

“REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS”: MEDIA, BIAS AND THE COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL DISASTERS

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Over the last two years the world has had a surfeit of disasters. Everywhere one turned there were new photographs of bodies lined up so relatives could come and claim them. In October 2005, the images of covered corpses, stunned faces, keening mothers, tumbled homes and nature gone awry resulted from the South Asia earthquake. In August, the global tragedy was Hurricane Katrina, where the bodies the world saw weren't under rubble but floating in New Orleans' toxic flood. In July, the casualties were British; grainy cell phone photos carried viewers into the very moment that terror struck the London transport system. In December 2004, the sprawled bodies in awkward, disconcerting color were the child and adult victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami. Three months earlier, in September, the translucent corpses of children were from the school siege in Beslan. And virtually every day—should one have troubled to look for them—one could find photographs of the human and other wreckage of another suicide bombing, or three, in Iraq.

But not all of the crises of this past year or so have equally commanded the attention of the world and its cameras. Some disasters have had the bad luck to occur at a moment when a more telegenic disaster was already capturing global attention. The worst tragedy in Iraq in 2005 occurred on 31 August. At the same time that flood waters were sweeping over New Orleans, up to one million Iraqis walking to a Shi'ite shrine in Baghdad stampeded when the rumor that there was a suicide bomber in their midst swept through the crowd. Almost a thousand people died and nearly five hundred more were injured.

Then there were the mudslides in Central America. “I have never known an emergency become forgotten as quickly as Guatemala's, where 120,000 people have been made homeless, on the very day it came to the world's attention,” recalled Toby Porter, emergencies director of Save the Children UK. But that was the same day that the earthquake shook Pakistan and India. “A country hit by a volcanic eruption, a hurricane and then devastating mudslides would in any normal week be considered

a major emergency,” mused Porter. “But this is not a normal week—or year....”¹

Other crisis stories have played even more poorly in the media. “Terror” remains the vital “*bête noir*” of President George W. Bush’s administration, but even significant acts of terrorism abroad made but a blip on the American media radar—they made the news the day they occurred, but they were given little more attention than

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that: the November 2005 Al Qaeda attacks—what Jordanians have called their “9/11”—on three hotels in Amman that turned a wedding reception into a morgue, killing over fifty and wounding almost two hundred and fifty; the series of explosions in Bali at the beginning of October that killed twenty people and left perhaps one hundred injured; the July car-bombing of tourists sites in Egypt that killed almost ninety and wounded more than one hundred; and the Valentine’s Day car-bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and twenty others in Beirut.²

And some crises of unimaginable proportions still go unreported; the number of threatened or killed is not a solid predictor of coverage. The media have covered some of the most devastating disasters sporadically: the genocide in Darfur that has displaced 1.2 million people and killed hundreds of thousands; the famine in Niger that currently threatens 2.4 million people; the seven-year-long war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that has killed 3.8 million and in which the International Rescue Committee estimates another 31,000 die monthly.³

Other global disasters are in such a state of stasis that the media have effectively ignored their numbing devastation: the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa that has orphaned an estimated 12 million children and that has afflicted approximately 25 million, tuberculosis that kills 2 million a year and the easily vaccinated measles which kills almost half a million children every year.⁴

The lack of Western attention to what UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan calls “orphaned” disasters—except when highlighted by celebrity visits and pop stars organizing concerts—suggests that even major crises, by themselves, are not considered newsworthy.⁵ There must be something beyond a death toll to compel coverage.

TAKING MEASURE OF THE WORLD’S CRISES

Who evaluates the world’s disasters significantly influences how much attention those disasters receive. Those disasters that garner the most attention from the American media are not always the same disasters that governments, policy analysts, the NGO community or the insurance industry rank highest. Global crises are assessed by government officials often in terms of security interests at stake, while policy analysts typically look at crises in terms of their own singular priorities (the melting of Greenland’s glaciers are an important focus, for example, for those concerned with global warming). The NGO sector values the lives at risk, the insurance

"Regarding the Pain of Others": Media, Bias and the Coverage of International Disasters industry considers property damage and loss, and the U.S. mainstream media, while taking into account all of these factors, also assesses a crisis' connection to Americans and its sensational, or even "gee-whiz" factor.

Various institutional analyses of the most "important" disasters and crises of 2005 bear out these rough guidelines: The American media covered the hurricanes in the United States to a far greater extent than disasters elsewhere despite great disparities in casualty figures; they focused on the war in Iraq, with an emphasis on U.S. troops in combat, continued violence and terrorism; they reported on "celebrities" of all kinds, from the death of Pope John Paul II to the controversy over Terry Schiavo's condition to the breakup of Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt.

The media-tracking journal, *The Tyndall Report*, evaluates which stories get most pickup by ABC, CBS and NBC. While the three nightly television newscasts have seen ratings decline by 34 percent in the past decade, 44 percent since 1980 and 59 percent from their peak in 1969, they still attract nearly 30 million viewers each night, making them the three most-watched and influential news outlets in the United States.⁶ Every week, the *Report* records which news stories make the three networks' weekday nightly newscasts. At the end of the year, publisher Andrew Tyndall calculates which stories receive the most coverage. In 2005, noted the *Report*, "Natural disasters dominated the year. With Hurricane Katrina in the lead, they attracted triple their average annual attention. NBC, whose new anchor Brian Williams was in New Orleans when the storm struck, made Katrina (522 min v ABC 314, CBS 317) its signature story." Four of the top ten stories centered on Iraq—U.S. combat, elections, reconstruction and suicide bombings—for a total of 1534 minutes. The continuing tsunami story was the fourth ranked story, with 250 minutes of coverage. The death of Pope John Paul II was the fifth most covered story at 246 minutes. The London transit bombings was sixth at 221 minutes, the Terry Schiavo story was eighth with 169 minutes and the Valerie Plame-CIA leak story was ninth with 166 minutes.⁷

With a different agenda, LexisNexis, the leading aggregator of public records and legal, business and news information, tracks which news sources and which news stories are most sought after by their clients. With that concern paramount, LexisNexis undertook a survey of American adults to determine the "Most Talked-About News in 2005."⁸ "News consumption plays a critical role in what topics are discussed in our daily lives," noted a LexisNexis senior vice president in the survey's press release.⁹ According to the November 2005 survey, the top ten stories of the year, in order, were: Hurricane Katrina, the rise in gasoline prices, the war in Iraq, the tsunami, the London terrorist bombings, the U.S. Supreme Court nominations, Terry Schiavo, Natalee Holloway's disappearance in Aruba, the Michael Jackson trial, the breakup of Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt, and the relationship between Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes.¹⁰

Another capture of what crises emerged as most “important” came from Swiss Re, the world’s second largest re-insurer. Swiss Re annually publishes revealing statistics on world catastrophes, including two lists of the biggest disasters, one in terms of lives lost and a second in terms of losses for insurance companies. The two lists for 2005 were almost entirely different. The list of the most expensive disasters was topped by the North American hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Wilma and Dennis, which together claimed 1308 dead and missing but over \$170 billion in economic losses—\$65 billion of which was insured.¹¹ The list of the natural disasters that were the most costly in terms of casualties was topped by earthquakes in Pakistan and Indonesia and mudslides in Pakistan and Central America that together claimed 93,230 dead and missing—but had only \$5 billion or so in economic losses, perhaps \$500 million of which were insured losses.¹² Similarly, Swiss Re’s data from 2004 showed a similar trend: the most costly disasters were the three U.S. hurricanes, Ivan, Charley and Frances, with insured losses totaling \$24 billion, but with only 186 deaths in all.¹³ By contrast, Swiss Re recorded the death toll from the “Tsunami in Indian Ocean” at 280,000, but the insured losses for that disaster at \$5 billion, one-fifth of the insured losses from the U.S. hurricanes.¹⁴

THERE’S NOTHING BETTER THAN PHOTOS OF A “WHITE WESTERNER IN A BATHING SUIT”

The tsunami, which struck Asia on 26 December 2004, dominated news coverage well into the new year. But even given its magnitude, commentators and even relief agencies have been uncertain why exactly the tsunami captured the media and world’s imagination to the extent that it did. “Only the Christmas before last, the Iranian city of Bam was razed by an earthquake killing nearly 60,000 people, many of them children,” mused Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in the London newspaper, *The Independent*. “The rest still live in the ruins, broken-hearted and destitute, trying to raise the will to rebuild their lives slowly. Outside Iran, no one is interested. Of course there are no beach resorts in Bam, no bikinis, hotels, pleasure palaces. Is that why? Gujarat heaved on 26 January four years ago, burying tens of thousands, but outside India, they are now erased from international memory.”¹⁵

Ted Koppel, anchor of ABC’s *Nightline*, opened his program on 11 January 2005, with these words:

We humans are a curious, if not bewildering, bunch of creatures. What is it that allows us to turn away from any number of tragedies, say Rwanda, Congo, Sudan, while opening our hearts and checkbooks to the victims of the tsunami in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India? You will hear any number of theories over the next half hour.

We are, it seems, put-off by tragedies that involve both the heroics and villainies of war and politics. A giant tsunami, a natural disaster on the

other hand, is nonjudgmental. By that standard, though, we should have flooded Iran with aid and generosity last year, after its devastating earthquake in Bam. We did not. We have not. Nor has the world community made good on its promises of aid following Turkey's terrible earthquake.

Maybe race and religion have something to do with it. All those Blacks in Africa and those Muslims in Turkey and Iran. But Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim community, and many people in Sri Lanka and India are just as dark as the Tutsi in Rwanda.

As for the numbers of victims, the ongoing tragedies in Congo and Sudan, have killed millions and continue to kill at a horrifying rate.¹⁶

As reporter Ruth Gridley noted, "Tim Cunningham, an executive producer who worked on tsunami coverage in Sri Lanka for Sky TV news, noted that Sky had sent fifty journalists from London to cover the tsunami in Asia, but had just one reporter in Africa."¹⁷

Within two weeks after the tsunami hit, 45 percent of all Americans had donated to the victims of the tsunami and another 25 percent were thinking about it, according to a USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll.¹⁸ During those first two weeks after the tsunami, \$406 million was raised, compared with \$550 million raised during the two weeks after the terrorist attack of September 11th. The special cruelty of the Asian tsunami's holiday timing—Boxing Day for Commonwealth countries, the day after Christmas for others—did find many in a spirit of giving. Observed reporter Kathleen Megan with the *Hartford Courant*, "Hardly any American—from the small child who put \$6 in an envelope with the note, 'I hope you feel better and find a family,' to the 80-year-old couple who skipped a meal and donated the savings so someone else could eat—hasn't been touched by the tsunami victims."¹⁹

Journalists themselves have argued that the media covered the story in part because of its terrible scale. As *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof noted: "If you were going to make a movie, then you would make it about this kind of tsunami sweeping down all around the world. It's a disaster movie, only it's real life."²⁰ "It was a natural disaster like no other," noted Jan Egeland, the UN's Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief, "in the sense that 230,000 people, roughly, died in a minute."²¹

Equally important was that the disaster was so telegenic, and that images of the event itself as well as the aftermath were available. Stacy Palmer, editor of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, observed that in most disasters media are only able to transmit photographs and video after the fact. "Here we saw the water coming," said Palmer.²² *Newsday* reported that the tsunami images were in such demand that media outlets went to airports seeking video from returning vacationers.²³

The plethora of international satellite channels as well as the Internet helped move the images more widely, more quickly. In reiterating interviewee Nicholas

Kristof's observations, reporter Chris Bury of ABC News' *Nightline* said that "the pictures themselves, of course, proved unusually powerful and compelling, giving the disaster an epic, almost Biblical quality....New digital technology allowed news organizations to zap those dramatic videos, nearly all shot by people caught up in the disaster, around the world at the speed of light."²⁴ Reports on the horrifying disaster were globalized, instantaneous, interactive and available 24/7. The intensity of

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this layered communication created a sense of humanitarian solidarity, motivating many to care about those in harm's way. In the hours after the tsunami struck, people worldwide jammed phone lines and websites to give millions of dollars to charity

appeals. How did one process the images otherwise—the close-up photograph of an Indian father crying as he held the dead hand of his 8-year-old child to his forehead; an Indonesian mother in agony as she knelt amongst her children, all dead upon the floor of a makeshift morgue? In the United States alone, the American Red Cross collected \$556 million for tsunami relief. Before the tsunami, the largest amount collected by the American Red Cross for an international disaster had been \$50 million.²⁵

It was not just Americans who noted that the pictures drove the story and the outpouring of support. "It would be trite to say that a major reason the news networks paid so much attention was because so many disaster movie-quality images were so readily available, thanks to intrepid tourists who shot them and the Internet which disseminated them," wrote Antonia Zerbisias in the *Toronto Star*. "Trite but true."²⁶

Those same reporters observed that the pictures that were run on American and European television focused on the tsunami in large measure because many of the videos featured their own citizens. "If the waves had hit remote coasts without wealthy Westerners to record them, to bear witness to them, and to survive or be swept away by them," continued Zerbisias in her article ten days after the tsunami hit, "it is highly likely that, despite the magnitude of this tragedy, most of the media would have moved on by now."²⁷ "Anyone watching television in the West might think the tsunami struck Sweden or Switzerland," observed Gideon Levy in Israel's *Ha'aretz*. "If it were not for the 10 or so missing Israelis in the tsunami disaster, we would have forgotten about it already."²⁸

The dramatic videos shot by tourists in the resort areas of Thailand only encouraged the media in what Sue Dwyer, deputy vice president of international programs for the International Rescue Committee in New York, called the "the white-Westerner-in-a-bathing-suit phenomenon."²⁹ "Inevitably," admitted BBC reporter Guy Pelham on CNNI's program *International Correspondents*, "we are drawn to places where communications are easy—relatively easy. It's relatively easy to get to places like Phuket in Thailand, where there are a number of white people who are dead or missing."³⁰

Western Europeans, Australians and Americans caught in the midst of the tsunami were tourists who not only could literally narrate the events (often in English) for the global media, but could also personalize the story. The still and video images of destruction, rescues, grief and survival had simple, clearly understood narratives that were often packaged as human mini-dramas: the survival of *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit cover model Petra Nemcova who watched her boyfriend get swept away, then clung to a palm tree for eight hours despite a broken pelvis and internal injuries; the worldwide call to identify a blond two-year-old boy (who turned out to be a Swedish child, Hannes Bergstroem); and the deaths of the daughter and granddaughter of film director Richard Attenborough.

The attention of Western media to their "own" helped turn the disaster into a domestic political issue in Europe and the United States. In England, noted Graham Wood, "The Prime Minister is criticized for staying away on holiday rather than 'directing' a government response. He has never been criticized for holidaying while thousands die daily from AIDS."³¹ "In many countries, including the UK," Wood said on another occasion, "it would appear that the public response has led and the governments followed. While this shows compassion, it also demonstrates the capacity of the media to influence and direct. In a world where six million children under five die from malnutrition every year and more than one billion live on less than one dollar a day, the 226,000 who died in the tsunami represent relatively small, if tragic numbers."³²

THE APPEAL OF SELF-EVIDENT, APOLITICAL SOLUTIONS

Aside from some minor coverage of criticism of the lack of an Indian Ocean early warning system, of cautions that global warming was in part to blame, and of concern over whether relief would be well-handled in the conflict zones of Banda Aceh and parts of Sri Lanka, there was little controversy in the Asian disaster.

For the media, the tsunami clearly fell into the "Act of God" category: The causes were not due to political forces, even if one effect of the disaster was to push Indonesia and Sri Lanka to allow some NGOs to help desperate conflict-zone populations formerly off-limits.³³ Eric Burns, host of FOX News Channel's *Fox News Watch* a weekly half-hour program that "covers the coverage," observed that "it was a story that had no political controversy attached to it. The media could give it a lot of time without anybody being too critical."³⁴ The apolitical nature of the tsunami meant that donors everywhere could give without feeling that they were furthering a political agenda. Lawrence Haddad, director of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, noted:

The moral case for private citizens to give to new emergencies in the future is unlikely to be as clear as it was with the tsunami, an unprecedented natural disaster that could not be blamed on human action or inaction and affected rich and poorer countries alike.

With conflict, epidemics and financial disasters, it is harder for some people to identify or empathise with innocent victims. Affected citizens are often seen as part of the structure that created the emergency.³⁵

The perceived lack of moral ambiguity and the breaking-news angle encouraged coverage across the spectrum. Unforeseen natural disasters make for better viewing than man-made catastrophes that play out over time. Neal Gabler, senior fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, noted on *Fox News Watch* that “acts of God are better than manmade disasters like Darfur. And things that happen in one swoop—one fell swoop are better for the media than things that happen drip-by-drip like AIDS and malaria.”³⁶

Newsrooms have difficulties making long-running humanitarian crises remain fresh. As Mark Jones, editor of Reuters AlertNet, a news network created to feature humanitarian issues, remarked, “If I tried to sell you the story of Congo, you might say it could wait until tomorrow, or the next day, or the next decade.”³⁷ And tight budgets and logistical problems with visas and travel itineraries also discourage news editors from even assigning reporters to cover these drawn-out stories. “The story is always the same,” said Lindsey Hilsum, the international editor of the UK’s Channel 4 TV news. “It induces despair. It’s expensive and dangerous, and one feels that there are no solutions and no end to it all.”³⁸

A survey by Reuters AlertNet released in March 2005 that analyzed news coverage in 200 English-language newspapers found that “the Asian tsunami attracted more media attention in the first six weeks after it struck than the world’s top 10 ‘forgotten’ emergencies did over a whole year.”³⁹

In a separate AlertNet poll, more than 100 relief experts and other leaders were surveyed as to why they thought some emergencies were “forgotten.” “The challenge of distilling a complex crisis down to simple soundbites...and finding a thread of hope to help audiences empathise” were mentioned as key variables.⁴⁰

Natural disasters, such as the tsunami, lend themselves better to short news packages because there is a presumption that it is evident what happened and what is needed. Resolution of the tsunami, for example, seemed clear cut: Send money and in-kind aid to rebuild the homes and infrastructure of the devastated regions. Five million across the zone lost basic services, housing, schools and jobs. Commentators argued that this was not another Somali famine where the cause looked like simple drought, but turned out to be that food was being used as a weapon of war. Most argued that the tsunami was an instance where aid donations could resolve the devastation, not just put a temporary Band-Aid over a suppurating wound.

Long-running crises in the regions struck by the Indian Ocean tsunami, such as the fighting in Banda Aceh and Sri Lanka, were either de-coupled from the disaster, or their importance was minimized. *Newsweek*’s web-exclusive article titled “Aceh’s Phantom Rebellion,” for example, had as its sub-heading: “With the insurgents that

Jakarta is so worried about nowhere in sight, behind-the-scenes peace talks are underway. Could peace be a silver lining in Indonesia's awful tsunami crisis?"⁴¹ The lead paragraph also made light of the conflict:

Alwi Shihab sees a guerrilla lurking in every shadow. Indonesia's point man for tsunami relief in Aceh province misses few chances to stoke fears about the Free Aceh Movement—an armed separatist group that has waged a low-grade war for independence for almost three decades. During a press briefing for foreign journalists in the capital Banda Aceh this week, Shihab fed rumors that the rebels, known locally as GAM, had infiltrated refugee camps, and were continuing military operations despite publicly declaring a unilateral ceasefire. He even hinted they shot down a U.S. Navy helicopter near the military airport just two hours earlier. The Americans attributed the non-fatal crash to a technical failure. "I haven't seen any GAM rebels," chuckled one American officer at the airfield, "but over that road, there are two pretty mean water buffalo."⁴²

For journalists, it is an article of faith that the needs and the solutions for disasters that are ongoing—nations caught in wars or famines such as the Congo or Niger—or for chronic emergencies such as AIDS and TB are less obvious than those for natural disasters. Crises in stasis are more complex to cover, and often far more dangerous. In addition, it is not easy for their audience to see how they can contribute to a positive and permanent resolution of such thorny and tragic situations. Mark Melia, director of annual giving and support for Catholic Relief Services, said that a tragedy like Darfur is "very complicated. It's hard to understand people who are doing horrible things....It's very hard to understand why and what can be done to stop it."⁴³ Even international institutions, NGOs and relief agencies do not always have clear recommendations for what needs to be done to ameliorate, much less resolve, some of the apparently intractable situations. Egeland noted on PBS's *The Charlie Rose Show*, for example, that "Niger is a complicated issue....There's internal discussions among donors, among aid agencies and so on what is really the cause of it and what is really the solution."⁴⁴

From the beginning, tsunami appeals were overwhelmed with donations, while solicitations for chronic crises are typically ignored even with substantial marketing by humanitarian organizations. Millions have fled their homes in the Darfur region of Sudan, noted relief officials at Oxfam. "As many people are homeless in Sudan as in the tsunami region, yet Sudan has quickly become a forgotten emergency," said Jasmine Whitbread, Oxfam's international director.⁴⁵ *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) received £62 million in donations for the tsunami, more than three times the £17 million it had asked for. According to the *Guardian*, in late January 2005 MSF was "contacting donors to ask if the money can be used on its relief work elsewhere. If they say no, the money will be returned. Most of those contacted so far are in Germany and the United States, where some 20 percent are understood to have asked for their money back."⁴⁶

"The media is a huge factor in getting people to be generous," said Oxfam's funding manager, Orla Quinlan, quoted in the *Guardian*. "If they're visually engaged, that brings it home and makes it real to them."⁴⁷ The relief community knows well the direct connection between media attention and donations, especially for neglected crises. There is a phenomenon of "image multiplication." Pictures make all the difference. And running 1-800 numbers for relief organizations on the crawl across the bottom of the TV screen prompts people to give, too. "The media is to political and public attention what other technological 'force multipliers' are to the military," noted Pamela von Gruber, publisher of Defense and Foreign Affairs publications.⁴⁸ When Egeland appeared in December 2005 on the *The Charlie Rose Show* for the one-year anniversary of the tsunami, he spoke about the role media play in disaster relief:

We asked for \$1 billion in the tsunami. We got 90 percent in no time....In northern Pakistan, we asked for only half of that, \$550 million, and we have less than half of that three months into the effort....If [the Pakistan earthquake] had happened in the middle of western Christmas and New Year's break, if the media had followed it as much, if we had had as many tourists there and as many video clips to run on CNN and BBC and so on around the clock, as we did at that time, we might have had the same kind of a response. But this happened in October. There are no images of how people died, how people struggled in the rubble. And we got much less.⁴⁹

The lack of media attention to Niger, Egeland argued, was also the cause for the lack of donor response there: "We saw it was coming up as an emergency. My people on the ground appealed December of last year [2004] for money. We didn't get anything. We...appealed again in March [2005], in April. Then in May, it was really bad. And I told in big press conferences that now, soon, children will start dying. Still didn't get money. And then the BBC World Television did its images, and then suddenly we got more in ten days than we had in the previous ten months." "Seeing suffering is a powerful incentive to give," agreed host Charlie Rose.⁵⁰

For those reasons, every year for the past eight years, MSF has published a list of the top 10 "Most Underreported Humanitarian Stories."⁵¹ According to Andrew Tyndall, publisher of *The Tyndall Report*, the ten stories highlighted by MSF for 2005 accounted for just eight minutes of the 14,529 minutes on the three major U.S. television networks' nightly newscasts. 2005 had an unusually high amount of international coverage, but according to Tyndall only six minutes of American week-night network newscasts were devoted to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and two minutes to Chechnya. The AIDS crisis received 14 minutes of coverage. The remaining stories highlighted by MSF's "Top Ten"—conflicts in Haiti, northeastern India, Colombia, northern Uganda, Ivory Coast, Somalia and southern Sudan—were not covered at all. In 1999 and 2001, the conflict in Sri Lanka made MSF's

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“Top Ten,” and in 2000, the conflict in Indonesia did—although only partly because of the violence in Banda Aceh. MSF’s noting of the media’s general failure to cover these regions is but more evidence of the limited appetite the media have for covering those areas, barring some record-setting event such as the tsunami. Even in the early weeks of 2005, after the tsunami when the world’s media were already in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, the media still gave minimal attention to those two decades-long conflicts.⁵²

Coverage of the tsunami’s distinctive destruction and of the war in Iraq sucked all of the oxygen out of newsrooms for international reporting in general and war reporting specifically. “The world’s obsession with Iraq has pushed to the margins many other scenes of mass violence,” said Gareth Evans, the head of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group think tank.⁵³ “One television news producer we met in the U.S. summed up the situation since spring 2003 this way: ‘Look, we’ve got three foreign news priorities these days: Iraq, Iraq, Iraq’...And Iraq is not simply an American obsession. We’ve heard a similar refrain from news producers and newspaper editors again and again throughout Europe and elsewhere.”⁵⁴

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE UNITED STATES...

Coverage of Hurricane Katrina dominated U.S. domestic news in the last half of 2005. Cable television made an overwhelming commitment to the story. In the immediate days after the hurricane struck New Orleans, Fox News sent more than 50 staffers to the Gulf Coast and CNN sent in 125.⁵⁵ CNN superstar Christiane Amanpour came to the region as did veteran war correspondent Nic Robertson. For cable news, it was a business call. By the first days of September, Fox’s prime-time audience had climbed to 4.2 million, 112 percent above its Tuesday average and CNN had 3.7 million viewers, an increase of 336 percent. MSNBC had 1.5 million viewers, 379 percent above its average.⁵⁶

At first the U.S. media covered Hurricane Katrina as if they were covering any hurricane: Get your reporter live with the whipping winds and flooded streets as a backdrop to do a standup on just how bad this one is. Then, embarrassingly, the media learned that they had been covering the wrong story. The story was not the broken levees, but why they were broken. The story was not how many people were left in New Orleans, but who was left in New Orleans.

As the dimensions of the Gulf Coast disaster grew in the days following the hurricane, it also grew beyond New Orleans. The rest of the country found that Katrina had become a local story because of the migration of those made homeless by the storm to cities and towns across the United States, because of the response—often inadequate—by the federal government, and because of the rise in oil and gas prices across the nation.

That switch in focus kept the disaster on the front pages, but it changed how

willing Americans were to give money. The early images coming out of New Orleans prompted countless American individuals and families to hold bake sales and yard sales and donate the proceeds to the Red Cross. But, according to Eric Block, spokesman for Mercy Corps, donations for Hurricane Katrina survivors quickly tapered off when media coverage shifted “from tales of disaster to various finger-pointing” among government agencies.⁵⁷

The hurricane also laid significant claim to non-Americans’ attention. Like the tsunami, it was immensely telegenic and access, while difficult, was possible. For Americans, the power of the story had been that it happened here, to people who were us. For non-Americans, the power of the story was that even Americans were not exempt from the depredations of natural disasters or the failures of government. Offers of aid came in from across the globe, including from countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras and Paraguay that have little discretionary money in their economies, and countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka, which are still paying for their own natural disaster.⁵⁸

WHAT’S SIMPLE ABOUT A “SIMPLE EMERGENCY”?

Gripping still and video images; manageable access; breaking news, rather than chronic events; innocents, preferably children, who need to be rescued; lives lost; substantial property destroyed; key security interests at stake; violence, scandal, or corruption; even gee-whiz stories, like the rescue of an Indonesian man, Rizal Shahputra, eight days after the tsunami, found floating on tree branches 100 miles from shore: These are the elements that command media coverage of disasters and crises, but there is no spreadsheet that can calculate the degree of commitment of the media to a story, even when these elements are present. Not only are the individual variables infinitely mutable, but there are other, external components at play. Is there a major news event already being covered that is closer to home: a presidential election, a shooting war with American soldiers, even a sensational criminal trial? Has the White House put the disaster story high on its agenda? Do Americans or just the U.S. government actually like these people—do Americans really want to give dollars to Iran, for example, despite the devastation of Bam?

Even the highest death tolls, tales of unthinkable violence, images that wrench at one’s heart, are not necessarily enough to guarantee sufficient attention to get an event onto the global news agenda and generate a critical mass of coverage. Thus recommendations of how international institutions, relief agencies and governments should manage the message of a disaster in order to attract media interest are not infallible. Following such recommendations may well lead to some exposure, but not sustained consideration. Egeland argues that the world’s disaster victims are caught up in “a kind of humanitarian sweepstakes.” “They are in a global lottery, really. And

"Regarding the Pain of Others": Media, Bias and the Coverage of International Disasters they play every night to seek our attention and our support. And every night 99 percent of them lose. And one percent win."⁵⁹

Before her death, Susan Sontag wrote in her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "Let the atrocious images haunt us." But as she noted throughout her career, graphic photographs have clear limitations—"painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark," she wrote.⁶⁰ The right images can arrest our attention, but that is just the first and perhaps the easiest step to take.

It is that observation that leads to the notion that perhaps, as far as the media are concerned, there is only a short-term difference between "simple" emergencies and "complex" ones. Most observers categorize "natural disasters"—those clearly in the "Act of God" category, such as hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions—as "simple emergencies." Simple emergencies call for a straightforward humanitarian response: the provision of food, shelter and medical supplies. Distinct from that in the jargon of disaster relief is the class of "complex emergencies," man-made disasters in which humans are at fault: civil war, ethnic cleansing, refugee migrations. Such emergencies demand not only humanitarian relief, but also social, political and even military attention.

Complex emergencies
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"news pegs."

Complex emergencies, even when catastrophic, do not usually have easy, event-driven "news pegs"—moments on which a front-page, top-of-the-news story can be "hung." Complex emergencies demand that the media devote significant resources of time, labor and money, often with too little perceived "bang for the buck." Even a multi-part story on the Congo or Colombia, for instance, is unlikely to attract readers or viewers in striking quantities. Without an enticing news event prompting a critical mass of coverage, the story of a complex emergency is a once-off, more prompted by a reporter, editor or producer's belief that the public should know about the emergency than propelled by a feeding frenzy of media swarming to cover the "next big thing."

Simple emergencies are much more likely to get breaking news coverage: they happen suddenly, unexpectedly and are often cataclysmic. To media that value what just happened, such events are irresistible—but only for a brief period of time. Even the most calamitous breaking story—a tsunami, a hurricane, an earthquake—quickly devolves into a less dramatic recovery tale of patience and stamina and so is pushed off the front pages and the top of the news by more recent, and currently spectacular stories. "We're there for the dramatic pictures, but reconstruction is a less dramatic story," admitted *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz. "It doesn't have the exciting video."⁶¹ Few reporters stay on a disaster story after the bodies have been recovered and the funerals are over. Fewer yet sustain coverage during the years-long process of recovery, beyond the perfunctory anniversary pieces. Yet journalists themselves will argue that their work makes a difference, even well

after the disaster. UPI reporter Ravi Trasad, based in Sri Lanka, noted on CNNI:

It's because of the international journalists and journalists locally working here and their reports that there is a lot of pressure on the government to work hard, work quickly and reconstruct the country very fast. If you look at what's happening in the north and east, it was because of the reports that we all did that the government came under pressure, they sent a team to the north which met the Tamil Tigers. They had a discussion, they've come to an agreement to work together.⁶²

The tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Pakistan, not to mention the earthquakes in Bam and Gujarat, have made it abundantly clear that “simple” emergencies develop their own sets of complications. It is not enough for relief operations to bring in water tanks and to throw food parcels and tents off the back of a truck for a week or two. In today's world there is no such thing as a “simple” emergency that is truly simple and quick to solve. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), an international, interagency humanitarian forum (which includes such groups as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN Children's Fund, the World Health Organization, CARE, OXFAM, Save the Children, World Vision and the International Committee of the Red Cross), noted in its “Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004” that “problems are remarkably consistent across crises that were drought-related in origin...as well as those rooted in civil strife....The recurring nature of the problems supports the contention that the challenges of complex emergencies are of a piece with those of ‘natural’ disasters but with an added degree of complexity.”⁶³

So while it is tempting to conclude that the media covers simple emergencies relatively well and complex emergencies poorly, the truer assessment is that the media cover simple emergencies well...as long as they appear simple. Once the complications of reconstruction begin—and the telegenic survivor stories are played out—the media cover “simple” and “complex” emergencies in much the same way, which is to say that they do not cover either of them. Howard Kurtz asked why crises such as Darfur and Rwanda are “not high on the media radar screen.” “And the answer,” he said, “is that day after day poverty or civil war...death tolls don't make for exciting television because there is no video and the story doesn't change very much.”⁶⁴

Complex emergencies rarely draw significant international coverage, and neither do simple emergencies after the initial shock is past. Mainstream media have regard only for some of the pain of others. It is not consciousness of another's pain that compels media attention; rather, it is the media's conviction that certain kinds of pain are fascinating for their public—pain that is understood, at least in the aggregate, to be tolerable. In order to attract a broad audience, pain must be perceived as having an economical anodyne (bind up the wounded, dump the cheating jerk, reconnect the feeding tube, elect a new pope). Pain that devolves into grinding misery

is at once debilitating to manage and hard to ameliorate, pain that is too acute is at once hard to imagine and difficult to empathize with. Ergo, those kinds of pain (malaria, AIDS, Sierra Leone, Darfur) are not box office draws; the media does not know how to describe such pain in ways that their audience can feel other than overwhelmed and helpless: What can one person do to halt a pandemic or stop a genocide?

OPTIONS FOR BETTER COVERAGE

Coverage of the tsunami and Hurricane Katrina do give some cause for hope, however. These events have remained in the news; they have received nuanced coverage. Both the tsunami story and the hurricane story evolved to become less about the natural disaster and more about the local and national government response, about poverty and race, about culture and community, about external efforts to provide relief and indigenous commitments to rebuilding. "There is a consensus in the media industry that the tsunami was covered better than any previous disaster," wrote reporter Ruth Gridley on the Reuters AlertNet site. "Journalists said they'd been good at avoiding usual pitfalls of journalists parachuted into disaster zones.... they dispelled myths about bodies causing disease...also argued against well-meaning but misguided international adoptions of newly orphaned babies, and tried to persuade people to donate cash instead of inappropriate old clothes."⁶⁵

But poor habits remained: In large measure, mainstream media were still heavily reliant on parachuting journalists. Tim Cunningham of Sky TV, for example, admitted he had never been to Sri Lanka before the tsunami. "My knowledge consisted of a couple of print-outs. I'd been told I was going 30 minutes before."⁶⁶ For television viewers, especially, the presence of expatriate journalists such as a Christiane Amanpour or a Nic Robertson at a disaster signals that the event being covered is "major." For the media, the attraction of bringing in a familiar face or byline is in part because of those correspondents' familiarity with their news outlets' needs and procedures, but inevitably indigenous reporters, already on the ground, are more knowledgeable about local needs and customs.

Most mainstream—especially television—media are locked into the business model they have; establishing dozens of country bureaus or even many regional bureaus is not seen as financially feasible. Media have to scale up for coverage of a major event, and in the hours after the event breaks, deadline pressure operates against any specific training of those mobilized to go. Usually those sent are skilled in crisis coverage, not educated in the politics, culture and language of a region. Ted Koppel, writing in January 2006, at the end of his ABC *Nightline* career, observed:

The networks' foreign bureaus have, for some years now, been seen as too expensive to merit survival. Judged on the frequency with which their reports get airtime, they can no longer be deemed cost-effective. Most have either been closed or reduced in size to the point of irrelevance.

Simply stated, no audience is perceived to be clamoring for foreign news, the exceptions being wars in their early months that involve American troops, acts of terrorism and, for a couple of weeks or so, natural disasters of truly epic proportions.

You will still see foreign stories on the evening news broadcasts, but examine them carefully. They are either reported by one of a half-dozen or so remaining foreign correspondents who now cover the world for each network, or the anchor simply narrates a piece of videotape shot by some other news agency. For big events, an anchor might parachute in for a couple of days of high drama coverage. But the age of the foreign correspondent, who knew a country or region intimately, is long over.⁶⁷

As a result, most of the mainstream media are increasingly second-level sources. Even for the elite media, the pressure of reporting for “the 24-hour media machine” means that when covering crises, parachuting reporters need others to give them context (not to mention pictures), and help them find ways to give history and background. Many in the mainstream media hire local stringers, fixers and translators; rely on NGO “ex-pats” working overseas to provide perspective; and even use international relief flights as their primary way of getting around.

But it is important to enter a caveat. The media are not monolithic. There are important exceptions to elite media’s wholesale retreat from “foreign” news coverage. Under Ted Turner, it was forbidden at CNN for reporters and producers to speak of “foreign news”—the correct term was “international news,” a characterization that the Associated Press (AP) among others has also adopted.⁶⁸ While network television has increasingly abdicated the role of covering international news with its own correspondents and world events are covered poorly if at all in most media outlets, some media continue to cover global news with regularity and depth.

The major American newspapers—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor* prominent among them—make substantial commitments to overseas reporting, and AP and the British Reuters and French Agence France-Presse (AFP) are all resources that smaller news outlets tap into. One significant area of growth in American media has been the incursion of the BBC and *The Economist* into the U.S. market. Public Radio International’s 10-year-old radio program *The World*, a co-production of PRI, the BBC and WGBH, is an award-winning daily program that reaches over 2 million listeners a week. It is, however, the only hour-long program of international news on TV or radio. It is no coincidence that *The World* and the BBC’s radio programming, *The BBC World Service*, which reach 5 million Americans a week, operate on different—non-commercial—business models.

The networks’ abandonment of foreign news has created opportunities and reasons for both public media, most notably public radio, and foreign news sources, most notably the BBC, to bring global news to an American audience. It has also

prompted NGOs, long frustrated by the mainstream media's peripatetic coverage that doesn't match the objectives of the relief agencies themselves, to move to become their own media outlets. World Vision, a leader in the relief business, is sophisticated in the creation of media packages to keep aid flowing after the mainstream media have turned their attention elsewhere. "Within days of the tsunami," noted *Nightline* reporter Chris Bury, "World Vision had its own camera crews on the way to the scene. Its own production teams package and update the material to give donors a stake in the relief efforts."⁶⁹ "Within 24 hours," said World Vision president Richard Sterns, "we can have e-mail in the hands of half a million people. And that e-mail can have a situation report, photographs and even streaming video."⁷⁰ The targeted audience for these e-mails receives news, therefore, not from the mainstream media, but from another "news" source—an NGO with its own clear agenda, but also with a greater commitment both to a geographic area and to the issues of development and humanitarian relief than the media could ever make.

The networks' abandonment of foreign news created opportunities for others to bring global news to a U.S. audience.

At the World Electronic Media Forum, held in Geneva in December 2003, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan noted that "broadcasting leaders from all the world's regions adopted a declaration in which they pledged to do their part for development and social cohesion."⁷¹ Information and the media are as vital in crises as food, water, shelter and medicine. Mainstream media are late in coming to recognize that media and NGOs share an interest in information and communication technologies (ICTs)—even while their agendas may be different.

There are some intriguing attempts by international organizations, relief agencies, NGOs and the philanthropic community to create technologically innovative Internet experiments where information on crises can get out, can be shared and can be contextualized. Prominent among them is the Reuters Foundation's AlertNet, the portal that aggregates the Reuters newsfeed to feature current and potential "health, sudden onset, food-related, and conflict" crises, with special attention to "emergencies that, for a variety of reasons, receive only sporadic coverage elsewhere in the media—so-called 'forgotten' or 'hidden' emergencies."⁷² AlertNet has a network of more than three hundred contributing humanitarian organizations and allows those contributors to post news from crisis zones directly to the site. The chief limitation of the portal is stated upfront on the site itself:

AlertNet focuses its resources on covering fast-moving humanitarian emergencies and on the early warning of future emergencies. In so doing we provide relatively little on economic development which is a closely related subject and makes up the majority of the work of AlertNet member NGOs.

The reason for this focus is that Reuters has traditionally been strong in handling fast-moving information and that our chosen medium—the online world—is particularly well-suited to alerting services.⁷³

Recently the site is being tested as a tool and resource to help compensate for broadcast and print media's shortcomings. At the end of 2005, for example, the Department for International Development (DfID) awarded Reuters AlertNet £500,000 in financial backing "to finance the first two years of a project called MediaBridge," an "online community for journalists reporting on humanitarian crises."⁷⁴

"I'd like to challenge journalists to think again about other ways to report humanitarian crises," said Mark Jones, editor of Reuters AlertNet.⁷⁵ MediaBridge is "the result of a study conducted by the Columbia School of Journalism which found that journalists reporting on crises need more background facts, tips on breaking stories, and information on relief agencies."⁷⁶ MediaBridge will provide tools and "contextual content" for journalists as well as help them find new angles to long-running stories.⁷⁷ "You can't report that another 4,000 died in northern Uganda last month—that's not news," argued Jones, "what we're looking for is not a news scoop, but a contextual scoop."⁷⁸

Similar to AlertNet is a site created by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): ReliefWeb, a "global hub for time-critical humanitarian information" that also emphasizes the coverage of "forgotten emergencies."⁷⁹

And other organizations have identified more discrete needs. The French organization, *Télécoms Sans Frontières* (TSF), modeled in part after *Médecins Sans Frontières* and *Reporters Sans Frontières*, is supported by the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO). TSF specializes in setting up telecom lines in disaster zones both to get information out and to coordinate aid efforts.

In the last months of 2005, a consortium of Internet resources came together under an umbrella area of activity labeled "ICT for Peace" or, as it is known online, "ICT4Peace." The UN ICT Task Force at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis in November 2005 released a report giving examples of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are being deployed.⁸⁰ In addition to Reliefweb and TSF, the report mentioned MapAction, an NGO that uses satellite earth imaging, data processing, and locally deployed mapping teams to supply real-time maps to relief operations and journalists, and Martus, a software tool developed by the Silicon Valley-based non-profit Benetech, that collects, safeguards, organizes and disseminates information about human rights violations from small NGOs on the ground as well as large international groups.⁸¹

These entrepreneurial, problem-oriented ventures are emerging to compensate for the professional disinclination and the structural inability of most mainstream media to consider that alongside their essential task of delivering the "product" of "news" could be—or should be—the delivery of operational information essential for recon-

struction, humanitarian and development efforts. As a result—and made possible through the Internet and digital and satellite technologies—mainstream media no longer have a near monopoly on the dissemination of international information.

The need for information is so great that other institutions, with their own varied agendas, are entering what has been the bailiwick of journalists. Mainstream media have "gotten" that the news business is no longer just about delivering information to passive consumers. Yet most mainstream media efforts to move beyond that model have been toward binary interactivity: setting up on-line chats with reporters, or including streaming video, flash slide shows and audio clips as addenda to news stories.

But the international ICT arena confirms that the "news" business is rapidly democratizing, thrust by the needs of consumers—individuals, communities, institutions, entire regions—into redefining news as far more than the information that can be found in the *New York Times*. The concept of what is "news" has been invigorated, but the profession of traditional journalism is in crisis.

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CONCLUSION

Exactly what the American mainstream media considers to be important could be read in their coverage of the crises of 2005: just-breaking news, dramatic pictures, Americans at risk, situations that can be distilled down to uncomplicated controversy (he said, she said) or uncomplicated violence (such as that caused by natural disasters), quick and/or resolvable denouements and human anecdotes. Immediate actions are valued far more than processes. With this as the key, it is easy to understand why the top news stories in 2005 could range from the devastation of the tsunami to Jennifer Aniston's divorce, from the death of Pope John Paul II to the care and feeding of Terry Schiavo.

Most mainstream media outlets do not consider international crises and disasters holistically. Crises are not crises; instead, they are a kind of virtual merchandise to be sold to fickle audiences who select what news to consume from an exhaustive menu of choices—from tragic disasters to celebrity breakups. When media consider what stories to put on their news budget, elements often far removed from the intrinsic "importance" of a crisis matter. Like the insurance industry that worries over insured losses more than absolute losses, the media worry over what is "new," what is photogenic, what directly affects their audience, what can be told in a minute-thirty or seven hundred words. The elements of a crisis are disaggregated and evaluated quite dispassionately, often by media accountants with priorities and expectations far different than that of government officials, policy wonks, NGO specialists, insurance executives or even news junkies.

When relief workers look at crises and see crises, for example, media look at crises and see news which is, for most media, a commodity. Other professions—engineers or health workers, for instance—might consider the same crises and see needs of a global community or of individual victims. Viewed in that light it is possible to understand why media institutions do not have any inherent business instincts to cover even major disasters beyond the initial cataclysm. Andrew Stoehein, media director for the International Crisis Group based in Brussels, observed in an op-ed in the summer of 2005: “I’ve lost count of how many journalists in the recent weeks have asked me, ‘Why aren’t the media covering the Congo?’ With an estimated 1,000 people dying there every day as a result of hunger and disease caused by war, it is an appropriate question. But the extent of this coverage of non-coverage is reaching the absurd: print, radio, TV, Internet—they all want to know why they themselves are not writing articles and broadcasting programs about the Congo.”⁸²

The disasters of 2005 exposed the disconnects in the media’s consideration of crises. The news stories of 2005 made clear that the mass of mainstream media look for “opportunity”—the opportunity to economically report on a sensational story of proven interest to their target demographic—before they look for “importance”.[♠]

NOTES

¹ Toby Porter, “Comment: Give us the money now: Save the Children’s Toby Porter argues for faster disaster relief,” *Observer*, 16 October 2005.

² Shafika Mattar, “Poll: Most Jordanians classify al-Qaida as terrorists rather than resistance group since bombings,” *Associated Press*, 5 January 2006; Jamal Halaby, “At least 57 killed in blasts at 3 Amman hotels; minister says suicide attacks and bomb-packed car,” *Associated Press*, 9 November 2005; “Jailed militant cleric accuses U.S. president of waging war against all Muslims,” *Associated Press*, 3 March 2006; Greg Myre and Mona El-Naggar, “Death Toll Rises to at Least 90 in Bombings at Egyptian Resort,” *New York Times*, 24 July 2005, “U.N.: Truck Bomb Killed Hariri,” *CNN*, 18 June 2005, <http://www.cnn.tv/2005/WORLD/meast/06/17/un.hariri/index.html>.

³ Paul Ames, “Pushed by U.S., a wary NATO mulls more help for African peacekeepers in Sudan,” *Associated Press*, 21 February 2006; Michael Fleshman, “Niger: a famine foretold,” *Africa Renewal* 19, no. 3 (October 2005); International Rescue Committee, “IRC Study Reveals 31,000 Die Monthly in Congo Conflict and 3.8 Million Died in Past Six Years. When Will the World Pay Attention?” (report, IRC, 9 December 2004); One consequence of this lack of coverage: Five months after the United Nations’ appeal to nations for disaster aid in November 2004, several country had “zero” money pledged or committed, including Chad, home to all the Darfuran refugees. PBS, “Conversation With Jan Egeland of the U.N.,” *The Charlie Rose Show*, 28 March 2005.

⁴ World Health Organization, “Tuberculosis” (fact sheet no. 104, WHO, August 2002, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/who104/en/print.html>; UNICEF, “Immunization plus,” (report, *UNICEF in Action*, UNICEF), http://www.unicef.org/immunization/index_measles.html.

⁵ “World Must ‘Wake up to Disasters,’” *CNN*, 3 January 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/asiapcf/01/03/un.egeland.disasters/index.html>.

⁶ Journalism.org, “The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism,” (report, Journalism.org), <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2005.index>. Traditional U.S. media (non-Internet) print news outlets, such as major metropolitan newspapers (especially the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*) together with the three newsweeklies (*Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*), public radio’s drive-time news shows (“Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered”) and on occasion, other news magazines (such as *The New Yorker*, *Foreign Policy* and

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Foreign Affairs) remain agenda-setters well beyond their circulation and immediate audience. The reported circulation data for the *New York Times* in 2005 were: 1,126,190 weekday and 1,682,644 Sunday. [Source: 2005 ABC Fas-Fax, NY Times internal records] NPR's "Morning Edition," the second-most-listened-to program overall for commercial and non-commercial radio—the first is the Rush Limbaugh program—has a weekly cume (the percentage of homes in a market that tune to a particular station for six minutes or more during a measurement period) of more than 13.2 million weekly listeners, based on the fall 2004 Arbitron survey. *Time* magazine, the most popular news weekly, has a circulation of 4.05 million, the *New Yorker* has a circulation of 950,000, and *Foreign Policy* of 100,000.

In terms of identifying policy questions to be taken up by policy elites and other media, these media outlets together with network and increasingly cable news all have the capability of being an 800-pound gorilla in the room—although no single venue has superceded the *New York Times*' editorial pages as an agenda-setter. But network TV still gathers more people under its tent. The Nielsen ratings for 15 February 2006 show NBC's "Nightly News" ahead in attracting the evening-news audience, averaging 9.8 million viewers (6.9 rating, 13 share), ABC's "World News Tonight" with 9.2 million viewers (6.4 rating, 12 share), and the "CBS Evening News" with 8.0 million (5.6 rating, 11 share). <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6065643/from/RL.1/>

Yet while the reach of network news is still unmatched, what it offers the public has changed over the years. As Journalism.org's Annual Report states:

Available numbers suggest that the news divisions have fewer correspondents and off-air journalists to produce the news than they once did, and fewer bureaus or listening posts here and abroad. Foreign bureaus have been cut by more than half. At the same time, the newsgathering technology has become more sophisticated, the editing capabilities and satellite reach more vast and instantaneous.

The net effect, many network journalists say, is the news at all three organizations tends to be focused on the major stories that have to be covered, leavened with features or sidebars routinely chosen for their appeal to targeted demographic groups. Privately, network veterans say the unexpected is less common. So is the original. There is more homogenization. Large portions of the domestic news agenda, such as the environment, science, prisons and the poor, content analyses suggest, are often absent. Other topics of special interest to targeted demographic groups, such as healthcare, retirement and financial markets, are emphasized.

Overall, more people now say they turn to cable television for major breaking news events than say they turn to network or local broadcast news. The reason appears to be convenience and availability. We live in an on-demand world. Yet on those occasions when network television news goes head to head with cable, such as with morning news shows, network still tends to attract more audience.

As for morning news shows, the report notes:

Morning news shows, which have half the audience of nightly news programs, also enjoy twice the revenue as their evening counterparts, according to available data. Yet the content in the morning is softer. People who get their news from morning programs know a very different world—one that is less global and more oriented around entertainment, celebrity and true crime—than those who get their news from newspapers or evening news.

⁷ The Tyndall Report, "Year in Review 2005," <http://www.tyndallreport.com/>.

⁸ LexisNexis, "Most Talked-About News in 2005: Americans Rank Hurricane Katrina and Spike in Oil Prices Highest, Reports LexisNexis Survey," (press release, LexisNexis, 19 December 2005), <http://www.lexisnexis.com/about/releases/0856.asp>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Swiss Re, "Swiss Re sigma, catastrophe report 2005: Catastrophes cause total damage of USD 230 billion—about one third, or USD 83 billion, covered by insurance," (press release, Swiss Re, 24 February 2006), <http://www.swissre.com/>.

¹² Swiss Re, "Preliminary Swiss Re sigma estimates of catastrophe losses in 2005: High casualty count and record insured losses of USD 80 billion," (press release, Swiss Re, 20 December 2005),

<http://www.swissre.com/>.

¹³ Swiss Re, "New Swiss Re sigma study on catastrophes in 2004: more than 300 000 fatalities, insured losses reach nearly USD 50bn," (press release, Swiss Re, 1 March 2005).

¹⁴ Ibid.; The figure of 280,00 was also given by the U.S. Geological Survey, "Significant Worldwide Earthquakes in 2004," (report, U.S.G.S., 2004), http://neic.usgs.gov/neis/eq_depot/2004/.

¹⁵ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Today's Pity Is Worthless If We Forget," *Independent* (London), 10 January 2005, 33.

¹⁶ ABC News, "The Sympathy Gap," *Nightline*, 11 January 2005.

¹⁷ Ruth Gidley, "Debate: Has tsunami carved a news niche for disasters?" *AlertNet*, 11 March 2005, <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/111056581462.htm>.

The BBC, rival to British Sky Broadcasting, sent 25 correspondents and crew to the region on the day of the disaster, and had over 100 in place at the height of its coverage. Tim Burt, Joshua Chaffin, Hannah Costigan and Justine Lau, "Media accused of too much coverage after slow beginning," *Financial Times* Asia Edition, 8 January 2005, 1-2.

¹⁸ Martin Kasindorf, "Polls, charities chart American outpouring," *USA Today*, 7 January 2005, A5.

¹⁹ Kathleen Megan, "Friends in Need; What Is It about the Tsunami Disaster that Has Made Americans So Generous?" *Hartford Courant*, 20 January 2005, D1.

²⁰ *Nightline*.

²¹ *Charlie Rose*.

²² Megan.

²³ Antonia Zerbisias, "Will we still care when media leave?" *Toronto Star*, 6 January 2005, sec. Opinion, A21.

²⁴ *Nightline*.

²⁵ Stephanie Strom, "Figures Reveal Dynamics of Disaster Giving," *New York Times*, 23 October 2005, 18.

²⁶ Zerbisias.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mark Bixler, "World's 'silent tsunamis' take quiet, deadly toll," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 9 February 2005, 1F.

³⁰ CNN International, "Critique of Worldwide Media Coverage," *International Correspondents*, 2 January 2005.

³¹ Graham Wood, "Tsunami and the Response," *Ockenden International*, <http://www.ockenden.org.uk/index.asp?id=1145>.

³² Paul Keilthy, "Expert Talk: Has tsunami compassion killed other aid?" *AlertNet*, 24 January 2005 <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/110657947835.htm>.

³³ Those relief organizations which gained a greater range of movement and which were able to provide humanitarian relief in Banda Aceh and parts of Sri Lanka had, for the most part, significant operations already on the ground in those areas. *The Washington Post* reported on 19 January that:

Until the tsunami struck, the government had closed the province to foreign journalists and aid workers in an effort to block access to the rebels. But the scale of the tragedy has forced the government to allow in foreigners, including journalists, and the rebels have taken the opportunity to voice their views to an unprecedented international audience." But the greater access in Banda Aceh came at a cost. Earlier in the article, the reporter noted: "The Indonesian government calls the rebels terrorists, and last week it imposed reporting requirements on aid workers, citing the rebels as a threat to the volunteers' safety.

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Ellen Nakashima, "Aceh Rebels Describe Effort to Aid 'Our Own'; Men Descended From Hillsides After Tsunami," *Washington Post*, 19 January 2005, A12.

³⁴ Fox News, "Quick Takes on the Media," *Fox News Watch Saturdays*, 15 January 2005.

³⁵ Reuters, "Reuters AlertNet Expert Poll: Tsunami Fundraising Efforts May Adversely Affect Other Disasters," (press release, Reuters, 24 January 2005), <http://about.reuters.com/pressoffice/pressreleases/index.asp?pressid=2406>.

³⁶ *Fox News Watch Saturdays*.

Although one should not equate coverage of AIDS with that of malaria. Research released in March 2005 "showed that malaria had become the world's forgotten killer, with half a billion people suffering from the disease but drawing a fraction of the attention of 'new' killers such as HIV/Aids." Julia Day, "How the tsunami hogged the headlines," *Guardian Unlimited*, 11 March 2005.

³⁷ Ben Flanagan, "Media: Don't let disaster get in the way of a real story: The media sometimes makes bad judgments on humanitarian crises. But help is at hand," *Observer*, 18 December 2005.

³⁸ Day.

Due to mergers and the consequent demand that news operations see profit and not public service as their bottom line, broadcast and even print news outlets are increasingly part—and understood to be part—of the entertainment circus that the "media" business has become. News media geared to overnight ratings and quarterly stockholders reports fail to see the percentage in covering long-running disaster stories or static—even if horrific—crises, if they ever did. See Susan Moeller, "Trends in U.S. Media," (report, *The Media-Public Opinion-Public Policy Nexus in German-American Relations*, AICGS, 2005), 9-15. http://www.aicgs.org/Publications/PDF/25628%20AICGS_GAI5%20FINAL.pdf

³⁹ Gidley.

⁴⁰ Day.

⁴¹ George Wehrfritz and Joe Cochrane, "Aceh's Phantom Rebellion," *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, 15 January 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6829873/site/newsweek/>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Megan.

⁴⁴ *Charlie Rose*.

⁴⁵ Sam Jones, "Sudan next as tsunami appeal ends," *Guardian*, 28 January 2005.

⁴⁶ "Charity gives money back," *Birmingham Post* (UK), 28 January 2005.

⁴⁷ Day.

⁴⁸ Pamela von Gruber, "Special Report: Emergency Disaster Response and the Impact of the Media, the Military, and Time," *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis* 33, Issue 6 (16 June 2005).

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