New Study: Why Humanitarian Crises Are Underreported

A new Columbia study offers fresh insights into why humanitarian emergencies are often underreported. While newsrooms have limited funding available for crisis site visits and the media generally suffer from crisis fatigue, that is only part of the problem, according to the survey conducted by Steven S. Ross, an associate professor in the Graduate School of Journalism. Compounding those obstacles, the study found that local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) lack experienced media relations officers and journalist-friendly Web sites.

The study, titled “Toward New Understandings: Journalists & Humanitarian Relief Coverage,” was commissioned by not-for-profits Reuters AlertNet and Fritz Institute. It is the largest, most comprehensive survey to date of the relationship between international journalists and NGOs.

In many ways, the survey’s results were surprising. “Conventional wisdom is that reporters, editors and columnists do not know enough about crises, especially chronic crises such as AIDS in Africa or natural disasters in countries of no immediate interest to the American public,” said Ross. “However, our survey shows that journalists are actually fairly well informed.”

On the other hand, press relations specialists at NGOs noted repeatedly that field offices tend to be staffed by local nationals who are inexperienced in press relations and unfamiliar with what might be at stake when working with a reporter from outside the region.

“Media coverage is a vital tool for relief charities in garnering public support and funding. Fritz Institute and Reuters AlertNet conducted this study to help the humanitarian relief community build its capacity to engage the media,” said Anisyah Thomas, managing director of Fritz Institute.

Ross and his team sought to understand the dynamics of media coverage of humanitarian relief. They analyzed the factors that went into editors’ and journalists’ decisions to cover a story, and the capabilities of humanitarian agencies to successfully place their stories.

The researchers conducted interviews and received responses from 54 humanitarian relief organization officials, located mainly in organizations’ international headquarters and in regional hubs worldwide. The team also surveyed 290 journalists around the world.

There are several reasons why crises appear to be given low priority by news organizations. The study found that reporters who cover crises rarely do it full time. In fact, for those who do cover relief efforts, the average is less than one story in five. When asked why it was harder to get a crisis story onto the news agenda now than in the past, respondents cited two main contributing factors: lack of journalistic resources and crisis fatigue.

Lack of funding was a major obstacle to coverage. News organizations are reluctant to spend money to send reporters to areas where aid is being administered. Respondents to the survey, especially those from outside North America, said they need and would welcome funds from other organizations to cover these stories. The funding, however, would need to be independent of the groups they cover, they said.

On the other side of the issue, the survey found that the ability of NGOs to meet the needs of reporters is hampered by a number of factors. For instance, NGO press officers said that field officers tended to be staffed by local nationals who are often inexperienced in Western-style press relations. In addition, while journalists usually are given adequate access to NGO sites, the information they receive is often incorrect.

In the absence of funding for trips and timely information from press officers, reporters are reliant on NGO Web sites. But, the survey found, NGOs typically don’t use Internet technology as well as they might. Of the 32 Web sites reviewed, three lacked contact names and addresses. Only 17 of the 32 sites described the organization’s background or included an archive of project reports; only one third included an archive of past press releases. Almost half of journalists surveyed relied on Google or other search engines to find local organizations, but few of the NGO sites were organized so that Google and other general-purpose search engines could search reliably beyond their homepage.

The researchers recommended several steps to overcome the obstacles revealed by the survey. Among their suggestions were that NGOs establish a single organization to produce more detailed information to support journalists covering humanitarian crises, a suggestion strongly supported by journalists surveyed; that existing information sources, such as AlertNet (www.alertnet.org) and ReliefWeb (www.reliefweb.int), be better promoted; that a means of offering direct support to journalists covering humanitarian crises (including training and financing for travel) be established; and that a facility for making photography, audio and video available to journalists who can’t travel be created.

For more information, visit www.fritzinstitute.org/images/FL.pdfs/Media_study_wAppendices.pdf.

CORRECTION

In the March 12 issue, a news item on the award-winning book Nuy y Byway mispelled the writer’s name. The author is Columbia professor Robert Hymes. The Record regrets the error.