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Shaking our Foundations

MEDIA AND THE ASIAN TSUNAMI



A composite panoramic photograph of three photographs showing the destruction of Banda Aceh caused by the earthquake and tsunami. Mick Tsikas/AAP Image

The massive earthquake and subsequent tsunamis devastated a number of communities in a dozen Indian Ocean countries on 26 December 2004. The death toll reached over 286,000 with another half a million people injured and many more homeless. The tsunami proved to be an enormous test, for governments, aid organisations and media. In the first 48 hours relief efforts in many regions were coordinated by the media.

As eyewitnesses to the disaster, journalists had a huge task: to cover the immediate catastrophe, which required reporters to uphold a high standard of accuracy, professionalism and, above all, ethics while, at the same time, maintaining their own peace of mind in an atmosphere of great suffering which had a traumatic effect on survivors and observers alike.

Now, the media must ensure transparent and corruption-free aid to the damaged regions. This burden will continue to be most strongly felt in hardest hit countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka where media also have a special role to monitor the actions of the authorities.

This report from the IFJ gives an overview of the challenges journalists and media organisations face in the aftermath of the tsunami. By raising awareness of these issues we can ensure that the coverage is not only of a high standard, but also that it will contribute to the restoration of the affected regions.

JOURNALISTS KILLED OR MISSING

Indonesia bore the brunt of the waves with the hardest-hit region of northern Sumatra incurring casualties in the vicinity of 230,000 according to the Indonesian Health Ministry. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200501/s1292899.htm>

The newspaper *Serambi Indonesia*, which operates out of the region's capital Banda Aceh, lost 51 of its 193 staff in the disaster. The paper's headquarters were destroyed by the tsunami, however ten journalists managed to resume publication in a nearby city on 2 January, producing 10,000 copies per day – a figure which constitutes a mere tenth of its usual circulation.

"We felt like we had to immediately be available again for the Acehnese as we were the only daily here and we had to



Internally displaced People board a lorry to flee the city of Meulaboh, Aceh.
Dean Sewell/Oculi - www.oculi.com.au

keep the people calm as none of the rumours were facts," the daily's editorial secretary, Mr Nurdinsyam, told *The Jakarta Post* on 18 January. <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=19189> The daily newspaper was distributed for free for the first seven days to people in reachable areas, such as refugee camps and humanitarian aid posts.

Also in the province of Aceh, 11 radio stations were either damaged or destroyed with four radio stations in the Meulaboh area wiped out. At least two of them went back on air in late January due to a donation of just over US\$100,000 by the Media Development Loan Fund. Technicians were last reported to be working on putting two more stations to air during February. http://www.abu.org.my/public/dsp_page.cfm?articleid=1011&specialsection=ART_FULL&pageid=247

The country's public broadcasters, Televisi Republik Indonesia and Radio Republik Indonesia, reported 34 staffers missing. At least three journalist members of the IFJ affiliate, the Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI), are confirmed dead with another two AJI members still missing are feared dead. The AP correspondent for Aceh is also reported missing. In total 70 media workers in Aceh are missing presumed dead after their houses were reduced to rubble. Both TVRI and RRI have reported severe damage to



Withraana Shirmi De Zoysa mourns for four members of her family killed by tsunami that hit the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Jason South, *The Age*, Fairfax Photos

transmitters and other equipment according to the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union.

http://www.abu.org.my/public/dsp_page.cfm?articleid=979&specialsection=ART_FULL&pageid=247

In **Sri Lanka**, where over 38,000 people were killed, 5,000 are still missing and nearly one million people have been displaced. Some 58% of the 2121 provincial Sri Lankan journalists come from the 14 tsunami-affected districts according to the Sri Lanka Environmental Journalists Forum (SLEJF). Two journalists are still missing and many more have lost their houses and work equipment. Provincial journalists generally freelance for Colombo-based national media and receive little remuneration. Along with computers, digital cameras, tape recorders and cellular phones, many have lost their livelihood. Journalists' organizations are appealing for support to help replace lost professional equipment.

<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/tsunami/article.asp?parentid=19844>

In **India**, more than 10,000 people died in the worst hit areas of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and the Nicobar and Andaman Island. There have been no reports of journalists affected. However, India's public TV broadcaster, *Doordarshan* has reported that several of its TV transmitters on the northernmost of the Nicobar Islands were badly damaged by the waves.

<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/bbc/indo05.htm>

In Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, Bangladesh, the Maldives and East Africa, there have been no journalists reported injured or missing.

THE MEDIA PROVIDES AID

The media not only monitor aid work, they contribute too. The IFJ itself raised nearly US\$100,000 from its member unions to support journalists, media staff and their families affected by the tsunami disaster.

Some US\$50,000 in immediate humanitarian assistance has been donated to the Alliance of Independent Journalists (Aliansi Jurnalists Independen, AJI) in Indonesia.

<http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?index=2907&language=EN>. A further US\$ 10,000 has also been sent to colleagues in Sri Lanka.

The IFJ has also signed a project contract with AJI for trade union development over the next three years, which will include support to rebuild AJI's operations in Aceh. To meet the challenge of reporting post Tsunami, AJI is establishing a media centre in Aceh to provide facilities for journalists in the area. The aim is that the centre will be equipped for use by journalists, will conduct research as well as channelling reliable information by establishing a website and a newsletter.

Radio Netherlands is setting up a number of emergency radio stations in Indonesia, which will later be developed into permanent stations.

<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/bbc/indo05.htm>

Several television stations including the three commercial stations in Australia as well as public service stations like Germany's public ZDF channel have raised huge amounts of money for the tsunami victims. Greece's public broadcaster ERT, Portuguese public television RTP and US television network NBC have held or are planning fundraisers featuring musical performances.

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

In Sri Lanka, television stations mounted a major relief operation for victims of the tsunami, sending more than 200 truckloads of food, clothing and medicine to badly hit areas in the island's north, east and south in less than 72 hours, according to the independent, Sri Lankan media watchdog Free Media Movement (FMM). The Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU) is leading a relief effort by assisting with the provision of medical assistance in refugee camps.

In Scandinavia, the Danish branch of the international organisation Doctors Without Borders stated in national newspaper advertisements that they had received more money than needed for their tsunami appeal and further donations would be used to aid African nations in need like the Darfur region in Sudan.

<http://www.msf.dk/view.asp?NewsID=686>

The Red Cross and other aid organisations rejected claims that they could not use all of the donations pledged to victims of the tidal wave in that region. However, they did agree that not all donations would be spent on emergency aid.

THE JOURNALIST AS AN EYEWITNESS

Besides providing important information on the impact of the tsunami, many journalists resident or holidaying in the area provided important eyewitness details of the disaster. Experiencing the catastrophe and the effects took its toll on the press. Many victims of the tsunami were children unable to outrun the tidal waves.

"People were very calm. Except for the ones who had lost children. There was almost a sense that if you lost your partner you couldn't say anything, because if you lost your



Tsunami survivors study hospital noticeboards in the hope of finding news of missing loved ones. David Dare Parker - <http://www.daviddareparker.com/>

children that was so much worse,” explained *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter Alexa Moses.

<http://media.smh.com.au/?rid=15291&sy=smh&source=smh.com.au%2Fspecials%2Ftsunami%2F&t=2AJI8K&ie=1&player=wm7&rate=1175&flash=1>

She was holidaying with her family on the Thai resort of Khao Lak when the tsunami struck. Together with journalists from other countries, she was able to give detailed accounts of the impact of the wave.

CNN correspondent Stan Grant also spoke of the emotional trauma of witnessing the disaster. He saw the bodies of three small children, arms interlocked, among a group of bodies collected in the aftermath of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. “At that moment I stopped being a reporter and felt like a father,” he recalled.

http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,12060093%255E7582,00.html

Reporters themselves can help prevent breakdowns by knowing their own limits, taking breaks and finding editors or peers who may have similar experiences. Often, signs of traumatic stress emerge weeks or months after returning from assignment, and therefore the primary source of support will come from managers, colleagues, editors and family.

This is a concern being taken up, by senior media executives. Managing director at CNN, Chris Cramer, believes that the

role of journalists have been changing ever since the student demonstration at Tiananmen Square in 1989:

“Most journalists are trained never to ask a grieving widow or the parents of a child who died the heartless question: “how do you feel?” Now, for the first time, media professionals are starting to tell us how they feel about some stories. And it will probably make them better journalists”.
http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,12060093%255E7582,00.html

TRAUMA OF COVERING THE TSUNAMI

A number of organisations, including the DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma both in Australia and the US have offered information on how to tackle trauma for the many journalists covering the tsunami.

<http://www.dartcenter.org/index.html>

The International News Safety Institute and the IFJ was quick to distribute this and other information.

<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/dart/trauma30.htm>

In Australia, both major media houses, Fairfax and News Ltd, acted promptly and have received assistance from the DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma on how to help struggling journalists and photographers. Fairfax, with the experience of covering the Bali bombing still fresh, organised their coverage so journalists rotated quickly

through the most devastated areas.
http://www.dartcenter.org/tips_tools/disasters.html

DART and other organisations like the American Poynter Institute and the international safety-training organisation AKE group have resources on their websites for dealing with trauma <http://www.poynter.org/>
<http://www.akegroup.com/index.htm>

They recommend that all media outlets have guidelines and offer counselling to staff on how to deal with indirect trauma. On January 17, the AKE group held a post-tsunami debriefing session for journalists and news crew with more to follow in Australia and Thailand.

MEDIA OBSTACLES

Political interference has proved a problem in coverage of the aftermath. In Sri Lanka, political interference in the state-owned media, which includes the nation's largest newspaper group, makes it difficult for people to get reliable information. Critical reporting of the relief and reconstruction effort has already been branded as betrayal in the state media.

http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/newsarticle.asp?UILang=1&Cid=263795&CidLang=1

Research by Sri Lankan thinktank, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, examined the news telecasts of the Sri Lankan state broadcaster, the SLRC, from January 1 to 7, 2005. The report concluded that in its post tsunami news telecasts, the SLRC coverage of the tsunami promoted the image of the government while not allocating adequate time to those affected by the Tsunami to voice their needs, and that, despite the relatively high level of devastation and destruction in the Tamil dominated northern and eastern Sri Lanka, these areas were given low coverage when compared with news from the predominantly Sinhala South.

In Myanmar, the military junta generally prohibits media from reporting on natural disasters. According to *The Straits Times*, the local government's public-service media offered casualty numbers far lower than those from the Red Cross and other relief agencies. State-controlled media were slow to announce any casualty figures from the earthquake. It took them two days before they released the news.

<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/bbc/indo05.htm>
However, the tsunami gave journalists access to information, which had been restricted for years. Foreign journalists were invited to an official news conference for the first time in 15 years according to the Democratic Voice of Burma.

Restrictions on media access and movement in Aceh, where the Indonesian military have been fighting the Acehese separatist movement (GAM), meant news of the catastrophe was slow to filter out. The area was opened to foreign journalists and aid workers in the wake of the Tsunami, however, by the end of January the Indonesian military were attempting to close off the area and detain or deport several Western journalists, including Michael Lev, the Beijing correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, and his Indonesia translator Handewi Pramesti. Protest led the



TNI soldiers run after gun shots from rebel snipers in the ruined GAM (Free Aceh Movement) stronghold Lhoknga, on tsunami ravaged Sumatra on January 6.
Renee Nowytarger/*The Australian*

Indonesian government to backtrack on some of its demands on foreigners in the region, but the situation remains uncertain after several alleged attacks by separatists.
<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=19734>

Freelance journalist William Arthur Nessen, whose articles on Aceh are published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was ordered to leave the country on 24 January 2005, after being detained for one day. Nessen had previously been deported for alleged visa irregularities in 2003.
<http://www.seapabkk.org/news/indonesia/20030723.html>

The *Bangkok Post* reported on a slow and ineffective television media in Thailand after criticism from meteorologist Smith Dharmasarojana of the National Disaster Warning Committee explained how some television stations failed to raise the alarm when the tsunami struck. Somsak Potisat, chief of the Mineral Resources Department, learned of the undersea earthquake and subsequent tsunami about 8am on Sunday Dec 26 while he was exercising near his home. Mr Somsak phoned a radio station and called a TV channel to immediately break the news to the public. He said "I was told another programme was on air and that it couldn't be interrupted until 11am. I explained that it would then be too late and requested that the channel provide running messages ..."
<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=19874>

Very few media outlets have focused on gender issues arising in the aftermath. The Indian media have touched on problems with outcasts in refugee camps but little has been reported on the affect the tsunami has had – and will have – for women.

RADIO FULFILLS URGENT ROLE

In the wake of the disaster Asian media became a lifeline. In several regions where phone lines were disrupted and shipping links cut, radio stations assisted the aid relief by broadcasting information and reuniting families.

The local office of the state-run *All India Radio* (AIR) in Nicobar broadcast hundreds of messages from islanders concerned about missing family members. Also, AIR launched an Internet helpline to provide information and



A buddhist monk looks after the bodies at the Yan Yaow Temple in Phuket, Thailand, on December 30, 2004. Andrew Taylor/The Sydney Morning Herald/Fairfax Photos

assistance to the public. This included services from its Tuticorin station in the southern state of Tamil Nadu to assist victims in India and in nearby Sri Lanka.
<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/bbc/indo05.htm>

In Indonesia, the local television station Metro TV offered a videotape service to relatives seeking information on missing friends and family. In mid January, 700 people had used the search service to search for lost ones and 40 have managed to identify missing relatives from the footage. Metro TV coordinated their search with humanitarian and command-posts to locate the identified persons.
<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/tsunami/relief.asp>

NEW MEDIA EMERGES IN THE AFTERMATH

The Internet, too, has provided an effective means of reuniting families and locating missing persons. Over 36 million websites worldwide provide details on the tsunami, many of them operated by web loggers offering a message board with services to assist people to locate missing family members and friends. www.tsunamihelp.blogspot.com/

The speed of spreading amateur eyewitness photographs and videos through e-mail and blogs has superseded mainstream news outlets. Much of the video footage taken by local residents and tourists was initially distributed on the web and subsequently picked up by the traditional media. Steve Outing from the Poynter Institute suggests that the blogs following the tsunami have expanded the notion of "citizen journalism". He says that digital technology has evolved to the point where eyewitnesses, like professional journalists, are able to reach a wide audience.
http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=76520

Whether new media and citizen reporting prove durable is yet to be seen, as is the evolution of its relationship with traditional media outlets. Furthermore, there are ethical questions arising from the use of the Internet.

In some cases, email chains with images of wounded Western children searching for family circulated the Internet for weeks, even after the families have been reunited. And although the emails reach a wide audience, they draw attention away from other imminent problems. Instead, websites from established NGOs like <http://www.familylinks.icrc.org/home.nsf/home/webfamilylinks> are more reliable.

In the rush to air with images of the disaster, standards slipped in some parts. Several media outlets broadcast video footage and ran front-page pictures, for instance, showing people watching a tidal wave, apparently from the December 26 tsunami, which were distributed through the Bangalore office of the Press Trust of India (PTI), a semi-government-run news agency. Several television channels and newspapers used them, including the *Times* of India, the *Calgary Herald* in Canada and Australia's Channel Nine's Sky News. However, the pictures were in fact more than two-years-old and showed a tsunami hitting shores of China. Most media announced the mistake and subsequently apologised.
<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=19595>

SMS EFFECTIVE IN WARNING

The BBC reported the potential of mobile phone text messaging for disseminating future disaster warnings. The Short Message Service, or SMS, was used to alert people in the tsunami area as well.

Sri Lankan TV-journalist Sanjaya Senanayake was one of the first on the scene after the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. Since cell



A young boy reaches out for his father in Fakinah Hospital in Banda Aceh. The boy has infected lungs and a perforated appendix from the tsunami. Mick Tsikas/AAP Image

phone signals were weak and landlines unreliable, Senanayake send out text messages with updates and assessments of aid needed. Friends in India took the text messages and posted them on a web-log called *Dogs without Borders*, which enabled thousands of people to follow the events as they unfolded.

<http://www.desimediabitch.blogspot.com/>

Taran Rampersad from Trinidad and Tobago got the idea to create a centralised system where text messages were automatically uploaded to websites. Together with Dan Lane from Britain and others with technical expertise they are creating "Alert Retrieval Cache" to create networks linking people in need with others who offer help. So far, the Alert Retrieval Cache can only automatically upload a text message to a website, or distribute it to an e-mail list. Eventually, however, it will have the capacity to receive text messages from people in affected areas and, via human moderators, provide information for aid and relief efforts. <http://www.comminit.com/strategicthinking/st2005/thinking-977.html>

American-based organisation NetHope is a joint venture of several NGOs which has have devised a system for making portable Internet technology available to remote coastal communities affected by the catastrophe. The organisation is developing rugged, suitcase-sized, wireless-based voice and data communications devices which will access the Internet via a mobile satellite station. <http://www.nethope.org/>

DRAWING THE LINE

The random nature of a natural disaster attracts wide humanitarian aid and emotional responses from the public. However, the publishing of graphic images of dead and distressed victims can cause offence. While journalists returning from Aceh, Sri Lanka and Thailand said they struggled to convey the enormity and overwhelming nature of the disaster in their photographs and reports, media commentators believe that the pictures of the recent tsunami are more explicit than those from previous disasters or conflicts, reflecting both the immense impact and the scale of the tragedy.

<http://worldpressinstitute.org/tsunami2.htm>

An article from the Associated Press on 2 January raised the question of depicting bodies of victims. Editors at *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* showed similar judgment in early January in running large, front-page pictures of bodies. Faces of dead babies in makeshift morgues were clearly visible. Almost identical pictures took up much of the top half of the page in both the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. The picture showed dozens of bodies in a morgue with an ashen baby, eyes closed in death, in the forefront. <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2005/01/02/entertainment1242EST0434.DTL&type=tvradio>

In Australia, many of the pictures of dead bodies came in late at night on December 26, leaving little time for discussion in the newsroom. Few of them reached any front pages on December 27. Instead, most newspapers showed photos from either just before or as the tidal wave hit the coastline. Inside the newspapers were some smaller pictures of victims.

Photo editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Andrew Mearns explains: "Even the editors were shocked by the pictures of dead children, but we felt a commitment to publish the pictures. We did not publish the picture that the *New York Times* showed. In hindsight, I wish we had. That picture told the story of incredible devastation and the impact of the tsunami."

Some Asian commentators feel differently. In the Indian newspaper, *Hindustan*, Mannika Chopra attacked the US media for using the disaster to improve public perceptions after a disastrous Iraqi war:

"The tsunami tragedy was also an occasion to reduce the negative impression of America's aggressive role in Iraq. Images of American largesse and sympathy to the world's largest Muslim country was in plentiful evidence (...) Maybe the American media has realised that one picture can be worth a thousand wrongdoings."

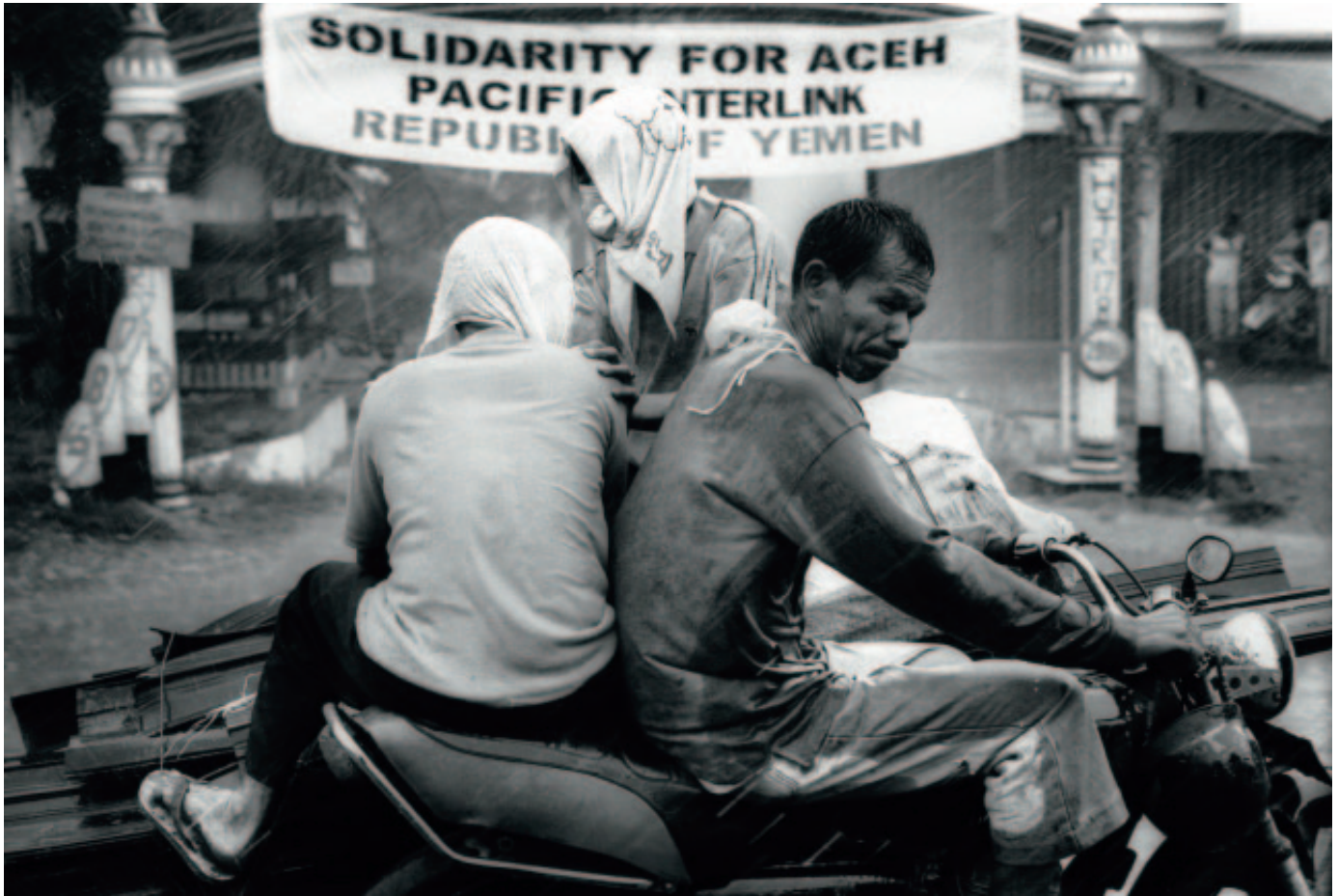
<http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=Web61952349Hoot32539%20PM1470&pn=1>

Singaporean journalist Ong Soh Chin, in an article appearing in *The Straits Times* asked if it was possible for the media to cover a disaster with sensitivity. He drew the conclusion that it was not. In times of immense grief and total devastation, journalists have to report the experience and disregard any self-censorship. Without quick, accurate and painstakingly truthful reporting, governments and organisations might not have reacted as quickly as they did.

<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/tsunami/article.asp?parentid=19206>

SCRUTINIZING THE RECONSTRUCTION

The biggest test for the media in the days and months ahead will be reporting on how the huge sums of foreign money donated to the relief and reconstruction efforts are spent, and to monitor and measure the activities of the military, local authorities, aid organizations and their governments in the reconstruction. This process will test governments and the media plays a key role to ensure



Driving tropical rain pelts these refugees as they use their motorcycle to leave Banda Aceh. David Dare Parker -<http://www.daviddareparker.com/>

proper scrutiny of the reconstruction process.

Several journalists' groups, including the IFJ and its affiliates, have called for all journalists and media institutions to keep in mind their responsibility to act as a watchdog and to ensure aid efforts remain transparent and corruption free.

The IFJ president, Christopher Warren, in a letter to UN secretary-General, Kofi Annan, expressed concern about the dissemination of incorrect information due to state interference in the media.

"There can be no doubt that the media has played a critical role in alerting the world to the dimensions of the tragedy and to encouraging the genuine outpouring of support for aid organisations. Unfortunately, there can equally be no doubt that, in too many of the countries affected, restrictions on the media and state interference in the media has limited the information available to the communities," Warren wrote. <http://www.ifj-asia.org/page/annan050104.html>

The World Bank President and the UN Secretary-General have raised concerns about the risk of corruption compromising the administration of donor funds. Transparency and accountability are vital for all donors, and the World Bank President has urged governments to provide detailed information of where money is coming from and

where it is going.

<http://www.un.org.au/SG%20statements.htm>

The media worldwide reported extensively on the emerging human trade with orphaned children, who were put up for adoption in developed countries within days of the tsunami. It gave the Indonesian Government a chance to respond quickly and protect the children by assigning military as guards in camps as well as banning children from leaving the area.

http://www.heraldnet.com/stories/05/01/05/100wir_tsunami001.cfm

MONITORING AID EFFORTS

In certain regions, the tsunami disaster has highlighted old conflicts. The Indian media were praised for highlighting discrimination against the lowest caste, the Dalits, in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu.

Relief camps in Nagapattinam are reporting extensive discrimination: families have been thrown out, denied food, and not had access to toilet facilities and drinking water provided by a UN agency. The *Indian Express* broke the story and, according to the newspaper, the NGOs have raised the problem during their meeting with the local authorities. http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=62499



Alan Moir/The Sydney Morning Herald

Amnesty International (AI) is monitoring the relief effort to ensure that fundamental human rights are respected. These include the principle of non-discrimination in aid provision, principles guiding protection of human rights in situations of internal displacement and the right to protection from physical or mental abuse, including violence against women.

In Sri Lanka, AI is concerned about sexual violence against women in camps and the risk of orphaned children being recruited as soldiers by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Initially, there were signs of co-operation between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government. However, there appears to be increasing disagreement between the two parties over the distribution of aid. It is vital that local and international media oversees the aid effort without discrimination.

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/pages/tsunami2-eng>

The Free Media Movement in Sri Lanka has started a network with the Muslim Media Forum and the Sri Lankan Tamil Media Alliance to ensure that rehabilitation and reconstruction activities are transparent and devoid of corruption and discrimination.

The network has established an office in the capital Colombo and hopes to expand to three regional offices. Activities will be coordinated for journalists in affected areas. Workshops will provide guidelines on covering disasters.

A meeting of 20 editors from Sri Lankan media organised under the auspices of the IFJ condemned the lack of transparency and called on journalists and editors to properly scrutinize the reconstruction and resist any self-censorship in the name of national unity. Highlighting the critical need for investigative journalism, they urged

journalists not to report rumour as fact, to pay special attention to the needs of children and called for ongoing training of Sri Lankan reporters to enhance ethnic and cultural diversity.

On 28 February, Japan's national broadcaster NHK is holding an emergency workshop on natural disasters for the regional broadcasters. The workshop is held in Tokyo and will go for three days together with the Asia Pacific Broadcaster Union (ABU). The aim will be to evaluate the role that broadcasters can play in relaying early warnings so that casualties from natural disasters can be minimised. Further information can be found on <http://www.abu.org.my/public/compiled/p247.htm>

*Cover illustration by
The Sydney Morning Herald's Michael Fitzjames.*

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www.ifj-asia.org*

How do you photograph a tragedy?

By Andrew Meares

The stealth of the Indian Ocean tsunami challenged our comprehension – as both a devastating natural phenomenon and as a media event.

There wasn't a defining moment to be repeatedly broadcast and burnt into our consciousness, as when the second plane crashed into the World Trade Center on 9/11.

In the absence of that one moment of dramatic instant imagery, photography played a crucial role in explaining the scale and impact of what had happened.

Holiday snaps of impending doom were mixed with photojournalists' emotional insights of the devastation and grief. Intensely personal photos of the missing were posted on noticeboards and the internet as families desperately sought answers.

Hospitals in Thailand showed their wounded patients in galleries on the web and forensic photos of the deceased made up databases that, while gruesome, offered some hope of recognition. Satellites redirected their gaze to the damaged coastlines, providing spectacular before and after photographic evidence.

"You can't convey the power and fury of this tsunami in a single photograph," concluded Mike Bowers, Herald Publication photographic managing editor, on assignment in Banda Aceh. Instead, we have come to comprehend the impact of the tsunami through the accumulation of still imagery – some of it shocking – which will linger in our minds for years to come.

Geography and access to technology determined the flow of information on the morning of December 26, 2004. The worse the devastation, the poorer the location, and the more limited the communications and greater the information lag.

The first front pages of the tsunami disaster coverage published in Australia showed photos of flooded carparks in the tourist centre of Phuket. While these photos were transmitted within hours of the tragedy they did not provide conclusive proof of a major international disaster, let alone a dramatic wall of water.

And then came the death.

Photos now showed heartbroken parents weeping over children reclaimed lifeless from the ocean. Bodies of bloated tourists littering formerly idyllic picture-perfect beaches. Neat rows of corpses in makeshift mortuaries with their limbs awkwardly extruding, defeating attempts to cover them. And the children – so many tiny victims.

Haunting in their intensity, these photos told the story of the tsunami and, no doubt, helped shape the overwhelming public response. As media coverage of the Asian tsunami slowly recedes these images will stay with us.

The photos newspaper readers see are guided by judgement. Photographers are always editing. The viewfinder determines what is relevant and excludes all else. Lens selection, focus and exposure constraints culminate with split-second timing that isolate the significant moment. These photos are then carefully selected, cropped and transmitted. Photo editors and the editorial teams evaluate what should be published and how it should be presented.

Publishing graphic photos is always sensitive. Recent



Nick Moir, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Fairfax Photos

events have presented unique imagery: people plummeting from the twin towers on 9/11, the burnt bodies of the US contractors hanging from a bridge in Fallujah, the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse photos and the body parts strewn across railway tracks after the Madrid train bombing.

Recently the Associated Press Managing Editors National Credibility Roundtables Project, involving more than 2400 readers and 400 journalists, conducted a survey of five graphic photographs showing death scenes. The survey included a tsunami photograph by Gautam Singh from the Associated Press showing an anguished mother grieving over identifiable bodies of children. Despite the shocking content the majority of readers (56 per cent) believed the photo should be published (the journalists polled 67 per cent), with 41 per cent of respondents in agreement that the photo could be used on the front page.

A comment from the survey argued "Report the news as it happens and don't try to soft-pedal everything... How can people react appropriately to any given situation if they don't have all the facts; or if the facts are altered because someone thinks life is too graphic for us to deal with?... Not being able to face reality is a major problem in our society today."

The same photo ran large across the front of *The New York Times*. Daniel Okrent, the newspaper's public editor, justified the decision in a recent column. He argued that of all the photos considered that day "... this image could only have been photographed now, and only on the devastated shores of the Indian Ocean ...this picture was the story of the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 – not the truth, but a stand-in for the truth that will not leave the thoughts of those who saw it".