

Media, Disaster Relief and Images of the Developing World:

Strategies for Rapid, Accurate, and Effective Coverage of Complex Stories From Around the Globe

[Fred H. Cate](#)

In 1993-94, The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored a year-long project examining the impact of images of the developing world portrayed by and through the western media. Senior officials from the American Red Cross, BBC, CARE, CNN, the International Broadcasting Trust, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, U.K. Overseas Development Administration, NPR, Save the Children, and other leading media and relief organizations met in Washington and London to consider practical, specific strategies for both the media and relief organizations to improve the accuracy, timeliness, quality, and cost-effectiveness of the information they disseminate about developing countries. Their recommendations were published in March 1994 in the Program's report, *Media, Disaster Relief and Images of the Developing World*, written by Annenberg Senior Fellow Fred H. Cate.

The report was kept short (the printed version was six pages), and was distributed widely as part of the Program's largest distribution effort ever, in an effort not only to inform discussions, but to influence the behavior of both media and relief organizations. The Program mailed more than four thousand copies of the report and published a related article in the April issue of its newsletter, *Update*. The complete report was included in the March issue of InterAction's *Monday Developments* newsletter, which reaches all major U.S. relief agencies. A two-page excerpt appeared in the May issue of *American Journalism Review*, which is read by more than 50,000 journalists and academics. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies included an excerpt in its authoritative *World Disasters Report 1994*, which is distributed worldwide in five languages. That excerpt was reprinted in the May-June 1994 issue of *Crosslines*, the international development and humanitarian relief newsletter. The Program's report was also distributed at the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama.

Much of the public throughout the industrialized world shares an image of developing countries that is incomplete and inaccurate. The efforts of the media to alert the public and report the news accurately and promptly, and of relief organizations to motivate public and governmental support and save human lives, inadvertently contribute to this image. Because western audiences often lack knowledge of developing countries, reports of exceptional events, such as famines or floods, may foster misimpressions of the developing world.

On May 20, 1993, The Annenberg Washington Program sponsored a high-level roundtable in Washington, D.C., to examine the impact of images of the developing world portrayed through the media and by relief organizations. The 17 participants--including reporters, editors, producers, and leaders from international and national relief organizations--considered the many causes of these images and practical means for improving reporting on development, disasters and their causes, and relief activities in the developing world. The group also explored ways to further strengthen partnerships between the press and relief organizations.

On December 2, 1993, the Program brought together in London a working group of six of the participants to continue the work of the roundtable. The working group recognized that the media compete for viewers, listeners, and readers, and aid organizations vie for members and contributors in markets that are increasingly competitive and rapidly changing. Both media and relief organizations command limited resources with which to respond to more frequent and complex disasters around the world. The working group therefore sought to identify practical, specific strategies for both the media and relief organizations to improve the accuracy, timeliness, quality, and cost-effectiveness of the information they disseminate about developing countries.

This report is based on those discussions. Although not every participant would agree with all of the statements included herein, the ideas and suggestions that follow are the product of serious deliberation and reflect a frank and energetic dialogue. A more detailed report examining the images of the developing world and their causes will be published later this year. The Program is grateful to all of the participants who have devoted themselves to this task and who have given generously of their time, experience, and knowledge.

The Images and Their Causes

Peter Adamson, founder and author of UNICEF's annual *State of the World's Children* report and a participant in the Annenberg roundtable, observed in a January 1991 address to the UNICEF National Committees that western audiences dramatically overestimate the needs of inhabitants of the developing world:

- *Whenever I give a talk in a school or college, usually with 16- or 17-year-olds, I end by distributing a questionnaire to both students and tutors.*
- *I ask: What percentage of the world's children do you think are starving--defined as "visibly malnourished?" The answer is usually 50 to 75 percent.*
The real answer is 1 to 2 percent.
- *I ask: What percentage of the world's families are living in absolute poverty--so they cannot meet even their most basic needs? The answer is usually in the region of 75 percent.*
The real answer is 20 to 25 percent.
- *I ask: What percentage of the world's 6- to 12-year-olds start school? The average answer is usually 10 to 20 percent.*
The real answer is almost 90 percent.

- *I ask: Is the rate of population growth in the developing world increasing, decreasing, or staying about the same? Almost invariably, the answer is "it is increasing."*
The fact is it is decreasing in every region of the developing world, including Africa.
- *I ask: What percentage of the poor world's income comes from overseas aid of all kinds? The average answer is almost 50 percent, with many thinking that the developing world is 70 percent dependent on aid from abroad.*
The truth is that aid amounts to about 1 percent of the incomes of the poor world.

Adamson's findings were borne out in a 1993 World Vision U.K. public opinion survey. According to the survey results, the "public has a grossly distorted view of the Third World." Fewer than half of all respondents knew that loan repayments from developing countries exceed the aid they receive. These prevalent, but inaccurate, perceptions add up to, as Adamson has argued, "an impression that the developing world is exclusively a theater of tragedy in which poverty and human misery figure prominently in almost every scene ... This misconception is as profound as it is widespread."

Where does this misimpression originate? Most of the developed world's information about the developing world comes from two sources--the news media and relief organizations. Despite considerable efforts to be accurate and timely, both the media and relief organizations unintentionally contribute to distorted images of the developing world because both focus on the unusual, the extraordinary, the dramatic. Yet western viewers and readers perceive this information without a context or a background of information or experience against which to evaluate its significance. Thus, the public's perception of developing countries may be formed entirely of information about the exceptions, rather than the norms, of daily life.

Despite the force and variety of factors contributing to misimpressions of the developing world--e.g., the public's lack of first-hand knowledge about developing countries and the complexity of factors intrinsically interrelated with development, such as world trade--there are practical steps that could help the media and relief organizations respond to the challenge.

Strategies for Meeting the Challenge

Participants at the Annenberg roundtable and working group offered a number of strategies on how both media and relief organizations could increase the accuracy and completeness of the images they provide to the public, while also enhancing their ability to respond quickly to breaking stories; provide more timely, insightful information; make more efficient use of scarce resources; and compete more effectively for public attention and support. Many of these strategies are already being followed by leading news and relief organizations. Nine of the most important follow. They are not new; they are presented here as widely recognized, cost-effective techniques for maximizing the capacities of both the media and relief organizations.

Strategies for the Media

1. *Use news resources more effectively.* The media face the challenge to identify resources that could provide early notification about developing stories; background information; and timely, accurate reports about events in developing countries. Independent journalists or "stringers" could be used more widely. More cooperative ventures among news organizations could make maintaining bureaus in developing countries more economically feasible. Relief organizations often have the infrastructure within developing countries to help the media identify important issues or emerging trends, give logistical support in reporting those stories, provide background information, and arrange for sources and spokespeople from within the relevant country or countries. The media should also be aware of, and sensitive to, competitive pressures or inadequate resources that might compromise accuracy or thoroughness in reporting.

2. *Designate and train development journalists.* Reporting on developing countries could be improved by increasing the number of reporters who cover the area and by designating "development correspondents," just as many media today designate reporters to cover politics, financial markets, and other specific "beats." How can reporters and photographers who are rushed into a country to cover a story be better prepared for such assignments? What training and background information would help equip them? How can they have the greatest amount of time possible "on the scene," and how can that time best be used? What training or information would help editors and other "gatekeepers" within the media evaluate the significance of stories from developing countries and place those stories in a broader news context?

3. *Cover efforts by indigenous organizations and individuals to prevent, anticipate, and respond to disasters.* Reporting should seek to include, to an extent proportional to their importance, relief efforts by indigenous people and organizations or by other developing countries. Most disaster relief comes from within the developing world. News reports that focus on the arrival of western government officials, relief workers, or shipments from the industrialized world are likely to distort the response to disasters. "On the scene" interviews with western relief officials may similarly mislead the public. The media should seek to interview and quote officials from indigenous governments and relief organizations where possible.

4. *Provide professional training and review.* Journalism reviews, graduate schools, professional societies, and media critics should play an important role in training journalists in international reporting, critiquing reporting on developing countries, and sensitizing both the media and the public. There are noteworthy examples of high-quality reporting on development issues; these should be noted, rewarded, and used to help train other reporters, editors, photographers, and producers. Media institutions could help provide opportunities for skill building, sponsor workshops, provide training for reporters assigned outside of their home country or region, and even participate in providing substantive briefings about specific countries and issues.

Strategies for Aid Organizations

1. *Articulate communications strategy.* Each relief organization should publicly articulate its strategy for communicating with the media and the public. What are the purposes of those communications--to raise money, inform the public, change public opinion, motivate political action, promote the organization? Conflicts among those goals should be explicitly acknowledged. Communications strategies, like all activities of relief organizations, should be evaluated regularly to determine their effectiveness, relationship to the organization's goals, and impact. Relief organizations should also regularly evaluate their communications strategies for their impact on public understanding and ethical and professional appropriateness.

2. *Train organization personnel to work with media.* Relief organizations should provide training, particularly for personnel in the field, on how to work with media to improve the timeliness, quality, and accuracy of reporting about developing countries. Because relief organizations have expertise in development, monitor issues affecting developing countries and disaster relief full time, and have resources within developing countries, they are well placed to help the media identify and report important stories accurately and sensitively, evaluate the quality of news reports, and seek to correct inaccurate stories or supplement incomplete ones. For example, field offices could help identify stories warranting press coverage and provide indigenous spokespeople, logistical support, and other assistance to media covering stories in developing countries. Organizations should help link important stories to newsworthy events that are traditionally covered by western media, such as meetings of the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. Information provided to the media should be accurate, concise, and clear, and presented in the manner and format requested by the individual reporter or organization. Relief organizations should recognize that the media have limited resources, and should avoid overstating the scope of disasters.

3. *Evaluate media content.* Relief organizations should evaluate media coverage for accuracy, quality, completeness, timeliness, and professionalism. Excellent media coverage should be recognized and used to help improve other reporting. Inaccuracies or misperceptions should be corrected through direct contact with the media and reporters involved, letters to the editor, guest columns, counterinformation, and other means available to relief organizations.

4. *Create alternative programming.* Relief organizations should work to facilitate documentaries and other programming that provides a more complete image of developing countries. In particular, organizations should work cooperatively with program producers in developing countries and with the media to create and disseminate programming, such as the Developing Stories series produced for the One World Group of Broadcasters and broadcast in 18 countries in the developed world in 1992. New outlets such as cable and satellite television offer considerable potential for airing such programming.

5. *Evaluate relief organization communications.* Many relief organizations--individually and cooperatively--have adopted standards for their communications with the public. All communications activities should be evaluated according to articulated standards. For

example, InterAction--a membership association of U.S. relief organizations--requires its members to "respect the dignity, values, history, religion, and culture of the people served by the programs. They shall neither minimize nor overstate the human and material needs of those whom it assists." Save the Children (U.K.) has also adopted standards for communicating with the public: "The images and text used in all communications must be accurate and should avoid stereotypes and cliches. . . . Attempts should be made where possible to identify and quote people being photographed or interviewed. If they wish to remain anonymous, their request should be honored. Wherever possible, the views and experiences of the people involved should be communicated."

There is much we can do to correct misimpressions and to meet the challenge of conveying accurate, realistic information about development and life in developing countries in a timely, cost-effective, competitive manner. Many of the strategies identified in this report are simple and can be put into effect immediately and without significant cost. Most are already used by leaders in the development and media communities. What is important is that we continue the process of collaboration, both among and between media and relief organizations, to further the portrayal of honest, complete images of the developing world.

PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED:

- Peter Adamson, founder of the Third World First movement, the *New Internationalist*, and UNICEF's annual *State of the World's Children* report
- George Alagiah, award-winning Foreign Affairs Correspondent with BBC Television News responsible for coverage of developing countries and development issues
- Andrew Bearpark, Head of the Information and Emergency Aid Departments at the Overseas Development Administration in the U.K. Foreign Office and formerly Private Secretary and Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Lady Margaret Thatcher
- Rudolph von Bernuth, Associate Vice President of Save the Children/U.S., Co-chair of InterAction's Disaster Response Committee, and InterAction's representative to the United Nations Department for Humanitarian Affairs
- John Nicholas Borton, Research Fellow for the Relief and Disaster Policy Program at the Overseas Development Institute
- Fred H. Cate, Co-convenor, Senior Fellow, The Annenberg Washington Program, and Associate Professor of Law, Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington
- Nick Cater, writer, broadcaster, media consultant, and external editor of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' annual *World Disasters Report*
- Paddy Coulter, Director of the London-based International Broadcasting Trust, an independent television production company that seeks to promote a wide public understanding of Third World issues
- Peter Firstbrook, Executive Producer of "One World" at BBC Television, specializing in programs on environment and development issues

- Dale N. Hatfield, Co-convener, Senior Fellow of The Annenberg Washington Program, and CEO of Hatfield Associates, Inc.
- Sunni Khalid, an award-winning Foreign Affairs Reporter for National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., who primarily covers U.S. foreign policy toward Africa and Latin America
- William D. Novelli, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of CARE, the world's largest private relief and development organization
- Larry Register, award-winning Senior International Editor in charge of special projects for CNN's 19 international bureaus
- Jenny Richards, Director of Programs for Television Trust for the Environment and TVE's representative on the One World Group of Broadcasters' Steering Committee
- Philip Robins, Head of the Middle East Program at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London
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