

Media and humanitarian endeavour

Reflections on a recent book on the news media, civil war and humanitarian action

“We fed them, housed them, transported them, briefed them, let them use our sat-phone, held their hands, wiped their noses, everything... and not a line, not a mention, nothing!” These words, a fairly clear expression of pent-up resentment and frustration, were recently uttered by an ICRC head of delegation. Previously, he and his delegation had built up a wonderful reputation among the press internationally; but then, something snapped. Journalists just seemed a burdensome waste of time, money and energy. In his mind, press work had burnt down to a simple trade-off: “*We give, you show*” (implied: “*what we want you to show*”).

Unfortunately, such trade-offs rarely work. Too much “good news” is boring and promotional news stories lack credibility. Yet credibility is the axis around which all institutional communication programmes revolve. The ICRC is not, and cannot be, an exception to this rule.

The “visibility trade-off” is, however, only one of the alluring pitfalls that lie in wait for humanitarian workers dealing with the “necessary evil” of the press. The other, far more dangerous, consists in believing that one can, and should, so seduce the press as to make them objective and pliable allies in our own victim-orientated work. The honeyed tones of our siren songs sound all the sweeter to our ears since a number of respected journalists around the world have openly questioned the ethical basis of *their* work. Some such journalists have left journalism altogether, either to join humanitarian organizations or to enter into politics. Others gravitate around such initiatives as the Geneva-based International Centre for

Larry Minear, Colin Scott, Thomas G. Weiss, *The news media, civil war, and humanitarian action*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder London, 1996, 123 pages.

Humanitarian Reporting (ICHR) in the hope of improving on what they see as an objective convergence of interests between journalists and humanitarians.

Very laudable; but does this hold water? Does it work?

In an attempt to find out, three media-analysts working with the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University (USA) set their minds to defining the nature of the triangular relationship between media, humanitarian and government players. Naturally such a course of study also requires examination of the factors that affect and influence each component of what the authors dub the “crisis triangle”. Using six case studies as their point of departure (tripartite evaluations of components’ interaction in Liberia, northern Iraq, Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, Haiti and Rwanda), the authors seek to single out cause-and-effect linkages from a mass of data that would, in the eyes of others, look more like a formidable but frequently death-fraught game of spillikins.

The study sets out a bottom-line approach to relationships, yet at each step the authors admit to series of question marks, variable parameters, and qualifying conditions... Working the media, peddling influence, is not an exact science. It is an exercise that does not lend itself easily to ready-made push-button communication strategies.

If a thread runs through the book, however, it can be summarized in a single word: clarity. The authors never cease to emphasize the absolute need for all players concerned to understand what the other components can, or more to the point perhaps, cannot do; each component of the “triangle” needs to be absolutely clear about the “other’s” structural constraints, its purpose in life and society, its priorities and responsibilities. Absolute clarity on agendas and *démarches* is the kingpin of all will and work geared towards better efficiency. Unfortunately, I believe this may be wishful thinking since part of somebody’s agenda somewhere may well be the desire to compromise the others’ moves in the game (today’s version of a *Kriegspiel*?).

As such, and it will be a surprise to no one, the linkage between each component of the “crises triangle” is one characterized, at least in Western democratic societies which constitute the implied focus of the study, by interdependence and by a certain casualness. Each component implicitly feels/knows that it needs (or may one day need) the other two, but at the same time each is jealous of its zealously reaffirmed independence. Without saying so in so many words, the authors underline the fact that the triangular *quid pro quo* is determined as much by opportunism as by

more or less universally recognized principles. The question therefore is: must it, should it, always be so ?

Possibly the most pertinent observation drawn from the research affecting us as a humanitarian institution is the fact that high media coverage of a given crisis, particularly if it is channelled via television, is not likely to influence government policy (providing the said government has a policy!). Indeed such coverage is, practically by definition, cause-simplified and emotional in appeal. At most, says the study, it can precipitate domestic pressure in terms of timing and scope of a government's intentions in any given area, be they covert or declared.

On the rare occasions — illustrated by the case of Somalia — when the tyranny of the shocking image was allowed to dictate a foreign government's policy, the consequences were disastrous. Since then, governments have not only learnt to resist the emotional diktats of popular media coverage but are increasingly learning to gain control of them, notably by projecting an image of humanitarian assistance conceived by way of an alibi: people want us to be there, so let them see us *there* — helping victims. From the humanitarian point of view, visibility has become synonymous with funding; (Western) governments have become, or are in the process of becoming, politically immune to high-visibility humanitarian *tamashas*, à la Goma where, as Minear *et al* rightly point out, there was something of an NGO visibility circus. Flaunting T-shirts and logos might bring in cash to the organizations concerned, but in terms of political influence, their impact is nil.

Past experience has indeed shown that a government can no longer allow itself to be caught on the wrong foot in any high-profile humanitarian crisis. This means that the onus is on governments and administrations to include humanitarian crisis management as an integral part of their broader political objectives. Once the political course has been set, picturesque media serve only as a monitor of initiated aid programmes. In such circumstances media, particularly TV, coverage becomes at best a sensor of domestic public opinion, at worst the by now famous CNN factor. The likely consequence of this is that donor governments and those with the means to act according to peace-keeping/enforcing mandates will become increasingly impervious, if not jaundiced, to emotionally expressed utterances of humanitarian concern.

From the humanitarian point of view, the ICRC also has its reasons for wanting to keep at least the most extreme kind of emotional journalism at arm's length. Emotionally charged coverage can indeed lead to erroneous humanitarian solutions. The archetypal example of this must surely

be the flurry of adoption-seekers in the West following dramatic TV footage of orphans, or children presented as such. Such portrayals actually provoke not only family separations but a perverse humanitarian racism: Western media get mobilized to keep an “adopted” child with its adoptive parents and away from its biological ones (“*somewhere in Africa...*”) because the latter, it supposedly goes without saying but is repeatedly said, cannot possibly (!) look after the child properly. The natural, biological parent is therefore maligned by the press for the most humane reasons: the desire to give the child a decent chance in life... This is not a trend in humanitarian reporting that the ICRC should wish to encourage, either ethically or practically. And yet humanitarians must also be careful not to denigrate this very genuine and worthy formulation of human generosity as expressed by would-be adopters; somehow it must be properly, constructively channelled. This can be done by building up societies in which humanitarian considerations are adopted as a matter of governing policy, as a macro-application of human resources providing an environment in which the generous can feel at ease.

Minear and his co-researchers identify another form of pressure exerting itself on more or less accommodating media that have had, and will continue to have, implications for humanitarian work. In short, they say — and nobody will contradict them — that stories have to be short and simple mainly because print space and broadcasting time are in short supply. Professional journalists, whether in the written or audiovisual environment, quickly learn to respond to such a “story-telling” requirement. Hence, almost by definition, a certain convoluted Manichaeism is placed at the heart of all humanitarian story-telling: there is “good” and there is “bad”. There are the “good victims” and there (can be) “bad victims”. This Manichaeism often stems from the need journalists and editors (who together with media moguls are rightly called “gatekeepers” by Minear) believe link people to politicians, politicians to politics and thus all stories, especially if they deal with a humanitarian catastrophe, to real or supposed sources of guilt. A reader/viewer has to be psychologically able to assess the flow of responsibilities, if only to see the unfolding drama as something “foreign”. The media, more or less willingly, become a vehicle for stereotypes. The press coverage of the events in the former Yugoslavia and the Great Lakes region of Africa are cases in point.

The impression gained, as a reader, is that the web of contacts between media, humanitarians and authorities is a criss-cross of desire to help, powerlessness, distrust, diverging agendas, cynicism and increasingly, whether declared or not, of underlying short-, medium- or long-term

policy goals. The logical conclusion of this, is that if an organization like the ICRC wishes to influence government (or multinational) policy by providing its own input, constructed around legitimate patterns of reference, then it must do so upstream from the mass media. The proper course for our information and policy counselling is to assist in the making of serene societies in which humanitarian principles are accepted as norms of governance. In the meantime, ICRC gems of information or reflection are best kept for an elite capable of digesting them. The net result of course is the adoption by ICRC-like institutions of an audience-orientated communication policy.

Another conclusion I drew from the study, or more precisely from the complex and muddled web of media/government/humanitarian contacts, is that we — humanitarians, journalists, governments, victims even — are all learning. There was no Golden Age of perfect media-influence systems, there is no time-proven experience to draw from, no established reference manual available. So, too, are the media; they are learning new technologies and about the responses of new audiences with varying degrees of economic and educational empowerment. Communication patterns in the latter part of the twentieth century are being empirically built. The people who are probably learning fastest are those with the more pressing accountability agendas, e.g. elected governments and the ones who cultivate an “image problem” or have had one thrust upon them.

This process also means that the media themselves have to find a respectable equilibrium between so-called “infotainment” (a tendency found mainly but not exclusively in TV reporting) and a proper informing role. Most journalists, as individuals left to themselves, have a tendency to be seen as the topplers of idols — be they socialite, humanitarian or political. Yet as we all know, even the most iconoclastic journalist has to compromise with reality — namely the law and his or her salary. This does not concern humanitarian players directly, except for the fact that it is in our objective interest for the media to remain, like us, as independent as is politically and economically possible today.

This last problem is probably the one that affects humanitarian agencies the most. The media need money to function, money comes from markets, State subsidies and the euphemistically called “enlightened” private sector. In all cases, access to money hinges on audiences and what they want to read/hear/see — or what others think is fit for them to read/hear/see. Media people would love to be completely independent and tell the stories they think relevant in the manner they think the most suited. But whatever forms are agreed on in any one case are bound to be

transient. Look at the way media reporting has evolved over the past decades and you will see the structural instability of the business and the difficulties there are in wanting to pin down such a slippery cake of soap.

The media do, however, obey certain rules and there are many schools of thought about what they should do and how they should do it. Often the least relevant are those which counsel from the outside. Picture the media, and you are picturing less a science than an art. One cannot compare journalists to doctors, but to musicians, the lowest category of whom play on pavements, the highest in grand concert halls, and some to small elitist chamber music audiences. That's what the journalists' profession is, and that's how it should be. It's up to us to make do with what there is. And I do not believe we should even try to think about wanting to change it.

Too many people want to change/control the media. People we neither know nor trust. If we want humanitarian principles and practices to flourish and be respected, we need to be able not only to explain them but to underscore their relevance. One of the tools available to us to achieve this is the press, a credible press. We must not join in with those who, for whatever reasons, honourable or not, seek to subvert its inner mechanics; we cannot make the press natural allies of humanitarian action, we can make it only the truthful carrier of our stories and sentiments. As one strong-minded British media boss said "*I don't want fans with typewriters*". Indeed, by getting too involved in a story, a journalist loses his or her independence of mind and expression. I fear that any attempt to tie the press to a somewhat wispy convergence of interests may subordinate and ultimately discredit those who must always be free to call upon any one of us, individuals or institutions, to account for our actions, expenditure and policy statements. That way the press remains credible and, providing we do our job properly, so do we. Precisely that is the victims' interest. And, finally, to respond to our irate head of delegation quoted at the outset on a subject not tackled by Larry Minear & Co, I would say: "Patience, all in due course". The very fact that journalists use our institution is an acknowledgement of it as an efficient component of the "crisis triangle".

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