

Media & safe disaster coverage

Dealing with risks and danger

Disasters and natural calamities have been increasing with regularity in the region. Constant reminder is that they not only come with immediate and long-term impacts of varying degrees, magnitude, cross sections, casualties & losses, but also with risks. The challenges faced by journalists and media staff in bringing stories to our living rooms from such impending perilous situations, often at the risk of their lives, are many. Covering natural calamities are part of the day-to-day tasks of journalists and many have been doing so without any measure of protection and safety guidance. The question is, can they still tell the story with the possibility of less risk? What can be done to prepare journalists for covering dangerous assignments like disasters or working in restrictive environment?

The Belgium based, International News Safety Institute (INSI) monitors the news media working in disaster elements besides other situations. They track and record all staff and freelance casualties during coverage-related activities - print, photo and video journalists. The figure compiled by INSI of Journalists & Media Staff Killed in 2008 is 109. However, statistics show only a couple of news reporters losing their lives while reporting natural disasters. At this juncture, it is never late to be prepared, to be aware of the impending risks. There are several insightful questions that need attention. Does the news staff have security and medical equipment and information? Do they come to the field with specialized knowledge, and training on covering and reporting natural disasters? Who is responsible towards the reporting media to overcome traumatic situation? Who is responsible for their safety -the country, media agencies, their line managers, support groups, disaster practitioners? These haunting questions though not a priority in the list of growing global concerns and issues, but are a nagging & reflecting humanitarian thought for consideration and a way of paying our tribute to these undaunting news reporters, who play various roles in a natural disaster calamity.

The first responders

Reporters, editors, photojournalists and news crews are many a time the first to arrive at these critical moments, at times compelled to play the first responders and first to witness the aftermath of a ravaged disaster event. They work hand in hand with the community, local agencies & bodies. They are constantly called to cover events that leave lasting memories of pain and losses. Journalists face unusual challenges when covering mass tragedies, after all no one is above human reaction and emotions. They also come with different agendas. Additionally, they have to verify their reporting stories, follow ethics and report their story

ahead of the competition. Focus on the risks of working conditions for the safety of the media staff as first responders in dangerous environment is pertinent.

Also, when journalists are first responders, they face difficult decisions, the potential of physical danger and emotional risk to others and themselves in addition to ethical issues, the question of whether to provide aid to injured victims or help in the evacuation before emergency responders arrive.

Journalists are a victim themselves

The 2004 Tsunami coverage affected many journalists. After facing near death situations, covering horrifying scenes of dead bodies, broken, damaged, ravaged homes, destruction everywhere, it took months of recovery for many journalists to even pen a new story or photograph a new subject. Sense of reporting, sense of reasoning became incomprehensible. Indonesian television journalist Dendy Montgomery held his camera once again when he got a chance to do an assignment on Tsunami survivors. "It was like being born again," he recalls. Journalist when interviewing victims dealing with extreme grief and pain often build a needed and professional wall between themselves and the survivors and other witnesses. And yet again, some others are completely engulfed and immersed with the affected victims. Mixed reactions such as, sense of purpose, good feeling intermingling with reactions like, vulnerability and helplessness are also experienced by reporters covering disastrous events. However, in our overwhelming desire to receive information, news, updates we often overlook both, their physical and emotional well being, the safety issues, the traumatic stress. We take them for granted. Journalists receive very little support to overcome the varying stress after their reporting.

Journalists also evoke emotions, reactions reflected through the tone of their coverage, hence, receiving their stories with human focus and angle are always heart warming. Emotions, pathos, pain, grieve is universal, again stressing that no one, no one is above these feelings, the victims, the survivors, the community and the media.

Capturing with limitations

Every major disaster produces its own iconic images which determine how the collective memory of the world remembers the incident. Why are snapshots of frozen moments so powerfully evocative to individuals, communities and the world? Shahidul Alam, a renowned photographer recounts the profound lasting impressions of the victims and their survivors, from the Bam earthquake in 2003 in Iran, 2004 Tsunami, and the Kashmir quake in 2005, captured through his lenses in the joint publication, *Communicating Disasters* by UNDP Regional Centre in Bangkok and TVE Asia Pacific.

Photojournalists, who appear first in a scene, face dangerous situations, the first raw and harsh reactions of victims, law enforcements and the public. The desire to get the best shot sometimes delays the decision to leave the scene at the appropriate moment. Witnessing death and injury takes its toll, a toll that increases with exposure. The more such assignments photojournalists

undertake, the more likely they are to experience psychological consequences. Photographers are exposed to multitude of trauma every time they see the picture; they relieve the sights, sounds, smells associated with the picture.

Everyone is affected differently. Some may be affected immediately and some others may take days, weeks, months or even years. "Journalists have a history of denial. There is a perception that one is unprofessional if one cannot handle it. But the false bravado takes its toll" says Cratis Hippocrates of Dart Center Australia. And, sometimes the emotions are overwhelming, leading to seeking professional counseling. Tiredness, irritability, lashing out, snapping are common.

Facing risks with responsibility

There is a need to ascertain if the media have a risk assessment system. A system based on "what if" scenarios.

A few established news agencies, like Reuters, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), have peer support system, dedicated individuals to alerting, monitor reporters on fields and advocating to sensitive coverage and attention to staff's personal needs. Emails, encouragement memos, acknowledgements, positive notes are all boosters to help reporters facing such situations. However, smaller outfits, news agencies have no such benefits or services. Further, free lance reporters or stringers are on their own.

Also, it is important to know one's limits and the capacity to allow one-self to cover a difficult story. Like other first responders, journalists should be mindful of their own safety. Reporters covering not easy assignments may share concerns to their managers, supervisors, who many in turn provide guidance, support with regular follow ups and check-ins in the field. Admitting one's emotions, talking about what was witnessed to a trusted friend, spouse, or peer may help overcome such moments. On completion of such assignments, many journalists take a break or take up a hobby. Writing or narrating the incident may be therapeutic. Taking over of lighter assignments may help too.

Employers have a duty of care and must make it mandatory to send their staff or freelancers well trained, with sufficient support or preparation towards greater awareness of the risks. Enforcing professional safety practices should be encouraged. For Vaughan Smith, a leading conflict camera operator and producer, much of the media takes an amateur approach to safety.

The role of the media was acknowledged in the World Conference on Disaster Reduction that was held in Kobe, Japan at the initiative of the United Nations in January 2005. In line with the recommendations of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, the Thailand based, Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) has been actively sensitizing the media in disaster risk reduction concepts & practices. Training and building the capacity of the media on the nature and perceptions of risks, early warning communications and disaster risk reduction concepts & elements has been an engaging task of ADPC through its very various programs and projects.

Safety training must be at the heart of all efforts to enhance the security of media around the world. ADPC provides training in Disaster Risk Communication (DRC) emphasizing that communicating risks is not merely a matter of technology, but a holistic sensitizing approach with effective procedures and planning through training, skills and attitude. It is the right of media to know about the risks they face and to be informed enabling them to make sensible choices. Further, ADPC has developed a Media Kit, titled Community-based Disaster Risk Management and the Media that stresses the media's role in every phase of the disaster management, be it the pre, during or post.

INSI publication, *Killing the Messenger* emphatically recommends safety standards & codes for International community, calling Governments to live to their responsibility towards the media community, to encourage media training with an element of safety training. Calls are made to develop and sustain safety provisions covering disasters and other coverage. Actions including safety and explore crisis management guidelines need to be in place.

Coordinated, collected efforts among and with all concerned stakeholders will pave way for a proactive approach for us disaster practitioners to work with the media in promoting disaster risk reduction while harnessing a culture of safety for the media community.

References:

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