



The Brookings Institution – University of Bern  
Project on Internal Displacement



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*Bloggers, Buzz and Sound Bites: Innovative Media Approaches to  
Humanitarian Response*

**Luncheon Seminar**

**November 27, 2007**

Speakers: **Julie Barko Germany**, Deputy Director, Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management  
**John Rendon**, CEO and President, Rendon Group  
**Helga Leifsdottir**, Coordinator of ReliefWeb  
**Colleen Connors**, Communications Director, Save Darfur Coalition  
**Kate Sands Adams**, e-Marketing Director, International Rescue Committee

Moderator: **Elizabeth Ferris**, Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement

<p><b>Summary Report</b></p>
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**Presentations**

Elizabeth Ferris introduced the seminar by noting that it has long been recognized that the media are major actors in the international humanitarian system. This Brookings series on “Reporting Crises: how the media, the government and relief agencies shape humanitarian response” is intended to look at how the media interacts with other humanitarian actors. At our first seminar, there was extensive discussion about the effect of media coverage on humanitarian response, about relations between the press and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and about some of the economic pressures driving media coverage.<sup>1</sup> But several participants in that meeting said that we would be missing the point if we just focused on mainstream media. “The buzz is being created,” one participant argued, “on the internet, on YouTube, through bloggers, through online activism. If you want to understand how the media shape humanitarian response, you

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<sup>1</sup> Synthesis Report, Reporting Crises – How the Media, Relief Agencies and the Government Determine Humanitarian Response, Hosted by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement and Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings, 24 May 2007. Available at:  
[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2007/0524\\_media/20070524\\_Report.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2007/0524_media/20070524_Report.pdf)

have to look at non-traditional media.” This seminar was intended to explore the ways in which innovative media technologies are being used to mobilize humanitarian response.

### **Julie Barko Germany**

Back in 2003 people began talking about how the blogosphere would change America because now people were “hanging out” on the internet. However, as well as being a place to “hang out,” the internet is now also being used to accomplish the same kinds of tasks that we used to do in the offline world – tasks like consuming media, writing, and communicating. The internet has become a place for people to organize, to take action, and especially to share information. For example, Facebook became a way of organizing and of expressing collective sympathy with the students of Virginia Tech after the massacre there.

How does this all fit into the humanitarian agenda? There are four areas where new technologies can be particularly important in shaping humanitarian response:

1. Information - This does not just refer to providing information, but also to knowing how information is being used. By tracking the use of information over the internet, organizations can find out who their donors and supporters are, track public opinion in the media, respond to constituents and supporters, and determine what their supporters want. Borrowing from the corporate practice of customer relationship management, the aim is to make sure that ‘customers’ are well-served by the organization.
2. Putting data to use - After finding out how and by whom information is being used, organizations can put these data to use as a way of expanding their own networks of supporters through organizing local events and mobilizing constituents to take action. To cite an example from the political world, in 2004 Jim Webb’s campaign used a database tool called “donkey.” This tool stored volunteer information in an online database which grassroots organizers could access. The database was used not only to identify volunteers who were willing to work on the campaign, but to find out when they were available, what types of work they wanted to do, and particular skills and expertise they could contribute. This made it easy for local campaign offices to identify and mobilize volunteers quickly and efficiently.
3. Enabling - Information on supporters can be used to enable them to participate actively in the organization’s work. They can contribute expertise and labor through peer production and can contribute financially to the organization’s work. New technologies are constantly expanding possibilities of engaging supporters. For example, when users donate through websites to political campaigns, they can email their friends, encourage them to make donations to the same campaign, and forward the link to the website. This way it’s not the campaign asking people for donations, but their friends and people that they trust.

4. Transparency - The internet also enables transparency so that supporters know where their contributions are going.

### **John Rendon**

We now live in an environment in which multi-layered communications exist. The new, non-traditional media co-exist with traditional forms of media. While it took radio 50 years to reach 50 million people and it took TV 13 years to reach 50 million people, it took the internet only six years to reach 100 million people.

The internet has had a transformative effect. Instead of being a place simply to find information, the internet has become a social spot where people are able to form communities of interest – both with their friends and with people they have never met. Internet users often begin by carrying out online searches on particular issues, but then become engaged in them. They transform from voyeurs to activists. And this effort creates the single biggest transformative effect in communications: user-generated content. User-generated content is enormously powerful and now all the media outlets are using images and reports that are submitted by viewers.

The use of the YouTube space is creating a new impetus for user-generated content with startling results. For example, the [Battle at Kruger](#) film on YouTube was shot by users in Kruger National Park in South Africa and became enormously popular. That eight minute footage will do more for tourism than the budgets of many tourism agencies. And with user-generated content, people are compensated by being recognized rather than by being paid, which decreases the cost of providing information.

What underpins these changes is progress from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. In the Industrial Age the focus was on monologue and control, where the news told you what you needed to know. In contrast the hallmarks of the Information Age are dialogue and community. The challenge then becomes how to organize people with common interests who have never met.

The significance of blogs can be over-estimated. They may prove to be a temporary phenomenon. And at the moment they tend to reflect the discourse in the traditional media, thus amplifying traditional content and reinforcing, rather than challenging, the orthodoxy.

### **Helga Leifsdottir**

ReliefWeb was created in the mid-1990s as an internet-based tool for sharing information on humanitarian action and response in order to help humanitarian actors make better decisions in the field. Today ReliefWeb posts information from some 2,700 sources, including governments, NGOs, humanitarian organizations, rebel groups and non-state actors. ReliefWeb does not produce information, but rather serves as a broker of information.

The website is organized to sort information by topic/country/emergency which makes it possible to feature forgotten crises that are often overlooked by the mainstream media. In the last year, for example, ReliefWeb has highlighted natural disasters, in part because of the debate about climate change.

In 2002, humanitarian practitioners came together in Geneva to identify a set of guiding principles for ReliefWeb's work. These included: accessibility, inclusiveness interoperability, accountability, verifiability, relevance, objectivity, humanity, timeliness, and sustainability.

In 2007, practitioners came together again in what was called the Geneva Symposium +5 and added three new principles to this list: reliability, security/privacy/confidentiality, and reciprocity. In particular the addition of these principles reflected that collecting information can be risky, both for those providing information and for those collecting it.

Although these principles guide ReliefWeb's work, there are still many challenges, including: authority (making sure the information is accurate), technology (being bound by a certain package), multilingualism (as English presently dominates ReliefWeb), and proximity to operations. Perhaps the most critical challenge, however, is how to make sure that better humanitarian information has an impact on humanitarian responses.

### **Colleen Connors**

The Save Darfur Coalition was organized in the summer of 2004 and currently includes 180 human rights organizations, one million online activists and 1,000 community leaders throughout the US. Its mission is to raise public awareness and to mobilize a response to the atrocities taking place in Darfur. Online work is central to the mission of Save Darfur and includes: email list recruitment, list engagement, education and provision of information to American activists, and fund-raising.

Save Darfur has also found benefits in combining its online and offline campaigns, for example with the postcards to President Bush as part of their One Million Voices campaign. In addition to paper campaigns, Save Darfur has been using text messaging as another way to reach out to supporters and has about a 50 percent response rate in people registering on the website after receiving texts. Working with celebrities who can raise awareness of Darfur and publicize the URL has also been important in increasing the number of visits to the site.

Save Darfur has about 30,000 activists. A challenge is to find ways of engaging these activists while limiting burnout. By using tracking software to see what types of activities different activists are interested in, Save Darfur is able to send them information on activities/events in which they will be more likely to participate. Save Darfur has also been exploring Web 2.0 activities, such as Facebook and YouTube. The coalition created a Facebook causes profile less than a year ago which already has over 700,000 members and has raised \$50,000. Through YouTube, coalition activities were centered around the

Democratic and Republican debates with a video challenge to ask a question on Darfur to the candidates.

Public opinion about Darfur has definitely changed. In 2004, public awareness about Darfur was about 14 percent; earlier this year, it was 60 percent. The key to using the internet to mobilize action is to give people the confidence that they can actually make a difference.

### **Kate Adams**

IRC has found that supporters want to be informed, involved and to feel that they are contributing toward real change. They do not want to be seen as just “ATMs” and financial contributors. In the past 18 months, nine different IRC Take Action efforts were launched. Online lists grew by more than 50 percent through these campaigns. What seems to work is to:

- provide a simple message and describe in practical terms why taking action can result in a change in policy;
- suggest very quick and easy ways to get involved; and most importantly
- follow up with success stories.

The difficulty is that there are only a few seconds to capture an online user’s attention and it is a challenge to explain complex problems and solutions quickly. One solution is to post compelling video, link that video to an action item, and publicize the video on YouTube and other sites, and then to repeat it. It is also important to work with partners and allies and to encourage field staff to send videos. Telling personal stories is important as is reporting on how your organization makes a difference. It is also important to keep the information fresh with a steady stream of new videos.

IRC is now part of the YouTube nonprofit program and there is an IRC space on YouTube where its videos can be shared. IRC can also receive donations through Google Checkout.

### **Discussion:**

Themes that recurred during discussion were trust and the importance of building relationships, both for traditional as well as non-traditional media. Regardless of the means of communication, it is essential to develop trust relationships. As one participant noted, “it takes time to develop trust, but...trust can be broken in one – just one – go. One little mistake can break trust.”

Another participant reported on the ethical dilemma of using stories of people who may be targeted because they have shared them with a US audience. A panelist responded that while there are techniques that can be used to protect people, the flow of information is basically a transaction of trust. Developing relationships of trust is also important in civilian-military interactions on humanitarian issues.

In response to a question about target audiences, both IRC and Save Darfur responded that their primary audience is American. ReliefWeb, because of the dominance of English on its site, reaches mainly European and North American audiences.

Several participants noted the challenge of keeping information fresh and short, and one referred to a study showing that the public's attention span is limited to 2 minutes and 37 seconds.

Striking the balance between traditional and non-traditional technologies is also challenging. Most organizations currently use both, although the balance is shifting. "We thought that blogs would be out in front of traditional media but instead they're pretty much covering the same issues in the same way," one panelist commented. While the potential for user-generated content is tremendous, so far it has not been extensively used in the humanitarian sector.