

Nuffield College

Oxford



**ANYONE HERE SURVIVED A WAVE, SPEAK ENGLISH AND
GOT A MOBILE? AID AGENCIES, THE MEDIA AND
REPORTING DISASTERS SINCE THE TSUNAMI**

by

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Introduction

A harassed BBC news correspondent, under pressure from his bosses to scoop ITV, sent this message to the Oxfam press office:

Help. Have had request from BBC in London relating to an appeal to be televised next Thursday evening entitled Famine In Africa. Need urgent advice on where I can leap in and out quickly with pictures of harrowing drought victims, etc.... money no object, nor distance, only time.¹

There you have it – exposed - the attitude to disaster reporting that so many aid agencies and commentators complain about. No suggestion of getting to know the story or exploring the complex reasons behind the food shortages. Just a bald demand for good pictures.

But then, Michael Buerk *was* in a real hurry in 1984.

The BBC had heard that ITV had dramatic pictures of an African famine and wanted to rush out their own report. Buerk sent this plea to Paddy Coulter, then head of communications at Oxfam. Coulter suggested that Buerk go to Ethiopia...a suggestion that would lead several months later to a follow-up piece beginning with the words, “Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a Biblical famine now in the 20th century.”² Seven minutes of probably the biggest news story the BBC broadcasted in the 1980s, up until the fall of the Berlin Wall.

By mentioning this telex I am not denigrating Buerk’s work, just pointing out that it is all too easy to look back 20 years and assume that there was once a golden age of disaster reporting. Indeed while all aid agencies would now say that the Ethiopian famine transformed both media attitudes to disasters and their relationship with aid agencies, back in 1985 – *after* Buerk’s coverage - Mark Malloch Brown, then working for the UN, complained to John Simpson that voluntary agencies were still being “neglected” by the news media.³

So there is a self-perpetuating myth that there is always less media coverage of humanitarian emergencies than there used to be.

It’s fashionable to lament that foreign news is finished, journalists are filing ignorant and lazy stories, and that reporting is little better than the image conjured up by the late Edward Behr’s line *Anyone here been raped and speaks English*⁴.

But I believe that this is a mindset which does not represent reality.

This is not to say reporting is perfect. It is not. It’s right that there are concerns about which humanitarian disasters are being covered; and whether what Nik Gowing calls the increasing “tyranny of real time” may be exacerbating his three Fs of reporting – First, Fast and Flawed.⁵

Restricted time, and the need to retain an audience means that as *The Lancet* put it journalists are often not so much writing the first draft of history as performing the

same trick as Scheherazade, the storyteller of the Arabian Nights, forced to spin tales night after night that left the listener wanting more, because when she ceased to do so she would die⁶...just as newspapers and programmes do when they don't engage their audience.

But the events of the 26 December 2004, followed by the South Asia quake, the Niger food crisis and the Make Poverty History campaign means that no editor now automatically turns away from an earthquake in Indonesia, a wave in the Indian ocean or even starving children in an African country.

This year as part of my research I carried out a survey of the leading UK aid agencies and the foreign desks of national newspapers and broadcasters, I found that more than 70 per cent of each group thought that there is more reporting of disasters than there was five years ago. More than 80 per cent were convinced that the public were interested in such things and both thought the quality of reporting on these subjects had improved.

These findings are backed up by research published this month (Nov 2007) from the International Broadcasting Trust⁷ and also from the Fritz Institute⁸ where Prof Steven Ross found an increase in humanitarian stories about Aids, famine and child mortality in Africa.⁹

We are potentially at a pivotal moment in reporting disasters. New technology is altering how we report, where we report from and most of all who is doing the reporting. I'm talking about citizen journalism or user generated content, as it is also known. This is something that has many layers – the Poynter Institute pinpoints 11 – but for this lecture I am going to concentrate on texts, emails, blogs, footage and photographs that are created by ordinary people and used by the mainstream media. This is a great opportunity with possibilities – and pitfalls.

And this brings me to the three key points I want to explore today.

1. How citizen journalism is altering the reporting of disasters
2. How this in turn is altering the cosy relationship between journalists and aid agencies, blurring boundaries between the two.
3. And why this matters: how media coverage has a direct effect on aid.

Reporting the tsunami

Like Korem 20 years earlier, the tsunami was a milestone in disaster reporting. The timing, scale and location made this disaster unique. It happened at Christmas – a slow news period and a time when the public and even hard-bitten media executives are inclined to be charitable.

The scale was epic and it happened in places well known to Westerners. It was an easy story in many ways, a truly global drama that had victims and heroes but no villains – well, no human ones anyway. And as Mark Jones, then editor of the humanitarian website AlertNet, pointed out there was also “the slow motion manner in which the sheer scale of its destructiveness was unveiled”.¹⁰

In most disasters, the number of victims is regularly placed too high and has to be calculated down. Interest dwindles as the death toll does. In the case of the tsunami the initial estimates were far below the eventual number of deaths; the BBC News on Boxing Day reported that eight thousand were feared dead.¹¹ In fact, as the UN later estimated, 230,000 lost their lives in a matter of minutes.¹²

The response from the media was immediate. News reporters were roused from their turkey remnants; TV anchors uprooted from their comfy desks to stand in the heat of Sri Lanka and Aceh. Nick Pollard of Sky News says his station spent £100,000 in a few hours, just on excess baggage costs to get equipment out there.¹³

Was it an overreaction? Lee Cowan, a CBS news correspondent in Banda Aceh reported: “For the first time in my professional career I found a place where indescribable was actually the most accurate description; a city where 40,000 people perished in an instant, their bodies left to rot in the sun, many for several weeks. The stench is something that soaked into our memory”.¹⁴

Back home media executives were almost as overwhelmed. As Liz Hunt, then executive features editor of the Daily Mail sums up: “Take a mega wave that has been captured on camcorder, an apocalyptic impact and aftermath plus lots of middle class people on New Year holidays – and you have a mega story.”¹⁵

But what was different about the coverage this time?

The first point Hunt makes there is perhaps the crucial one. The revolution was televised. Dan Gillmor, author of *We The Media* and an expert on citizen journalism has described the tsunami as a “turning point” for user-generated content. While not the first event to use UGC, it was perhaps the first disaster where the dominant images we remember come 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 swept aside, and often a lack of comprehension on the part of onlookers that makes the footage painful to watch now. “I hope they can swim,” one man comments to his friend as they film people caught up in the wave. “Look, there’s one guy up a tree.”

As Tom Glocer, the head of Reuters pointed out, on the 26 December 2004 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 the only photos and video came from tourists armed with telephones, digital cameras and camcorders. And if you didn’t have those pictures, you weren’t on the story”.¹⁶

These images were quickly disseminated. One blog created just after the disaster called waveofdestruction.org, collected tsunami footage. Created by 22-year-old Australian blogger Geoffrey Huntley, it logged 682,366 unique visitors in just four days.

The mainstream media websites set up pages dedicated to first-hand accounts. The BBC received 400,000 messages on its message boards in the first week alone.¹⁷

“The power of internet and emails was demonstrated for the first time [with the tsunami],” agrees Kevin Bakhurst, controller of BBC News 24. “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, emailing in their stories it became a real resource as well.”¹⁸

Compare this with 9/11. Then the BBC received few emails in the early stages and could only turn two into interviews. There was no citizen journalism in the early stages.¹⁹

Yet some believed the tsunami was just a one off – that, as one commentator put it, the huge amount of user generated content was down to “rich white Westerners in bathing suits”; that this would not happen in an area where there were no tourists.

Just how wrong this was was proved in the South Asia quake.

Within eight minutes of the quake hitting Islamabad on 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.*²⁰

The BBC received 3,000 emails in the first day of the South Asia quake alone – comments, information, photographs, and messages about those missing.²¹ But importantly, as had happened with the tsunami, it was receiving information from the ground faster than its journalists or aid agencies could arrive there.

For example, the city of Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir was totally inaccessible, all roads blocked by landslides. Yet incredibly emails began to arrive from the ruined city. *Dear Brothers* read the first. *Salaam Alaykum! Many died and injured during yesterday earthquake.*²²

The speed, volume and intensity of citizen journalism have all increased almost unbelievably rapidly. In early 2005 the BBC received around 300 emails a day from viewers and listeners. Today the most recent figures stand at 12,000 a day. It received 160,000 emails from the Middle East alone during the Lebanon conflict of last year.²³

And the stories keep on coming from all over the world. However distasteful you may have found the mobile phone pictures of Saddam Hussein’s death taken by onlookers, they demolished the idea that the former dictator had gone to his death in a “sober and judicial way” as the Iraqi government originally claimed.

The photos were grainy and the video often shaky, but by beaming out the images of bloodied monks and street fires in 2007 the bloggers of Burma subverted the junta’s attempt to suppress news of protest as happened in 1988.

I am convinced the next big citizen journalism story could come out of Africa because of the mobile phone.

So far I have concentrated on the internet, but in the developing world the most important tool is the mobile phone. In Africa by the end of this year 200 million will own a mobile compared to eight million five years ago. In the next 24 hours alone 50,000 Africans will sign up with Safaricom, Celltech or another mobile phone company. In October 2007 ten African heads of state met up for the Connect Africa summit. They announced a £25bn deal, which will give 90 per cent mobile coverage in the next five years. The fisherman in Tanzania already uses his phone to get weather reports; Nairobi jobseekers receive texts about potential jobs.²⁴ And – as I found out last year when I worked briefly on the BBC World Service’s World Have Your Say – they use their mobiles to air their views.

Martin Plaut is the Africa editor of the BBC World Service news. He speaks of meeting a farmer two hours north of Kampala, whose most treasured possession was his mobile phone. The farmer made his living by brewing a disgustingly lethal gin from sugar cane in petrol drums. When it was ready he would drive to the nearest town and phone his contact in Kampala to tell him the gin was ready. While waiting he would typically send text messages – to say hello to his uncle in Europe or to friends – or perhaps to the World Service.

“UGC has made a huge difference. We always used to get a huge number of letters but they would obviously take a couple of weeks to arrive. Now when something happens we can get 200 text messages within an hour,” says Plaut.²⁵

For years, people in the developing world relied on the BBC World Service as a form of communication. Now with UGC the conversation is becoming two-way at last. And it is being embraced by people who never had the luxury of a free media before – in surprising ways.

Drive ten minutes out of the centre of Banda Aceh and you will come to Lely, a district still painfully rebuilding itself after the tsunami. There you’ll find half built houses, dirt roads, scrub – and probably Yasran the news editor of the daily local TV programme Aceh Dalam Berita. He’ll have been summoned there by text or phone call by members of the public. If not him, it’ll be someone from the local paper Serambi Indonesia or 68H, the local radio station.

In the aftermath of the tsunami the government eased reporting restrictions that had been in place during the struggle with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), both to help inform the public about aid and as part of the reconciliation process.

But what has been extraordinary is how ordinary people quickly learned to use the media. As Imogen Wall points out in her report for the UN Special Envoy²⁶ a television is often the first item purchased by IDPs (internally displaced people) when they have spare cash; there are usually 2-3 mobile phones per refugee camp and in the 4,000 coffee shops in Aceh up to 40 people will read the same newspaper. As one *kepala desa* (chief) put it, “We read everything because there is nothing else to do.”²⁷ And they increasingly manage news.

Yasran will be there as angry residents protest against the rate of rebuilding, or march through town to demonstrate against the government reconstruction agency the BRR, and to create their own news. One enterprising local with a beef against Oxfam painted “Oxfam [are] Bandits” on a housing development and then summoned local journalists to photograph it. NGOs expecting a grateful public have come up against an articulate and determined population using new media effectively. “The community is smart in playing the media game,” says Christelle Chapoy of Oxfam. “We have had the *geuchiks* (village chiefs) saying quite openly to us – if you don’t respond to our demands we will call in the media.”²⁸

And yet we must not forget there are problems with citizen journalism that it would be foolish to ignore.

Hoaxing is an ever-present possibility. Agencies, such as AP and Reuters have strict rules about faking pictures. *The Times of India*, *The Calgary Herald*, and Sky News in Australia all got caught out with fake tsunami pictures.

Second, we have to think about quality. As Simon Waldman of the *Guardian* pointed out the tsunami showed both the strength and weakness of UGC. Its strength was the vividness of the accounts and the sheer volume of emails, texts, blogs and video.²⁹ Its weakness was the fact that just because you have hundreds of accounts you don’t necessarily know exactly what the story is. Eyewitnesses can embellish and misremember – for example after the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes in Stockwell there were many at the time who said they had seen him leaping the barrier, dressed in a bulky jacket with wires protruding from it.

And third, it can potentially distort focus. Citizen journalism may skew the definition of news even more towards the unexpected, the spectacular event with the result that the less photogenic but equally important can get pushed out; the chronic famine ignored in favour of the earthquake. As Tom Sutcliffe of the *Independent* puts it: “The problem with citizen journalists - just like all us citizens - is that they’re incorrigible sensationalists.”³⁰

The changing narrative – and a changing relationship

But if every citizen with a mobile phone and email can become a reporter – where does that leave journalists and aid workers?

Imagine you are a journalist who has been sent to a disaster zone. This is what you can be sure of. A great deal of money has been spent on getting you there. Your editors want your story to be dramatic, clear and moving – and to be filed as quickly as possible. Is it any wonder that you turn to what George Alagiah has described as template reporting?

These are the ingredients listed by Alagiah, then developing world correspondent for the BBC, at a conference in 1998. Put briefly they are:

Starving child (preferably crying)
Feeding centre (complete with mothers with shrunken breasts)
Aid worker (usually white, usually a woman, battling against the odds)
Reporter (breathless and shocked saying how awful it is).³¹

To get all these elements in the past journalists turned to aid agencies. The result was a complicated relationship in which it was to the advantage of both sides that the story was as strong as possible. It's been described as a marriage of convenience but at its most extreme I found it more like a doppelganger – a ghostly reflection of the other. So you can get situations where the journalist ends up in danger of sounding like an aid worker – for example the ITN international editor Bill Neely told me he hoped that one of the consequences of his reporting would be to raise £100,000 for the Pakistan earthquake.³² And you can see aid workers morphing into journalists. Simon Harris, an aid worker I met out in Colombo, who has worked for two of the major UK agencies, told me that he'd been visited by the media department of one of them and had been asked him to push all the beds in a hospital into one corner so it would look more overcrowded and thus make more dramatic pictures.³³

So in the past journalists and aid workers had sewn up the story between them. But with UGC, John Naughton, the professor for the public understanding of technology at the Open University, believes that control of the story is shifting.

“There's a kind of corrupt symbiotic relationship between aid agencies and journalists and the narrative was shaped by that relationship,” he says. “The interesting thing is that UGC is now blowing that apart.”³⁴

There are several consequences. First journalists now have their work questioned more. Leonard Doyle, the former foreign editor of the *Independent* speaks of “taxi drivers going on holiday to Borneo”;³⁵ he points out that with more people travelling, it is not like the days when the *Independent*, *Guardian* or *Times* could get away with one stringer in a remote place and never have their work questioned.

Second, in the past aid agencies have traditionally supplied case studies – the victim, hero doctor etc – in return for a name check on paper or on air. But with these case studies going direct to the media themselves, agencies are potentially no longer as valuable to journalists as they once were.

So aid agencies have adapted to fight their corner. The most obvious manifestation of this is that they have turned to UGC sites to put up their own footage, photos and blogs as if they were citizen journalists themselves. Type in Oxfam, CAFOD or the Red Cross into YouTube, MySpace or Facebook and you will come up with a host of results. Log on to AOL blogs and you will see a series of blogs from Sri Lanka after the tsunami from someone called Anjali Kwatra – who is actually the Asia specialist in the Christian Aid press office.

Yet exposure on YouTube is still minute compared to a slot on the Six O Clock News. So aid agencies have also responded by turning their press offices into newsrooms providing cash-strapped foreign desks with free copy and footage.

The origins of this stretch back to the late 1990s when aid agencies woke up to the demands of the 24 hour news process, as well as salvaging their reputation which had taken a battering after the Rwanda genocide in 1994 and the Great Lakes Crisis of 1996/7 where agencies were accused of squabbling, misinformation and exaggerating numbers.³⁶

Aid agencies realised they had to change and get more professional.

If you cycle up the Cowley Road here in Oxford, you will eventually reach a large and rather soulless looking business park, which appears to be miles from anywhere except a large roundabout, a Tesco store and the Inland Revenue.

Amongst the large boxy buildings is Oxfam House. The charity moved into the 85,000 square foot building in 2003, replacing the nine buildings it previously inhabited around Summertown, north Oxford. The new building, with its open plan design, gleaming coffee shop and play area, symbolises how aid agencies have changed in the last decade.

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 also works in the Oxfam press office.

It was also down to good old 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,” says Renton, “commenting on places where they didn’t always have big programmes, getting a lot of attention and running the press office like a newsroom. It raised a lot of eyebrows at Oxfam – and a lot of hackles.”³⁷

Oxfam fought back by appointing as head of media Paul Mylrea, a former Reuters bureau chief, who had set up the Reuters humanitarian website AlertNet and who is now head of communications at the Department for International Development (DfID). Along with Justin Forsyth (who became an advisor to Tony Blair) they pushed the idea of press officers as “fireman” reporters - ensuring that press officers were on the ground as soon as possible after a disaster. They were not just passively facilitating media requests but attempting to influence the news agenda by writing and filming themselves.

Several years down journalists may look on in envy at how well paid these press officers are – a senior press officer in Oxfam can earn up to £40,000 according to a recent job advertised in *Media Guardian*³⁸ – and also how well equipped.

Oxfam protocol³⁹ means that a press officer sent to a disaster will take one international mobile and organise a local mobile while out there, a satellite phone, a laptop (capable of transmitting stills and short video clips), and a digital camera.

One senior BBC correspondent told me of sitting in a tiny restaurant in Darfur surrounded by five of the big agencies including Oxfam, World Food Programme and Save the Children all vying to offer her more.

So perhaps it is unsurprising that cash-starved foreign desks are turning to aid agencies in a different way.

The survey of national newspapers, broadcasters and the leading aid agencies that I carried out this year asked several questions, one of which was whether the media used aid workers as reporters. A third of newspapers admitted that they would. Many were reluctant to talk about it. Leonard Doyle, the former foreign editor of the *Independent* was most explicit, admitting his paper with a small staff and low budget would use aid workers to report if needed. “Sometimes the lines are a bit blurred because former journalists go on to become aid workers,” he said “and they have gone there on a ‘for hire’ basis.”⁴⁰

What is the problem with this? Surely using aid agency workers can be used as bloggers – just another form of citizen journalists?

But it goes further than that – aid agencies tell a different story. Fiona Callister of CAFOD said that her press office sometimes provided features that went in just rebylined with the name of a staff feature writer.⁴¹

Christian Aid has seen pieces it has written appear in the *Sunday Times*, *Express*, *Observer* and *Independent*. In a piece from *The Observer* on 9 June 2002 headlined ‘In starvation’s grip’, there are three bylines on it: Tim Judah, Dominic Nutt and Peter Beaumont. It is not clear that two of those are journalists and one is an aid worker.⁴²

Agencies are also increasingly focusing on electronic media. All agencies questioned said that they had supplied TV and newspaper websites with footage. Broadcasters said that they “always” labelled the footage correctly; aid agencies told a slightly different story. Some agencies like Save the Children are now concentrating on video diaries so their name cannot fail to be mentioned.

But the increasing numbers of rolling news channels, ravenous for pictures, means there is a serious issue here too. This is summed up in an example given by Lucy Clayton, acting head of communications of Medecins Sans Frontieres UK. In January 2006 violence was spreading in Haiti particularly in the capital, Port au Prince. MSF was working there under pressure and MSF UK sent an ex-ITN cameraman to make an edited news package, which was then used by ITV and Channel 4. However, when it went out on ITV MSF says that no mention was made that it had been filmed by MSF. In fact Clayton claims that ITV made a big thing of the fact ‘they’ had sent their man. “So it was good for us because it looked like an independent report but PR-wise it showed us doing a great job...it worked very well for both of us”.⁴³

It worked well for MSF – but is it right that viewers were not aware of the provenance of what they were watching? Was the agency doing as great a job as they were portrayed as doing? Probably they were, but if you have a cameraman employed by them then you are not going to get any other picture. And if it was such an important story, why weren’t ITV sending their own crew to look at the fall of Aristide, rather than relying on MSF?

It appears that this resulted from confusion rather than conspiracy. And the succession of recent scandals over TV fakery and fraud probably means that there is an

atmosphere where news editor would be more careful these days – but you cannot be sure.

Why does all this matter?

To misquote Benjamin Franklin, it all comes down to Death and Money. Media coverage can make a tangible difference.

This table shows the death toll in the tsunami as judged by the UN Special Envoy, and numbers of stories written in British newspapers as recorded by Lexis Nexis.

Tsunami	Dead/Missing	Number of Stories 19.12.04 – 16.01.05
Indonesia	167,000	343
Sri Lanka	35,000	729
Thailand	8,200 ⁴⁴	771 ⁴⁵

As you can see 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 that.

Did that translate into aid? It is hard not to believe it didn't. So many aid workers poured into Sri Lanka after 26 December 2004 that they were dubbed a “second tsunami” according to Simon Harris.⁴⁶ The first year Disasters Emergency Committee evaluation noted that Indonesia had suffered 60 per cent of the damage but received only 31 per cent of the funding. 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 this should change.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ It estimates that with the tsunami, those affected received on average \$1,241 per survivor – 50 times as much as the worst funded crises in that year.

But the tsunami was such an extraordinary event – perhaps it was a one-off? No, according to the report.

	TV coverage (mins of airtime)	Print media coverage (articles)	Amount of donation per person helped (US\$)
Tsunami	250	34,992	1,241
South Asia Quake	86	n.a.	300
Democratic Republic of the Congo	6	3,119	213
Somalia	0	n.a.	53
Cote d'Ivoire	0	n.a.	27 ⁴⁹

For example the South Asia quake attracted 86 minutes of TV coverage on US networks in 2005 and raised over US\$300 for every person helped. Meanwhile Somalia and Cote d'Ivoire – who were 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.

And you can even track it while it's happening as occurred in the Niger crisis of 2005.

Droughts and locusts during 2004 had led to harvest failure 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 \$16m appeal. It was greeted with what Jan Egeland – at the time the UN's emergency relief co-ordinator – called “near deafening silence”. According to the World Disasters Report, by 14 July, nearly two months later, only \$3.6m had been raised.

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 Ten O Clock News and the web. By 27 July, just over a week later, \$17m had been committed in and outside the UN appeal. And the journalists followed. Andersson had arrived to a “virtually empty” hotel in Maradi, the only foreign journalist there. By the time she left, she wrote, “our hotel was so full of journalists and aid workers that there were no rooms left at the inn”.⁵⁰

Niger and the tsunami shows the power disaster reporting has – and our responsibility to get it right.

When Niger's president Mamadou Tanja then accused the growing numbers of journalists of exaggerating the crisis for their own gain,⁵¹ he was widely condemned as making excuses for his own government and biting the hand that fed his people. Yet it raises an important issue. Niger is a place where, as one former aid worker puts it glumly, “every year is awful”.⁵²

The BBC coverage had 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 investigate. Andersson contacted MSF, who helped her, providing access to their feeding centres. The first report went out on the 18 July 2005, 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.”

Andersson chose her words very carefully. She did not actually say there was a famine. But the impact of the pictures and their position on the news meant there was a stampede by other news organisations to get there, in scenes reminiscent of Evelyn Waugh's “Scoop”.

The aid agency who'd assisted Andersson were concerned. They felt the piece “had a feel of 1984 [Ethiopian famine]...the biblical idea which was not how we saw the

crisis at the time,” says Lucy Clayton of MSF.⁵³ As a result she was asked to make a briefing guide for journalists to use in future.

And within the BBC itself there was disquiet. One senior correspondent claimed it was “flammed up by the BBC... I’m not disputing for a second people were suffering but you could go to Mali, Mauritania, Niger in almost any year and you would find that level of suffering and malnutrition. So to stick it on the Ten O’Clock News and call it a ‘forgotten’ famine - I found it the worst kind of ‘oh my god dying babies journalism’.”

However Kevin Bakhurst said that no one from aid agencies made those kinds of complaints to him about the coverage and he says he has no regrets over the story.

The problem was that droughts and locusts was only part of the story. Niger did have food – but exporting it had caused prices to rocket. As the Guardian’s Jeevan Vasagar pointed out there were markets 2km away full of food.⁵⁴ 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.” But is it a great outcome no matter what?

Disaster coverage, as Susan D Moeller says, at its most extreme becomes the focus of political debate and public action, a kind of moral bellwether for the nation; how much we care, how can we live with ourselves. And aid agencies, eager to raise funds or awareness, are often happy to collude with journalists in pushing this approach. So when covering famines, or earthquakes or tsunamis the media do not always prioritise establishing objectivity – as they might do when covering international diplomacy or politics.

The result is that journalists can become activists and witnesses who charge themselves with keeping the faith. They take what they believe is an unassailable position: that it is bad to let people starve to death and lose their homes. And of course it is. But journalists should continue to bear in mind Martyn Broughton of AlertNet’s distinction between aid workers and journalists. It’s the job, he says, of aid workers to get access to people to relieve suffering. 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”.⁵⁵

Take the tsunami. The group of people most likely to be mentioned in the coverage were babies or children. The tsunami orphan became a potent story and one that journalists felt strongly about. A typical headline on 2 January 2005 was “Don’t let them suffer twice”⁵⁶ about the fear of paedophiles preying on large numbers of orphans. Yet there were actually relatively few tsunami orphans. Oxfam later calculated that in Indonesia 80 per cent of the victims were women and children.⁵⁷ In fact as I found on Banda Aceh, there tends to be now a far greater problem in the aftermath with communities consisting of all men, who have a low profile and receive less funding.

With Niger, as Stephanie Strom of the *New York Times* argues,⁵⁸ did the focus on Niger mean the problems of Zimbabwe and Sudan who were equally suffering malnutrition get ignored?

Just because bad things happen, critical faculties should not be suspended. As David Loyn, developing world correspondent for the BBC 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.”⁵⁹

To be fair one of the consequences of the tsunami was that journalists have taken a more questioning attitude. In general there has been more follow up of disasters both for the South Asia quake and Niger, reporters have returned to analyse how the money has been spent. While aid agencies in the past have complained about the lack of follow up this new enthusiasm has sometimes been awkward. “The effect of the tsunami,” says John Davison, head of media at Christian Aid, “was to introduce some wariness. Journalists asked where the money had gone and the news was not always good – it knocked the corners off our angelic image...the [journalists] began to see aid agencies as just another business.”

The journalist’s responsibility may be to report accurately and objectively but the press offices of aid agencies still have as vital a role as ever to explain the crises especially with long running chronic emergencies and where, like Niger, the story is a complex one.

During my year here at Nuffield I was a fly on the wall at both Oxfam and the DEC’s appeals for Darfur/Chad in April and May respectively, and saw how they dealt with them very differently.

Oxfam is the *Daily Mail* of aid agencies. I mean that as a compliment, although I’m not sure which would be more infuriated by the comparison. Like the *Mail* Oxfam dominates and influences its sector and has the ability to take over a story even if it was not the first to do it. It is ruthless about getting coverage and understands it is not just about money, but influence.

As Ian Bray, senior press officer at Oxfam told me during my time there. “It’s all about getting the biggest bangs for our buck. In a changing world, looking at the causes of poverty and suffering, we do not believe aid changes the world – politics does.”

Oxfam realised early that running an appeal for Darfur/Chad would not be easy; they spent six weeks planning their appeal. From the first day they attempted to answer the question “Why now?” – a question that would later dog the DEC. They clearly defined their target audience – wealthy professionals, predominately females, who read the liberal press and watch the Ten O’Clock News. They thought of a new angle – paying the war photographer Don McCullin to photograph refugees in Chad, then selling his story as an exclusive to the BBC. They facilitated a trip for the *Guardian* and called in favours, getting Saatchis to do pro bono work. That resulted in a replica refugee tent being built which made a good live TV backdrop. The result was – an exclusive on the Ten O’Clock News, a good show in the newspapers including a

photo essay in the *Independent*, interest from all rolling news stations and a second story in the next week.

The DEC in comparison tried to plan a two week campaign in just two weeks which meant it was not possible to get visas for journalists to go to the region, it was difficult to get celebrities, and agencies themselves appeared reluctant – there were arguments over whether the appeal should be taking place at all. Goodwill towards the DEC, Natasha Kaplinsky and the broadcasters' own investment in the appeal meant it got a good show on TV on the first day but hardly any press. It was a chronic appeal run as if it was a rapid onset disaster. If the DEC wants to run an appeal like this, it has to be more imaginative.

Looking to the future

Of course it's true that not all disasters will get coverage. The Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters [CRED] points out that in 2005 alone there were 422 country-level disasters – more than one for every day of the year (and that was not counting epidemics).⁶⁰ But following the tsunami, there is interest from the public; through new technology and UGC there are more means of reporting such disasters than ever before. For both journalists and aid workers it should be an opportunity to think about how to report better.

To return to my initial three points:

1. Citizen journalism can improve disaster reporting. At its most simple you can't report without material – UGC means that countries that may previously not receive much coverage are now getting more. And more people have a voice – whether they are earthquake survivors in Pakistan, tsunami survivors in Banda Aceh or bloggers in Burma. This new wealth of angles can act as a corrective.

Of course this has to be used carefully, within limits - we need journalistic checks and balances. Journalists should use it as part of their coverage rather than feel they have to become like citizen journalists themselves.

2. New media has accelerated the blurring of boundaries between journalists eager for material but strapped for cash, and aid agencies fighting in a more competitive marketplace and using more creative means to get stories placed. If journalists use aid workers' words and footage they must be honest and clearly label it as such – not the murky halfway house that sometimes results. Journalists must also ask themselves if accepting a trip from an aid agency whether they would take the same trip if asked by a profit-making business.

And aid agencies must realise they can't have it both ways – they can't turn up as multi-media operators, blogging, podcasting and reporting and then be given an easy ride – they must expect to account for themselves. If you have asked for years that journalists do follow up stories then you cannot complain but must be ready to answer over where the tsunami money went when the three year deadline comes up in December 2007.

3. Disaster reporting does make a difference. But it requires as much rigour as any other story. Susan D Moeller has said that the media should commit to covering international affairs as do to domestic crime. "If you report on a suspect's arrest, you have an ethical responsibility to follow up and report the outcome of the trial whether innocent or guilty."⁶¹ Too often the media covers international affairs she adds as if an arrest, then the story is dropped and we never hear the verdict.

With the tsunami journalists did follow up because people wanted to know where the money had gone, something that should also happen in other disasters.

Conclusion

Disaster reporting is more important than ever. In September 2007 Sir John Holmes, the new UN emergency relief co-ordinator, reflected that the record number of floods, storms and droughts were adding up to a "mega disaster". "And 2007 is not finished. We will certainly have more by the end of the year, I fear", added Sir John.⁶²

OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - part of the UN secretariat that employs Sir John - has issued 13 emergency "flash" appeals so far this year. The number is three more than in 2005, which held the previous record. Yet of about \$338m (£166m) requested for OCHA's 13 flash appeals this year, less than half has so far been donated.

There is still huge interest in disasters thanks to the tsunami, UGC and aid agencies realising the importance of communicating with the public. What could kill this interest if lines continue to be blurred between aid agencies and journalists and aid agencies fail to realise they must be held accountable. What causes compassion fatigue is the feeling that nothing can be done and aid is being wasted; as the poet Edna St Vincent Millay put it instead of one thing after another, it is one damn thing over and over. Both rigorous and imaginative reporting and accountable PR can deal with this.

The war reporter Janine Di Giovanni was asked in 1993 what she found most difficult about reporting from Bosnia. She replied "the most difficult thing of all was not the blood or the crying or the coughing or even the hardship of not being able to wash or have a cup of tea or turn on the lights but the fact that we were covering a story that the public had grown tired of."⁶³

Disasters are not a story the public are tired of at the moment; if journalists and aid agencies deal honestly with each other, we can ensure that does not happen in future.

Notes

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Glenda Cooper studied English at St Hilda's College, Oxford and journalism at City University, London. She began her journalistic career as a trainee, then as a specialist and columnist on *The Independent*, subsequently working as a staff feature writer and editor on the *Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Telegraph*. She presented Channel 4 Radio News's 'Morning Report' and also worked as a correspondent for BBC News 24 and Radio 4's 'The World at One' and 'PM' programmes.

In 2001 she was awarded the Laurence Stern Fellowship for the *Washington Post*; in September and October she spent five weeks in New York covering the September 11th attacks and their aftermath for the paper.

Now a freelance writer and editor, she plans to continue this research and has just been awarded a visiting fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, and an associate membership of Nuffield College, Oxford.

She is married and lives in London.