

# Media effectiveness of humanitarian responses to crises



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Is the media an impediment to or a catalyst for mobilizing appropriate external responses to crises?

In this globalised world, the role of media in the humanitarian sector has been a popular topic for debate and research. Many articles and books have argued the importance of media as an actor in enabling humanitarian response and that media has the assumed power to influence and drive local and international government, humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisation (NGOs) to formulate responses to crises, such as policy responses, delivery of aid and interventions, to save lives and/or reduce suffering through meeting humanitarian needs. However, there are also many scholarly works that have begged to differ and justified that media may just be an instrument that communicates and validates responses and that media may not always have the direct power to shape the decision to launch an intervention in humanitarian situations due to other factors that has nothing to do with humanitarian needs. In my opinion, both points of views are rather convincing; however, for this essay, I am leaning towards the latter. Therefore, in this paper, I will discuss the factors that influence media coverage and how the media can cause an impeding effect on the effectiveness of humanitarian response and intervention in crises.

In media, perhaps the biggest factor influencing their coverage on humanitarian situations is the power of humanitarian imagery. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, media has been using images of violence, suffering and trauma to engage with the general public to generate emotion and demand that something needs to be done to alleviate suffering of those in crisis (Neuman, 2017). This is because people's "emotion are fundamentally genetically

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determined, so facial expressions of emotions are interpreted in the same way across most cultures or nations” (Ekman 1972, as cited in Lim 2016). I believe suffering and distress are both very strong emotions, and when coupled with the fact that we live in a media environment in which the competition is determined by its readership, ratings and revenue (Cottle and Nolan 2009), this explains why such images are often sought after by the media in order to create a “community of interest” as a form of solidarity (Arendt, 1973, as cited in Orgad 2013). This is with hope that it would in turn generate a large public interest which would subsequently spark a CNN effect.

By definition, According to Robinson (1999, 2013), the CNN effect is the concept whereby “mainstream news media in general, not just CNN, were having an increased effect upon foreign policy formulation” through the use of shocking images and real-time television. This means that media is seemingly the driving force for external intervention and response to a natural disaster or crisis by pressuring governments, NGOs and aid agencies to take action through the use of negative images of suffering. But the media coverage and its intensity on crises has very little, if any, to do with humanitarian needs and it is decided based on other aspects such as “geographic proximity to Western countries, costs, logistics, legal impediments (e. g. visa requirements), risk to journalists, relevance to national interest, and news attention cycles” (Jakobsen 2000). More importantly, media is critically selective on which crisis they want to cover and it is predominately determined by the level of drama and suffering it entails for a good, eye-catching story (Jakobsen 2000).

In Western conflict management, although media has the power to pressure governments to intervene militarily, the coverage and impact of media is very minimal during pre- and post-violence (because there are not of enough interest to the media and the foreign government tend to ignore calls) and it is only at its peak during the actual violence (Jakobsen 2000). For example, in the Iraq 1991, Somalia 1992 and Rwanda 1994 cases, the CNN effect was limited and despite the initial calls for intervention, they were rejected. This was the case until the media allegedly led the British Prime Minister John Major to counter the rejection by his advisors and to initiate an intervention in Iraq (Gowing 1994; as cited in Jakobsen 2000). Similarly, the Bush Administration also fell to the media's pressure to mobilise an intervention when the "television tipped it 'over the top'" (Gowing 1994; as cited in Jakobsen 2000). Here, we can see that media coverage in both print and television is essential in initiating a foreign intervention but, in my opinion, they were not directly because of humanitarian needs but more towards the interest of a potential political scandal. Although the governments responded to the second call due to public pressure and the hypothesis that it could have lower risk of losses, the role of the media here has limited impact on preventing and sustaining the response. If it were a catalyst to mobilising a response, I believe it should have been during the preventive call, however, this is problematic as it is highly subjected to the severity of the crisis at stake at that time.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, news headlines and television coverage went off the charts as the media aired and published graphic sights of death and suffering which were heavily exaggerated and irrational and as

a consequence, there was an overestimation of death toll (Rodriguez and Dynes 2006). Similarly, when the world's deadliest tsunami disaster hit the shores of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004, killing approximately 230, 000 lives (Brauman 2004), images and videos of people being swept away by the waves were posted online by the Western tourists creating a "tourist effect" while these were also broadcasted and printed on every television channel and worldwide due to the scale and timeliness of the disaster. Therefore, the media as a whole generated a lot of emotional response, especially since it coincided with the Christmas holidays. Although a significant number of Western tourists were killed in this disaster, they only comprised of less than 15 per cent of the total victims yet they occupied 40 per cent of media coverage collectively (CARMA International 2006). As a result, this had created a worldwide mobilisation of humanitarian relief with financial aid of \$13 billion which broke all records by the National Red Cross organisations, NGOs and national governments (Brauman 2004) because of its unambiguous nature and the presence of Western tourists (CARMA International 2006).

On the surface level, it does seem like media was a catalyst for mobilising humanitarian aid to the affected countries following the tsunami. However, the problem lies when aid arrives at its destination. Firstly, according to Brauman (2004), natural disasters do not produce the same type of consequences as armed conflicts; they do not have the same number of wounded, duration nor the same sort of displacement of population which means that the amount of that went out to the 2004 disaster was a waste.

Secondly, just like the case with Hurricane Katrina, Brauman (2004) also

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discussed the impulsive decisions of needing to have “ mass graves, set up a system for prevention and detection of infectious diseases and to undertake mass immunisation campaigns” in fear of an epidemic, which was also deemed as a waste of effort due to the fact that epidemics has never happened in such situations in history and that the bodies do not pose a threat to public health. To make things worse, legal and financial problems may arise since mass burial means that family and friends do not get to honour the dead and there are no death certificates (de Ville de Goyet 2000, as cited in Brauman 2004). Lastly, although aid workers are essential to helping the injured, the oversupply of this resource as a result of pressure from mass media coverage (both traditional and new) can act as a hindrance to the efficiency of a humanitarian response. When thousands of relief workers, doctors and nurses were deployed to scene, Brauman (2004) reported that they were not as useful as they thought since local doctors and nurses who are familiar with the environment and language were already systematically operational, effectively becoming a burden instead of an aid.

Because of the way the disaster gained the media’s attention and got the amount of coverage it did, I believe the external response and funding would have been weaker if it had not affected the elites as much, such as in other crises, thus creating an anchor of biased coverage. This brings me back to the above war conflict; this would explain the reason why humanitarian NGOs and external government did not respond to the initial call for intervention in the above war conflict – it was due to conflict fatigue and that it was not geographically close to Western countries or in this case, the elites.

In terms of resources, it is evident that the overwhelming media coverage and the trap of the imagery can do more harm than good. Well publicised crisis are often well funded while the less publicised ones received much less. Although the media has the power to generate funding, the selective nature of media's interest in the crisis and preference for the elites affects the sustainability of the resources. In the case with Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans got the most attention even though it was not as badly affected compared to Louisiana and Mississippi simply because the media was drawn to the state of chaos and anarchy since the city was heavily populated by poor African Americans. Hence, the media's assumption that New Orleans probably had the most social chaos became the centre of the coverage because the lens go where the drama is. Simply put, the way in which media works does not produce significant humanitarian impact in the long run, especially in long-term crises, and may indeed be hindering the appropriate external response in locations that need it the most due to its preference in coverage.

Speaking of the trap of imagery, NGOs are also guilty of using negative images to related to the wider public and spur money donations (Orgad and Vella 2012). Although it can create a sense of solidarity and compassion to want to donate, it is interesting to note that audiences could also feel manipulated into donating through the feelings of guilt and cause them to be resistant (Orgad and Vella 2012). Similarly, Johannes Paulmann's findings showed that such images can spark a desire for revenge and that visual campaigns can also lead to compassion fatigue and consequently, be

counterproductive since audience would fail respond, leading to lack of donation (Paulmann, n. d.).

Sometimes, it is understandable why there are less coverage in certain areas of conflict due to accessibility and safety reasons. To go around this, the media would rely on alternative sources for information such as the NGOs on the ground, especially if they deemed official sources unreliable or have been manipulated for their political benefit (Meyer, Sangar, and Michaels 2018). In return, NGOs could get good publicity and the media could use the information to create public pressure and challenge official sources for an intervention. But it gets problematic especially if the NGO is in no position to comment but did so anyway or if they spoke outside of their expertise since this would create a misinformation and be counterproductive. In the Cottle and Nolan's reading, it discussed a number of mediated scandals stunned the humanitarian aid sector which led to the humanitarian NGOs to become more sensitive towards the media in recent years. Whether it was a wrongdoing or misinterpretation of information, the claims can cause massive damage to the public reputation of agencies and organisations. As a response to this media logic, some agencies had to come up with communication plans in order to safeguard their reputation and reduce the risk of poor publicity (Cottle and Nolan 2009). Yet, some NGOs would withdraw entirely from getting involved in the response to avoid the risks thus potentially leading to insufficient aid.

As a conclusion, it is evident that although print media and electronic media work differently in their delivery of information where the former involves more analysis while the latter is very much emotionally driven (Brauman <https://assignbuster.com/media-effectiveness-of-humanitarian-responses-to-crises/>



2004), they both lack critical analytical assessment of information which led to error in judgement and subsequently the inappropriate response to aid. The amount of effort and resources mobilised by the sensationalism of the imagery and excessive coverage by the media could have been coordinated better, channelled and used to aid other aspects of the disaster or even other crises which are neglected such as the Kashmir earthquake, the Typhoon Doksuri in Vietnam, ongoing conflicts in Africa, all of which had poor coverage. Therefore, although both traditional and new media are instrumental to quickly spread information and news about humanitarian emergencies and put pressure on officials to respond and act appropriately, it inevitably does more harm than good. It requires a joint responsibility of government, aid agencies and the media to provide the appropriate response otherwise, the media hinders the humanitarian response as a whole.

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Q3: Have social imaginaries of humanitarianism and emergency prevented appropriate responses by the humanitarian community?

What are social imaginaries? According to Charles Taylor (2004), social imaginary is " people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations". This imaginary allows us others to identify and learn about its local characteristics and distinctiveness, where they belong and about their community (Kirakosyan 2018) and analyse " how people are being encouraged to imagine the reality of their world, but also to examine the symbolic portrayal of imaginable possibilities" (Wilkinson 2013)(Wilkinson 2013). In the humanitarian sector, the concept of emergency is used to make reference to any disaster, catastrophe, conflict and human suffering while humanitarianism is " an ethical response to emergencies" as a good way of responding to those who are suffering or in need of aid (Calhoun 2004). Together, these concepts provide an idea of the necessity of providing immediate response to the sudden and unpredictable event with the aim to alleviate human suffering. Even though crises are caused by both natural and human agency, the ideas of emergency, crises and humanitarianism are indeed socially constructed (Calhoun 2004). In this essay, I will discuss the significance of the humanitarian and emergency

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imaginaries in shaping responses and how they have distorted and prevented proper humanitarian responses in crises.

According to Cannon (2008), disasters is a result of material conditions, whether natural or social factors, that affects a vulnerable community and that people's vulnerability, which is also socially constructed by the economic, political and social factors, determines the emergency. This construction of emergency imaginary is essential as it forms the moral definition and expression of the disaster from the way it is exists and recognised which in turn shapes and supports the humanitarian response. Thus, people's vulnerability depends on how some disasters affect them; whether it is due to their own willingness to expose themselves to risk or caused by political and economic processes (Cannon 2008).

In the 2004 tsunami, many people who lived on the coastline were affected by the disaster and this was mainly because they need to make a living and not because of an exploitative, political or a differentiating economic system (Cannon 2008). Although the phenomenon in itself is a natural one, the disaster is not as it is a social imaginary and it affected people due to their choice of living in a high risk location for reasons of livelihood (Cannon 2008). This sort of disaster is considered an "innocent" one because there was not an obvious actor that can be blamed for their suffering and that their inequality of race or class had nothing to do with their vulnerability. Thus, this could explain the equal relief the victims received when humanitarian aid arrived.

On the other hand, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the deaths and suffering were mostly determined by social, economic and political factors of inequality, exploitation and corruption which are actors to be blamed (Cannon 2008). There was significant loss of lives, severe destruction of property and the source of livelihood was lost. It was appalling to see that there was no proper evacuation plan, lack of coordinated response and aid from all levels of the government (Rodriguez and Dynes 2006). During the immediate aftermath of the disaster, television reported that there was a tremendous confusion about the responsibility of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Homeland Security and the local officials. As a consequence, there was lack of response and performance which led to the lack of help before the situation escalated into a dramatic social chaos. Here, it is evident how political dysfunction and racial inequality resulted in the inadequate response from officials. As the city was predominately populated by poor African Americans, this gave the press the opportunity to pursue stories of racial stereotypes in the area, making it the spotlight of the disaster and neglecting other affected cities (Rodriguez and Dynes 2006). Such reports created a social imaginary which created a public fear that even some emergency medical services refused to carry out their duties at the site. As a result, some groups were much more affected than the other and aid was not equally reached out to the marginalised victims.

Similarly, Pradeep Kumar Parida (2016) also highlighted how Sri Lankan women of different social backgrounds are in itself a social, economic and political actor that had placed them in a vulnerable position following the tsunami. The study (Parida 2016) revealed that the severity of impact the of

disaster on different groups of people was determined by the people's level of vulnerability to hazard; woman from the upper class had less difficulties dealing with the disaster compared to those from the poor or working class. Although a massive aid had arrived to help the victims, he highlighted the foreign humanitarian workers were not able to help the victims, particularly the marginalised women because there was inadequate knowledge about their political ecology and gender implication of the crisis. Thus, this proves that the social construct of gender discrimination and social class pre-disaster can have a severe impact on this group of people during and post-disaster. Without well-thought out evaluation materials and understanding of the actors involved in this historical and cultural social imaginary, foreign aid workers and officials will not be able to reach out to this group efficiently or even come up with the appropriate preventive measures of this disaster.

Another social actor worth looking into is the caste-based discrimination which in the UN terminology, it is defined as "discrimination based on work and descent" (IDSN 2013). Although it is extensive in South Asia, this form of discrimination is also present in other countries in Africa and East Asia with approximately 260 million people affected worldwide (IDSN 2013). The Dalits, also known as the untouchables, are the ones who are worst effected by both natural and man-made disasters compared to other social groups due to their marginalised social status and have limited human rights (IDSN 2013). The case study revealed how neglect in understanding caste systems and the way they work affected the kind of emergency relief they receive. For example, when they were hit by the deadly tsunami, they are deprived of access to resources such as water, food, housing, counselling

and social protection due to the deep-rooted discrimination (IDSN 2013). Not only that, their predicament went underreported and, in many cases, they were subjected to take on the immediate clean-up efforts without pay or recognition (IDSN 2013). Although not as badly affected, there were also displacements among Sri Lankans where the low caste groups were refused of food rations and were deprived of certain resources (IDSN 2013).

From these case studies, we can see that the humanitarian response is as following the traditional definition of being “ free from long-term political or economic entanglements” and focused on “ actions deemed right in themselves and the necessary moral response to emergencies” (Fassin & Pandolfi 2010). This means that the humanitarian space is only limited to material aid and assistance through food distribution, medical care and funding as long as they are socially constructed emergencies and require urgent intervention and not focused on livelihood. If this is the case, it could be an explanation why the victims had not received appropriate response from the officials and humanitarian agencies. But then again, if emergencies are sudden, unpredictable and urgent and suppose to draw people and resources into humanitarian action, and if the fundamental value of humanitarian work is to relief human suffering including loss of dignity and dehumanisation with impartiality and neutrality, humanitarian workers are effectively going against their principles and contradicting their work by neglecting to consider the abovementioned social imaginaries.

In order to mobilise appropriate humanitarian response, humanitarian NGOs and agencies, officials and the media need to work together in order to

thoroughly consider the social imaginaries of the groups of people they are  
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sending aid to. Since media is instrumental in engaging with the general public to generate emotion and demand that something needs to be done to alleviate suffering of those in crisis (Neuman, 2017), humanitarian agencies and officials should work closely with the media to prevent rumours and misconception of information from being broadcasted and educating the public so to achieve a better understanding of the community at hand. This is with hope that through better understanding of the social imaginaries, the public will be able to come up with better policies and measures to aid those who are suffering in an effective manner.

Speaking of policies, it is evident that without the consideration of the abovementioned actors in its respective disasters, humanitarian and foreign aid workers will not be able to fully understand the way the community live their lives and thus will not be able to come up with the best practices to ensure that everyone has equal accessibility to aid. This will also reduce the waste of resources. For instance, although foreign aid workers had prepared reports, surveys and evaluation materials to help with their assistance in Sri Lanka, it was not enough for them to provide the necessary aid to the marginalised women. By understanding the characteristics of this group of women, the additional information would greatly facilitate policy planners to come up with sound policies related to gender and social class in context. Besides that, officials should also consider involving women in policymaking as their knowledge can potentially aid and reduce risk of disaster impact among the marginalised women.

Similarly, negligence in understanding caste systems and its implications in crises can result in further discrimination among groups such as the Dalits  
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and other disregarded communities. The ignorance to their vulnerabilities and the lack of focus on these communities or excluding them entirely from the response assessment and management can have detrimental effect and lead further discrimination and widening of the social gap. In this case, human rights officials should work together with humanitarian NGOs and agencies, officials and the media to ensure that humanitarian intervention and/or aid meets the ethics and standards they serve to achieve. This would in turn contribute to new policies and other statutory measures to tackle discrimination in humanitarian efforts.

Therefore, all parties such as humanitarian NGOs, government officials, researchers, advisors, media and the general public should work together and gain more knowledge on the subject of crises and its implication on those who are constantly in a vulnerable position in order to provide adequate aid and at the same time promote humanitarian responsibility and ethics. Otherwise, social imaginaries will continue to hinder and prevent appropriate humanitarian response which subsequently lead to a waste of time, effort and resources.

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