Impact of Media on INGOs During Disasters

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Research Problem:

During disasters, third sector organizations seek positive media attention to increase name recognition, enhance reputations, and obtain funding. Organizations on the scene first are usually the only ones journalists interview. Positive media coverage typically leads to increased donations for those agencies. But, their response level is based on the funding that can be funneled to the event. The type of coverage can impact INGO response.

This research attempts to discover media’s impact on international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) during disasters. This research fills a gap in the literature regarding INGOs’ internal and external actions during catastrophic events. The two disasters studied were the 2004 Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. At the time this research was conducted, the literature review indicated public administration and policy scholarship had largely ignored INGOs’ involvement.

One specific problem this research addresses is continued adversarial relations between INGOs and media and how media impact INGOs’ responses during disasters.

Aim of the research:

The research aims to examine the unprecedented response by INGOs to the tsunami and Katrina and to discover, from the INGO perspective, what influence media had on the actions (or reactions) of INGOs to these catastrophic disasters.

Research Questions:

The main research questions for this paper were the following:

- What influence did media have on INGOs during the 2004 Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in the United States?
- What might INGOs and media do in the future to improve their responses to disasters?

Theories and Concepts Informing the Research:

“It is generally recognized that the mass media are the conduit by which society receives information and on which it forms images of any major disaster” (Hartsough & Mileti, 1985, p. 282). Bentall (1993) claims, “The coverage of disasters by the press and the media is so selective and arbitrary that, in an important sense, they 'create' a disaster when they decide to recognize it” (p. 11). Media, therefore, can affect INGOs’ disaster operations.

Since media are the main tool to reach the public prior to and during disasters, it is important for relief agencies to form meaningful relationships with media (Drabek, et al., 1981; Minear, 2002; Rieff, 2002). But, risks are involved. Media can be a double-edged sword. Advantageously, media can place disasters on the international agenda, influencing the public to give and pushing politicians to act (Rieff, 2002; Wijkman & Timberlake, 1984; Wood, Apthorpe & Borton, 2001). Conversely, media can drive INGOs to disaster areas where they might not otherwise go; potential media coverage and funding are too tempting. Media can also cause other problems: reporting inaccurate information (Minear, 2002); creating competition among
agencies for coverage (Granot, 1977; Terry, 2002; Wood, Apthorpe & Borton, 2001); showcasing failure over success (Hancock, 1989); forcing politicians to make hasty decisions (MacFarlane, 2000).

To alleviate some of these problems, “The media…requires skillful cultivation by the humanitarian enterprise as an actor in its own right whose own constraints and agendas must be recognized” (Minear, 2002, p. 142). As such, scholars (Minear, 2002; Rieff, 2002; Scanlon et al., 1985) suggest INGOs form instructive relations with media which could possibly lead to more accurate, useful information being publicly disseminated.

Research Methodology and Design:

A qualitative research design was used which included three methods of data collection. First, a literature analysis was undertaken. Second, open-ended interviews were conducted (12 INGO representatives from first-time responders in the U.S., 12 from PQMD, and 8 from INGOs that rarely work in the U.S.). Participants were selected because they had responded to both disasters. Third, content analysis of relevant documents (press releases, news articles, organizational materials) was conducted.

Key Empirical Findings:

Four main findings emerged from the research. First, interviewees stated unsolicited donations caused problems. Flush with money, INGOs felt they had little choice but to respond. Yet, many of those INGOs did not coordinate with other relief agencies. Also, unsolicited in-kind donations took valuable time away from staff and clogged up runways. The majority of interviewees credited media for the abundance of donations.

Second, most agencies had difficulty ramping up their staff size quickly enough to meet demands. But, they felt compelled to respond, leaving many to rely on untrained staff to have enough people to handle activities. Also, with the tsunami, poaching became an issue.

Third, for Katrina, several interviewees discussed how staff felt driven to contribute their skills to relief efforts because of what they were seeing on television. From staff pressure, some INGOs—particularly those responding for the first time in the U.S.—were challenged by their mission and charter of incorporation. For example, one INGO, by charter, does not respond to disasters regardless of the situation. But, it responded to Katrina because of staff pressure (Interviewee #12). The INGO responded with less resources and force than it typically would have, possibly hindering the effectiveness of the response.

Fourth, although several interviewees stated they were unprepared for what happened during Katrina, their responses – based largely on media coverage – resulted in organizational changes. One organization now allows other nonprofits to join its local chapters, while another based in the U.S. will shift its programs to include domestic emergencies.