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Best practice, worst practice – rethinking disaster coverage in the wake of the Asian Tsunami

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26, 2004 was a disaster on a scale rarely seen. The world was overcome with grief, as images of powerful waves destroying all before them, were telecast around the world. However, these images of mayhem and destruction were only one part of an incredibly complex event. The world witnessed the unfolding drama in Asia and Africa through the work of journalists, photographers and other media professionals. But what impact did these media professionals have on the relief operations that were launched in the wake of the tsunami disaster? This research will focus on the media coverage from Banda Aceh, in northern Sumatra in the weeks immediately following the tsunami. It will be argued that the media coverage from this one location demonstrated isolated incidents of journalism best practice, but more appallingly, countless cases of journalism worst practice where the victims of the disaster were further affected by the unprofessional, unethical and ignorant approach of international media professionals and organisations. This research has centred mainly on the impact Australian media had in the disaster zone, however, comparisons with European and global media news services suggest they were much better equipped and their media professionals trained for reporting in such oppressive conditions. Despite that, the tsunami disaster has highlighted the need for all organisations to review their disaster reporting strategies given the chaos that emerged post-tsunami in Banda Aceh.

In the week after the tsunami disaster, journalists from around the world began filtering into Banda Aceh. As word spread that a disaster of 'Biblical proportions' had hit the region more journalists were mobilised and sent to the disaster zone. Fourteen days after the disaster more than 500 journalists, camera crews, sound recordists and fixers were based in Banda Aceh. In the days immediately after the tsunami, disaster organisations such as the International News Safety Institute (INSI) produced statements regarding minimum provision requirements for journalists travelling to tsunami-affected areas. The five main warnings that were reinforced in INSI's statements were:

- Be self-sufficient in health matters to avoid adding to the problem.
- Immediate disease risks will be from contaminated food and water.
- The risks from insect-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever will increase.
- The above disease risks are present in the region under ideal conditions.
- Do not be distracted from basic precautions such as road safety (2005).

INSI highlighted self-sufficiency as the number one priority for all correspondents, so that stress and strain would not be placed on the overall relief operations.

Few media organisations took heed of these warnings. By January 8, 2005 a media camp had been established at Banda Aceh's Governor's residence. A

small number of international media crews were self-sufficient in terms of supplying their own food, water, solar-powered or battery operated equipment and emergency health care. The majority were not. As a consequence conditions at the media camp quickly descended into squalor and the risk of disease and serious health risks escalated. One journalist from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) said it was 'alarming' how many journalists and news crews arrived from Australia and elsewhere with a complete lack of knowledge about basic hygiene and survival skills. He said:

The place became a real health risk. There were bodies everywhere and journalists would go out to cover a story and come back to the mansion and not even take off their shoes before coming inside. We were sleeping on the floor and they were walking on sewage, bodies and then coming back inside with the same shoes on. You could imagine how risky it was. When I asked them what they were doing or if they'd had any training in this type of thing a lot of them said they hadn't and that this was their first overseas gig. (Personal Communication September 16, 2005).

The claims were backed up by the Australian Nine Network's Brett McLeod who said members of their team rented local houses to escape the unhealthy environment at the main media camp. In addition, most news crews had no or limited food supplies, some had arrived alone without a translator or Indonesian language skills, others arrived with a corporate credit card and no money, while others arrived with no lap-tops, satellite phones or battery back-up to file their stories. Reporters said that as a direct result of this ill-preparedness, the first supplies of food and relief aid were eaten by some of the foreign media horde, rather than going to victims of the disaster. A south-east Asian foreign correspondent, who requested anonymity, said the media crews also bought large quantities of available food, fruit and vegetables from

locals at highly inflated prices to secure food supplies, while further depriving the survivors. He said:

Even if the locals had wanted to buy some of the food available they wouldn't have been able to afford it because sellers were targeting the foreign media who were paying higher prices. This had to have an impact on the survivors. We saw the survivors scrounging for food wherever they could. It was everyone for themselves. (Personal Communication September 16, 2005)

Despite this grim picture there were some examples of journalism excellence. The ABC took heed of the INSI warnings and delivered self-sufficient media response to the tsunami disaster that was the envy of many media crews. Their Jakarta correspondent Tim Palmer arrived in Banda Aceh the day after the tsunami and was equipped with a medical kit, a DV camera, two laptops, an ISDN satellite phone, 12-volt rechargeable batteries, antibiotics, food and water supplies, water purification tablets and fuel (Personal Communication September 16, 2005). By the end of the first week of reporting, the ABC had ferried a convoy of three trucks to Banda Aceh containing satellite dishes, food stuffs, medical kits, water, diesel and even a former Swedish SAS officer. Australia's Nine Network media crews were equipped with similar supplies and also trialled the use of an ex-SAS medic who provided constant support and advice for the crew. It is not surprising that the ABC's Jakarta correspondent Tim Palmer won Australia's prestigious Gold Walkley for journalism excellence, given the standard set by him and his media organisation. However, these acts of journalism best practice were swamped by a barrage of worst practice journalism. Alan Nichols, who coordinated the tsunami appeal for 40 aid agencies in Australia in the months after the

tsunami, said it was as if some of the journalists and media organisations had 'gone mad' (Personal Communication August 26, 2005). He said it was unlike anything he had ever witnessed and hoped the standards displayed by many in Banda Aceh would never be repeated.

The media madness that followed the tragic tsunami disaster highlights the need to rethink disaster journalism practice. The tsunami coverage delivered some excellent insights into the hardships and complexities of disasters. That is not disputed. However, what emerged in the tsunami's wake, was that many news organisations were too focused on getting the story and meeting the deadline, rather than considering the well-being of colleagues and more importantly the survivors of the event. The impact of the media coverage was demonstrated in the hundreds of millions of dollars raised through relief appeals. But I would emphasise another impact - the impact of unprofessional reporting on victims. Clearly and alarmingly, the suffering victims of this unprecedented disaster suffered further as a result of some international media crews in Banda Aceh. This appalling blight on disaster reporting should serve as a warning to all media professionals and media organisations to rethink their approach to reporting disasters so that the mistakes made in the wake of the tsunami are never repeated.

NB: A full paper on reporting the tsunami is available from the author.

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About the author

Scott Downman is a lecturer in journalism at Griffith University. He has more than 15 years experience working as a print journalist in Australia, Great Britain and south-east Asia. He has also worked with non-government organisations in south-east Asia in projects aimed at curbing the trafficking of women and children.