget – and time – constraints, the temptation is for this symbiotic relationship to enter a new phase, where aid agencies either become the journalist or use those who are not professional journalists to tell their stories. The media need to separate themselves from this so that the authorship of stories does not become confused.

The argument for this is simple. Humanitarian crises require rigorous reporting. Just because bad things happen, critical faculties should not be suspended. The funding that went to non-existent tsunami orphans compared to the very real adult male survivors left without sufficient money to rebuild their communities should act as a warning to those who feel the cosy relationship between the media and aid agencies can continue.

Is it realistic to believe, however, that in an age of budget cuts, newspapers and broadcasters would turn down free copy/footage? The initial answer is probably no; no media organisation could afford to do so.

But the truth is, can they afford *not* to take the risk in doing so? There has been a succession of scandals in recent times over authenticity: the BBC's documentary about the Queen which (erroneously) seemed to suggest that she walked out in a huff; the *Mirror's* publication of abuse of Iraqis by British soldiers.

In a fragmenting media world, reputation is more important than ever, and if media organisations do not make clear that they are using people as

¹⁰⁵ *World Disasters Report: Focus on Neglected Crises 2006*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

reporters who are not observers but major players in the game, then potentially the consequences are more serious.

For example, Ethan Zuckerman of Harvard's Berkman Center (and co-founder of Global Voices) in a recent article for the Nieman Journalism Lab points to a succession of stories where advocacy has competed with facts – and advocacy has won. For example, he points out that in 2007, UNAIDS had to cut its estimate of new HIV infections by 40 per cent, after critics complained that the figures had persistently been overestimated in order to create a sense of urgency and raise money. Zuckerman comments:

It's a mistake to read the UNAIDS revisions as an isolated case of bad actors manipulating data to their benefit. Rather, it is better understood as a result of a system which encourages activists, researchers and relief workers to seek media attention for their causes, while asking them to serve as primary sources for reporting on the same issues.¹⁰⁶

The most effective and simple way of ensuring that these lines are no longer blurred is that reporters and editors should always ask themselves the key question: 'How would I portray this piece of material if it were given to me by a profit-making organisation rather than an NGO?'

Thus: Is footage/copy clearly labelled that it was made by an NGO? If part of a wider story/feature, have there been good efforts to rely on other sources other than the NGO? If there are no other sources, is it made clear that these figures/statistics are from an NGO?

And if a journalist has been taken to the field by an aid agency, they should ask: would they do the same if Shell or Cadbury Schweppes or HSBC were funding the trip?

These are questions that journalists have had to bear in mind in recent conflicts such as Afghanistan and the Iraq war. Many media organisations thought carefully about how they should label reports from a frontline when journalists were embedded. Similar consideration should also be given to what Simon Cottle has termed 'beneficent embedding' of journalists with aid agencies.¹⁰⁷ According to Stephan Oberreit, communications director at MSF-France, during the tsunami crisis, the media, 'crossed the line' from being reporters to being humanitarian actors.¹⁰⁸ The same was seen in Haiti, as described earlier. Meanwhile, some aid agencies, such as Save the Children's

¹⁰⁶ E. Zuckerman, 'Advocacy, agenda and attention: Unpacking unstated motives in NGO journalism', Nieman Journalism Lab, January 2010: <http://www.niemanlab.org/2010/01/ethan-zuckerman-advocacy-agenda-and-attention-unpacking-unstated-motives-in-ngo-journalism/>

¹⁰⁷ S. Cottle and D. Nolan (2007), 'Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid-Media Field: "Everyone was dying for footage"', *Journalism Studies*, vol. 8, issue 6, pp. 862–78.

¹⁰⁸ *World Disasters Report 2005*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

'mummybloggers', are using those who blog or tweet in the same 'beneficent embedding' way.

We have to live in the real world; as has been previously noted, foreign budgets have been slashed, and free copy is always tempting. Without it, important stories go in danger of not being reported. So I am not saying that journalists cannot work with NGOs; that NGOs can never contribute to important stories, write for newspapers or record footage that can be used by broadcasters.

The issue here is in many ways a simple one of labelling: making sure that stories are flagged up clearly as comment pieces; if the piece is a feature, that there is a clear byline stating where the author of the piece works. That then ensures the viewer/reader has a sense of the agenda and authorship of the piece, rather than being unaware of who the 'journalist' really is (something that was made clear in the 'mummybloggers' story).

This research has shown the importance of disaster reporting and how it affects both aid and action from both the public and politicians. One last consideration: should this mean that such a subject should be treated more responsibly by the mainstream media?

At the 23rd Biannual Conference of Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) in Madrid in 2008, Sally Begbie of the Hong Kong-based NGO Crossroads, raised an intriguing question: could it be time for putting together a form of Media Social Responsibility?

She meant something analogous to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), in which organisations consider the interests of society by taking responsibility for the impact of their activities on customers, employees, communities and the environment.

She quoted Boutros Boutros-Ghali – 'CNN is the 16th member of the Security Council' – and while making clear that agencies must remember that the media always has ratings and readership to consider, she asked whether it was time for journalists to take on the idea that they, too, have a responsibility to give the voiceless a voice.

Unsurprisingly, this view was immediately challenged by Rafael Vilasanjuán, deputy director of the Centre for Contemporary Culture in Barcelona, who pointed out that, while the media could be seen as a kind of 'watchdog', alerting the public to issues, NGOs and the media have different audiences and stakeholders and both sectors have very different roles.

This is true, and, as discussed earlier, much of the difficulty in recent times between aid agencies and the media has been the failure to maintain the difference in these roles. But taking that as given, the media could introduce certain changes in relation to language, photography and follow-up that would improve reporting.

First, journalists should consider their use of language. There have

been big changes over the past two decades in the way that race and mental health issues are reported. Much of this is due to changing public perceptions. But there were also sustained campaigns by race and mental health campaigning groups to stop unthinking prejudice – and as in a successful campaign by the charity MIND in 1998, language was one of the ways to do this. Aid agencies should consider running a similar campaign.

The Red Cross Code of Conduct suggests encouraging the media to refer to those who live through disasters as ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims’. It is a small change that can, however, be telling. By all means, those who have died in disasters can be labelled as victims; but those who survive, and are going to have to rebuild their lives, should not be categorised as helpless and passive individuals. Aid agencies should make this clear to the journalists they work with, even if this means picking journalists up on loose use of language (never popular) and writing to editors when survivors are routinely referred to as victims.

Second, the use of images needs to be considered. Many aid agencies have strict rules about how survivors – and victims – are photographed. For example, they do not like the media using pictures of starving children as they did in the 1980s Ethiopian famine, arguing that such images can reinforce debasing stereotypes of Africa and rob the subjects of their dignity.

In an AlertNet debate on children, crises and the media in 2006, Toby Porter, emergencies director of Save the Children UK, argued that agencies could often be too precious about such things. ‘I have a real problem with this notion that we shouldn’t show pictures of starving children if they are starving,’ he said. He went on to describe how he was once told not to use a picture of a child photographed from above because it was patronising. ‘(That’s) intellectual claptrap [thought up] by people who have got nothing better to do...,’ he added.¹⁰⁹

Porter makes a valid point. If the story is about starving children, then it is illogical not to photograph them. But to dismiss sensitivities as ‘intellectual claptrap’ is not correct. The global reach of the tsunami deaths should perhaps have given the media pause for thought over the use of such photographs.

Westerners were only a small percentage of the tsunami deaths. National media in the UK were careful not to use dead bodies of Westerners which could be identified and distress relatives. In a globalised world the same dignity and restraint should be used for any victim of such a disaster. This does not mean that dead bodies – the sheer human toll – should never be used, but that victims should not be regarded as anonymous fodder for a front page – as appeared to become the case in the Haitian earthquake. The question still remains: should Sanjay Gupta’s CNN colleagues have switched

¹⁰⁹ Speaking at an AlertNet debate, *Children, Crises and the Media*, 11 July 2006.

off the cameras when he was treating victims of the earthquake? Would they have filmed in the same way if it had been an 'ordinary' doctor treating survivors?

The BBC's Editorial Guidelines make clear that images and words must be chosen with care when covering stories that report suffering and distress. They state:

*We will always need to consider carefully the editorial justification for portraying graphic material of human suffering and distress.... It is always important to respect the privacy and dignity of the dead. We should never show them gratuitously. We should also avoid the gratuitous use of close ups of faces and serious injuries or other violent material.*¹¹⁰

The BBC makes clear this should not mean that reporters self-censor, but that sensitivity is called for when reporting stories like this – and not just of Western victims. The Ofcom Code also touches on this, although not as explicitly:

*Broadcasters should not take or broadcast footage or audio of people caught up in emergencies, victims of accidents or those suffering a personal tragedy, even in a public place, where that results in an infringement of privacy, unless it is warranted or the people concerned have given consent.*¹¹¹

There is no such suggestion, however, in the Press Complaints Commission Code. My suggestion would be that Ofcom and the PCC reflect the BBC's editorial guidelines more closely and amend their codes.

Third, commit to the story as you would to a crime. On 8 October 2007, the *World Tonight* on Radio 4 ran a six-and-a-half minute piece by Michael Buchanan from Balakot, Pakistan. On the second anniversary of the South Asia quake, it detailed how many people were still living in temporary accommodation as they approached their third winter after the disaster.

After the tsunami, the *Guardian* committed itself to following the village of Nusa near to Banda Aceh for a year as it slowly and painfully rebuilt itself.

The sheer weight of public donations to the tsunami funds meant that this was a story that, unlike many others, the news media pursued. The results were intriguing, pointed up many problems and were read widely by those who had given donations.

¹¹⁰ BBC Editorial Guidelines, Section 6:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/privacy/reportingsuffer.shtml>

¹¹¹ Ofcom Broadcasting Code 2009, Section 8.16: <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/privacy/>

Susan D. Moeller has written that:

*the media should commit to covering international affairs as they do domestic crime. If they report on the arrest of a suspect they have an ethical responsibility to follow up and report on the outcome of that arrest. Was there a plea bargain or trial? Was the defendant found innocent or guilty?*¹¹²

With large sums of money and political action at stake, the media has a responsibility to follow the stories of what happened to those who were affected by humanitarian disasters – and how the money was spent.

It would be naïve to expect the same level of interest and reportage in other disasters as was found in the tsunami, but the return to the South Asian quake and, more recently, one year on from Cyclone Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake and Haiti, shows that there is potential. While it is impossible – and undesirable – to force the media to cover any one particular story, and thus impossible to legislate for, journalistic organisations should take more seriously their responsibility to their readers to follow up on stories of humanitarian crises. Aid agencies must also accept this, as part of the responsibility to their donors.

There are big issues at stake here. Humanitarian disasters are not just another story; good and bad reporting – reporting versus ignoring a story – has a huge impact, as noted earlier, in terms of fundraising and political attention to different disasters. We have moved on from simple appeals both on the part of the media and NGOs themselves. It is worth repeating the quote from Ian Bray, senior press officer with Oxfam: ‘We do not believe aid changes the world – politics does.’¹¹³

*

The conclusions I draw from this survey of disaster reporting are these:

- User-generated content (UGC) can improve disaster reporting. This new wealth of angles can act as a corrective to the traditional Western-centric approach where aid agencies and reporters acted as voices for the silent and dispossessed.
- UGC can highlight different stories and agendas – such as the work of Ushahidi over the Kenyan elections. And with the growth of UGC,

¹¹² S. Moeller (1999), *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, War, Famine and Death* (London: Routledge).

¹¹³ Interview, April 2007.

neither aid agencies nor the traditional media can return to the control of humanitarian stories that they had in the past.

- New technology has seen a potential blurring of boundaries between journalists eager for material but strapped for cash, and aid agencies fighting in a competitive marketplace and using more creative means to get stories placed.
- Disaster reporting does make a difference. But it requires as much rigour and sophistication as any other story.

From these, I would make the following policy recommendations:

- UGC should be used carefully; checks and balances are needed; those using it should also be aware that hoaxing is common. And new media can also be used as a dangerous weapon – witness the ethnic hate spread by SMS messages in the aftermath of the December 2007 Kenyan elections. As Susan D. Moeller reported, during high level mediation sessions in Nairobi there were politically motivated bulk SMS messages, and several of the delegation received messages on their Blackberries saying ‘We know who you are. We know where you are. We will get you.’¹¹⁴
- The blurring of boundaries between aid agencies and journalists should cease. If journalists use aid workers’ words and footage they must be honest and clearly label it as such – via astons on screen or properly bylined pieces.
- If journalists are accepting a trip from an aid agency – so-called ‘beneficent embedding’ – then they should be as transparent about it as they would be if they were accepting a trip from a business.
- Conversely, if aid agencies act as reporters they must consider seriously whether they are acting as journalists, or as advocates and be clear about what they are offering the mainstream media. Is it what Dan Gillmor calls ‘almost journalism’?
- When following the drive towards new media, aid agencies should also bear in mind that any such information is now seen around the world rapidly. As Vincent Lusser of the ICRC said: ‘our colleagues in

¹¹⁴ S. Moeller, ‘Considering the media’s framing and agenda-setting roles in states’ responsiveness to natural crises and disasters’, paper given at a Harvard–World Bank workshop, Harvard Kennedy School, 29–31 May 2008.

Kabul have to think that what happens in Afghanistan can affect our colleagues elsewhere in the world.¹¹⁵

- Journalists should consider their use of language, encouraged by aid agencies; for example referring to those who live through disasters as ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims’. Aid agencies should make this clear to the journalists they work with, even if this means picking journalists up on loose use of language.
- Use of photography. In a globalised world, dignity and restraint should be used for any victim of such a disaster, not just Westerners. This does not mean that dead bodies – the sheer human toll – should never be used, but that victims should not be regarded as anonymous fodder for a front page. Ofcom and the PCC should reflect the BBC’s editorial guidelines more closely and amend their codes.
- Commit to the story as you would to a crime. With large sums of money and political action at stake, the media has a responsibility to follow up the stories of what happened to those who were affected by humanitarian disasters – and how the money was spent. Aid agencies must also accept this, as part of the responsibility to their donors.

No one should think the media and NGOs will ever be working to the same agenda. The challenge is for both to work most effectively while maintaining their roles. The job of aid agencies, according to Martyn Broughton, then of Reuters AlertNet, is to ‘get access to people to relieve suffering’ whereas for journalists, it is to ‘get information to inform the audience. If you save lives all well and good but that is not the journey.’¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Speaking at *Dispatches from Disaster Zones* conference, 13 December 2006:
<http://www.redcross.org.uk/news.asp?id=63790>

¹¹⁶ Speaking at a HPN/ALNAP/Reuters AlertNet event, *Can journalists and aid workers ever trust each other?*, 24 September 2007, at the Overseas Development Institute, London.

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