



The Brookings Institution–University of Bern  
Project on Internal Displacement



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# **REPORTING CRISES – HOW THE MEDIA, RELIEF AGENCIES AND THE GOVERNMENT DETERMINE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

**SYNTHESIS REPORT**

**THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
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**HOSTED BY**

**THE BROOKINGS-BERN PROJECT ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT  
AND  
FOREIGN POLICY STUDIES AT BROOKINGS**

On Thursday, 24 May 2007, the Brookings Institution launched the first in a series of seminars on the relationship of the media, relief agencies and the US government in determining humanitarian response. The purpose of the series is to analyze trends in media coverage of world-wide humanitarian crises and the impact this coverage has on government policies, relief operations, and ultimately on the victims of the crises. This analysis is intended to lead to practical solutions for improving working relationships between the media and these stakeholders, and to arrive at a shared understanding which can help all parties find a common cause in responding to crises. The series will review the roles that NGOs, media, the U.N. and the government play in putting issues on the international agenda and how their work impacts on the collective response – and on each other. These seminars will stimulate a dialogue among veteran, experienced participants on the challenges that journalists, relief agencies and governments face in responding to emergencies. The seminars are being jointly organized by the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement and the Communications office of Foreign Policy Studies, Brookings Institution.

### The Program

The launch of the series was introduced by Carlos Pascual, Vice-President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution. Moderated by Randy Martin, Director of Global Emergency Operations, Mercy Corps, the first panel focused on “challenges confronting journalists and media organizations in reporting humanitarian

*“We hope that by raising these issues more responsibly, there will be better public education, stimulating a more effective response and greater awareness of long-term action.”*

-participant from the Brookings Institution

crises. Kenneth Bacon, President, Refugees International; Tom Gjelten, Foreign Affairs and National Security Correspondent, National Public Radio; and Donatella Lorch, former New York Times Africa Bureau Chief, London-based NBC and Newsweek reporter took up the challenge to be

frank and provocative in their comments on the panel. A second panel focused on the “role of communications in responding to humanitarian crises,” and was moderated by Jennifer Parmelee, Public Affairs Officer, World Food Programme. This panel included Jeffrey Grieco, Acting Assistant Administrator for Legislative and Public Affairs and Senior Deputy Assistant for Public Affairs, USAID; Dr. Christopher Hanson, Associate Professor, University of Maryland; John Norris, U.N. Mission, Nepal; and Rear Admiral Frank Thorp, United States Navy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Joint Communication. 41 participants engaged in the discussions, including individuals working with the media, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, US government, and academic and research institutes.

Discussion was lively, far-ranging and provocative. Participants spoke from their own diverse experiences and often challenged one other. As the seminar was held under Chatham House rules, this summary does not attempt a chronological summary of the day’s deliberations, but rather highlights certain themes that emerged in the course of the discussions.

## Humanitarian work in today's world

A theme running throughout the meeting was the changing context of humanitarian work. Humanitarian crises are becoming more prevalent and diverse and the media play a critical role in defining the response to these crises. The number of people in need, the chronically hungry, is increasing by about 4 million people per year, one UN participant reminded the group.

There are two long-term reasons, one participant suggested, for better understanding the role of the media in shaping humanitarian response: first, to shorten the tipping point when collectively governments are shamed into doing the right thing and secondly to maintain some level of sustained engagement and build a community of people who care. Several participants picked up the theme of the media's role in demanding – or enabling – governments to do the 'right thing.'

*“Any meaningful response to a humanitarian crisis requires two things: resources and political will. And neither will happen without media coverage.”*  
-NGO participant

While the media often cover major emergencies, huge media attention for a week or two isn't sufficient to get a country through the next three to five years, a UN representative noted. Media coverage is often shallow and coverage is uneven, another remarked.

On another level, the media can serve as a tool for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) themselves to generate a more compelling response and to tell their own stories. But first, people who are survivors of human and natural disasters need to know what the situation is. As one participant remarked, presently, there are refugees who can't take advantage of humanitarian assistance because they don't know what's going on. They live in situations of high anxiety and stress. They need not only to be informed, but to be given a voice. Media can empower them. Another participant from the Gulf Coast, noted that 'the differences in coverage of the Katrina aftermath between national and local media were striking. The local media provided information that people in New Orleans and on the Gulf coast needed to hear.'

*‘When it bleeds, it leads.’*  
-USG participant

Many participants referred to the changing nature of humanitarian work itself. The lines between humanitarian, political and military responses are increasingly blurred. Private contractors are carrying out work which used to be the exclusive province of non-governmental and UN agencies. The military used to be associated almost exclusively with providing security, but now is involved in a whole range of humanitarian activities. In the post-911 world, the US government is more concerned that its efforts and its name are acknowledged in the provision of humanitarian assistance while in an earlier era where the focus was more on the partners who were actually carrying out the work. The very concept of humanitarianism – as embodying principles of neutrality, independence, humanitarianism and impartiality – is being challenged. 'No humanitarian endeavor is seen as truly neutral or impartial' one participant lamented. 'You can't be neutral anymore,' several participants from different sectors observed. 'You absolutely cannot be neutral.' But while in the past, the presumed neutrality of humanitarian organizations

provided some protection from attack, the perception that neutrality has eroded creates security risks for today's humanitarian workers – even those who continue to believe that they are neutral in conflict zones.

Security risks create their own dynamic. Organizations which achieved some degree of protection from their knowledge of local culture and people are now putting some distance between themselves and the people they try to assist as a way of increasing their security. Or they are turning for protection to security forces who are themselves party to the conflict. Paradoxically, this sometimes results in diminished security for humanitarian workers. As one participant asked: “what does it mean to be impartial and neutral in an environment in which there are insurgents who see any outside face as being part of the enemy?”

### The role of the media

“We’re focusing on today’s crisis, rather than on situations which will become the next crises,” lamented one participant. “What about the forgotten emergencies – the ones that no one is covering?” One of the journalist participants noted that “at any given time, there are hundreds of conflicts in the world and the way they are reported determines whether there will be any response to them.” In such a situation, the pressures on journalists are immense – pressures to cover a particular crisis, or pressures to depict the causes of the conflict in a particular way, or pressures to portray one side or the other as the aggrieved victim rather than the aggressor.

*“The war in Bosnia was the first post-modern war; the outcome of the war depended as much on the way the conflict was perceived as on the way it was fought.”*  
-a journalist participant

“I can’t be neutral, but I try my best to be objective,” one journalist said. “You have to keep in mind that everyone you talk with has an agenda. You have to be aware of that and should consciously report stories that militate against your own views.”

Another journalist explained that some of the difference in coverage is simply because of the ease of access and the nature of the story. “Showing dead bodies in Rwanda’s genocide wasn’t a story because they were already dead by the time we were able to get there and most of the pictures were too gruesome to depict on television. But showing dying people in the refugee camps in Goma – now, that was a story.”

Press coverage of the huge displacement in Darfur and Iraq both came very late in the game; the press didn’t pick up these crises until they had already reached mammoth proportions. In Darfur, the violence had killed 100,000 people and created 1 million IDPs and 200,000 refugees in neighboring Chad before it hit the news. Reports coming out from the UN and a few NGOs weren’t sufficient to put Darfur in the headlines; firsthand reporting and visual images were required. The Sudanese government did everything it could to block reporting from the region and to deny access to journalists.

*‘It’s easier to focus on the humanitarian story than the political causes behind the story.’*  
-a US government participant

Today there is a national activist movement on behalf of Darfur – but it isn't a movement that is nurtured by the press but rather by student groups and religious communities. While media coverage of the Iraq war has been extensive, there was virtually no coverage of the rising refugee and IDP population until the numbers were in the millions. 15-20% of Jordan's population consisted of Iraqis before the refugee problem became a story. Why? One participant suggested it was because the Iraqis were not concentrated in camps, but were dispersed among the local population. The public perception is that refugees are in camps – where it is easy to get photographs of large numbers of people eking out an existence. But when they are dispersed within the larger urban population, it is hard to find the story.

Participants recounted cases where simple facts were contested, and contested bitterly by different actors. For example, at one moment in time, a US government official reported that there were 10-20,000 displaced Rwandans while an advocacy group was insisting that the number was 600,000. Another participant noted that there were similarly large differences in estimates of refugees between headquarters and field staff of UN agencies.

*“We shouldn't forget that these are not only academic issues. Lives are at stake.”*  
-participant

The low level of international interest on the part of the American public was noted by several participants. The limited attention span of most Americans and the fierce competition for that attention can make it difficult for journalists to cover international issues. Sometimes a reporter will write a story with passion and commitment, but the editor cut the story because it just isn't newsworthy enough, or because another story is breaking at the same time.

Newspapers are losing circulation and most Americans rely on local television newscasts for their news about the world. One participant commented on the intense media interest in the effect of the Rwandan genocide on native gorillas and on pets left homeless by Hurricane Katrina as evidence of the short-sighted nature of the American public. But another participant challenged this perception, noting that in reality there are multiple audiences which haven't begun to be tapped. Former Peace Corps volunteers and families of relief workers, for example, are a ready and willing constituency for responsible international reporting and for greater US engagement with the world. People who want to learn what's happening can do so, another commented. There is a wealth of information that is readily available on the internet.

*“Iraq is draining everyone's resources. It is so expensive to keep an office in Iraq that it limits the resources that are available to cover other conflicts.”*

-a journalist participant

Several journalists noted the real-live constraints facing reporters because of financial issues in the news industry. As news agencies cut back on their overseas offices, they rely more and more on 'firemen' who fly in for a few days to cover a crisis and who are often poorly prepared. They also often come in with pre-conceived notions of what the story is. One reporter lamented the fact that the news media themselves confuse two countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo from the Republic of the Congo. “If the

media can't get the two countries straight, how can they be expected to inform the general public?" As news bureaus cut back even further, this pressure will increase.

This firemen mentality is particularly prevalent in television coverage where the pressure is on to cover a story quickly and where reporters are typically juggling several stories at once. "The TV people come in for a day or two when something major is happening," one participant recounted. "But they don't have time to get the real story. KISS – keep it simple, stupid – is the guiding rule for television coverage."

There are good journalists risking their lives to get the story out, but they face obstacles within their own organizations and with the general public. "Most of us started out like you," one journalist remarked. "We were idealistic and wanted to use the media to change the world." Another participant talked of the need to mobilize the government to do the right thing, to find the tipping point when interest in a given subject is translated into concrete policy actions. "It took a long time for the media to get the story of Darfur out," another said, "but even when the US knew what was going on there, it prevented Darfur from coming to the UN table because of its concern that Darfur might derail the carefully-negotiated peace agreement in Southern Sudan."

*'I still judge my stories by whether or not they make people care.'*  
-a journalist participant

### Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Participants from all sectors commented on the crucial role which non-governmental organizations play in media coverage of humanitarian emergencies. One journalist noted that "we work very closely with NGOs, we can't move around without them. We need their knowledge and connections and friendship – sometimes our relationship is symbiotic."

But several participants lamented the fact that NGOs complain about the media, but really don't know very much about the way the media work. "They don't understand us," one journalist said. "They don't understand the economic pressures on us, the time pressures we're under." Another said that "NGOs don't have training in dealing with reporters. They don't know what a reporter needs to back up a story."

*"NGOs are generally on the front line. We need to understand how NGOs can communicate with the media. We need to respect the victims and the people who have to stay and work there."*  
-an academic participant

Still another said that "NGOs are our lifeline. We parachute in and depend on them to get the story." Yet another expressed frustration with local NGO staff, saying "we hear from your headquarters that you want media coverage, that you want the story to be told but then your staff in the field won't talk with us." One UN participant responded that some 65% of aid workers in Darfur can't speak freely because of their concerns to protect the work.

"We've done a lot to understand you," an NGO participant responded, "but at times it feels like one-way street. You don't take the time to understand us." Another commented

that “we have no control over what you will write. We have to protect the people we work with because you guys leave. Our first priority is to get the job done and we’re not going to jeopardize that work for a 30-second sound bite. Trust takes time and there’s a need for training on both sides on NGO-media relationships.”

*“The problem with the UN is that they don’t know if they’re defending the agency or promoting the story of the humanitarian disaster.”*  
-a journalist participant

The issue of NGOs and the media was obviously an issue on which many have strong opinions. One NGO participant noted that NGOs recognize that they need to work with the media more effectively, but this is an area where NGOs find it difficult to collaborate with one another. “We just don’t talk about our individual media strategies.” The fact is that for many NGOs, visibility in the media is directly related to their efforts to raise funds to respond to emergencies.

NGOs don’t only rely on the mainstream media, but also use non-traditional means of taking their messages and appeals directly to the public through fundraising letters, annual publications, websites, high-profile charity events and visits of senior UN officials which build both public and private support. And a government participant noted that NGOs also lobby for congressional appropriations and earmarks that make coordinating assistance more difficult.

### Public Diplomacy and the Military

As one participant reminded the group, there are three categories of conflicts for the US government: 1) those where vital US interests are involved, 2) those where important but not vital interests are at stake, and 3) that of humanitarian interest alone. The media has a tremendous role in determining which category a particular crisis falls in.

The US government has embarked on an extensive public diplomacy effort which

*“Our NGO partners tend to focus on the scale of the disaster and the human needs in order to mobilize more support. But this squeezes out the more positive experiences of donors and that story needs to be told.”*

-a US government participant

includes a comprehensive US branding and marking effort, the development of professional and trained communications field capacity and targeted public affairs and public information campaigns at the country level. “Since 9/11 we need to ensure that our humanitarian efforts are resulting in positive opinions of the United States,” a government participant insisted. The US response to the tsunami, for example, led to a surge of positive views about the country.

The public information campaigns are also paying off, one US government official argued, as demonstrated by public opinion surveys demonstrate increased positive opinions about the US after campaigns are implemented.

But others challenged this perception, arguing that it is impossible to separate US policy from the messaging. “More people are dying in Iraq every month than in 9/11 – that’s the overwhelming story on everyone’s mind,” one participant asserted. “We can’t ignore

how large the volume of information in the media is on Iraq. It is simply swamping everything else.”

The differences between NGO perceptions and the government’s were obvious when one NGO participant said “our primary mission isn’t national security – it’s saving lives.” Others challenged the notion of branding, noting that donor branding can damage an organization’s ability to provide humanitarian assistance. At the same, it was acknowledged that NGOs too have an interest in putting their own brands forward and being visible in emergency response. A journalist lifted up the victims of the crises; “we want to tell their stories, not the stories of the NGOs or UN agencies. You should be thinking about helping the victims, not messaging.”

*“Compassion without overt self-interest around collective goals is the best public diplomacy.”*  
-an NGO participant

Military involvement in humanitarian crises increases media coverage. While the military’s work in humanitarian response focuses on saving lives, after 9/11 there has been increased emphasis on the way that story is told. People need to know the US government is responding to human need – not just that lives are being saved. The military’s efforts at strategic communications are focused on international audiences, rather than national ones.

The strength of military involvement is also its weakness: the military tends to come in heavy with lots of resources and a big footprint. But these resources can be used by other humanitarian actors as well. The military’s involvement in responding to the Pakistan earthquake illustrated a new model of the US military’s communication potential during a major disaster. US forces helped others to tell their stories and provided logistical support to communicators throughout the emergency.

But even with their resources, a journalist reminded the group, the military can actually be quite isolated from the story or may have only a partial view of what is going on. Another participant reported being appalled at how eager the US government was to claim all the credit for a multilateral humanitarian response. “How must other governments feel?” she asked “when their contributions are overshadowed by US eagerness to claim the credit?”

### New media

*“You’d get a lot better coverage if you gave 100 people in Darfur camcorders and let them put their own stories on YouTube rather than trying to persuade a network to spend \$200,000 for a major correspondent to go to Darfur for 36 hours.”*  
-a UN participant

“A lot of the discussion today has focused on a dying model,” one participant affirmed. “We don’t live in a world anymore where simply getting ABC to give you 5 minutes of air time is going to create a tipping point or make a difference – we need to create a momentum, a buzz.” Several participants referred to the

new media technologies which are challenging traditional media as well as NGOs and the

government. “A lot of the best investigative reporting today – the reporting that makes a difference -- is coming from local reporters and bloggers,” one participant said. “The scandals are appearing on YouTube and traditional media end up covering the firestorm, not the story.”

“I get all of my news coverage from the internet – I never watch the evening news,” one participant affirmed. “We’ve entered a ‘boutique’ era of information and we’re missing the boat if we just look at traditional media outlets.” Another challenged the group to “look at the Save Darfur campaign where the number of donors on their list jumped in a year from 200,000 to 1.2 million. This is where popular mobilization is taking place and we need to understand these new technologies better.”

### Next Steps

Discussion at this seminar revealed that the issues are complex, multi-faceted, and vitally important. In order to take the discussions forward and to deepen the analysis of the relationship between media coverage and humanitarian response, the Brookings Institution will host a number of seminars in the coming year on different facets of the issue. In the fall of 2007, two events will be held: “Bloggers, buzz and soundbites” which will examine the role of Internet-based technologies in building a constituency for humanitarian action and “Public diplomacy, military involvement, humanitarian response and the media,” which will look at the government’s communications strategies for emergencies and how these affect other humanitarian actors. A number of suggestions of topics for future seminars have been made – ranging from “the role of the media in shaping Muslim perceptions of humanitarian work” to “NGOs, the media and humanitarian response. Further suggestions are most welcome!

*“We need not just to better understand the impact of the media on humanitarian response and the complexity that’s involved, but also to provide insights on policy and best practices that could be helpful to the media, to humanitarian workers, government agencies and host governments.”*

-participant from the Brookings Institution

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