

A few thoughts on the relationship between humanitarian agencies and the media

by Urs Boegli

Modern conflict often takes place in a communication vacuum, and it is time that something were done to fill it.

Those engaged in war today appear to have ever less desire to make their voices heard, in most cases for good reason. In this post-Cold War era, the belligerents do not care as much as they once did about what the rest of the world thinks. They no longer live in fear of annoying or embarrassing their sponsors; indeed in most cases they no longer have sponsors at all, nor do they need them. It is no longer their dream to make speeches at the United Nations in New York, as it was for so many national liberation movements a few decades ago. Many simply care nothing about their international image, or about the outside world.

The other “key players” in such crises — today’s international activists: organizations like the ICRC, government representatives, and internationally mandated military officials — also usually prefer silence. Here too there are valid reasons. There is often something afoot, something involving a painstaking process of preparation, a fragile edifice that the slightest whiff of publicity could bring crashing down. If the ICRC is arranging a prisoner exchange between two mutually hostile States, for example, there is little point in a journalist telephoning about it ten days

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ahead of time. The situation will probably be so sensitive at that point that silence is the only reasonable policy. But there are also some very poor reasons for silence, such as when diplomats simply have nothing to say because — as is too often the case these days — the political will is lacking to deal with political problems politically.

Nature does not like a vacuum, and eager humanitarian agencies have a tendency to thrust themselves into the void left when those who could make a true difference choose to efface themselves. The goals of humanitarian organizations are naturally different from those of diplomats, peace-keepers and others. The former frequently feel the need to take a stand. Though this desire is quite often prompted by fund-raising considerations and the requirement these impose to raise one's public profile, speaking out is also emotionally satisfying and gratifying to the ego. The "communication" that results tends to be short and shrill, because that is its nature but also because the exposure you actually receive does not allow you the time to explain what is really going on. Humanitarian workers, often posing with dying babies in their arms, have become the prime source of information from many conflict zones, but their message has been encapsulated in a few shots and sound bites wedged into a two-minute-and-thirty-second bracket.

The result is that issues of purely humanitarian concern (how to save the lives of starving people, for example) have recently dominated news coverage of multifaceted events. Far too many disasters with political causes and for which there can be only political solutions are today labelled "humanitarian crises". An acquaintance from *Médecins sans frontières* put this very well when he observed that rape is rape — nobody would describe it as a "gynaecological disaster". But numerous conflicts are repeatedly referred to as "humanitarian disasters" while in reality they are much more. This steers the international response in the wrong direction, toward purely humanitarian action in cases where what is required is *political* action. In an age of instant and graphic television coverage, politicians have little stomach for the hard decisions that are actually needed, including sometimes sending troops to restore order in situations that hold the electorally unwholesome menace of casualties. Increasingly, political leaders tend to let things slide. Humanitarian action, by contrast, is always possible, and at little political cost. It is duly filmed and shown to an admiring public. And, inevitably, the reality behind the "event" is distorted.

Another aspect of the unfair share of media coverage devoted to humanitarian operations is its potential effect on the safety of those engaged in such endeavour and on their access to those they seek to help.

Like many other organizations, the ICRC is convinced that impromptu statements can be very risky. There is something that BBC news presenter Nik Gowing calls “the tyranny of real time”: the fact that the slightest misstep in an interview may be broadcast instantly worldwide, resulting in incalculable damage of the most startling kind and in the most unexpected places. Recent ICRC field experience shows how true this is. The ICRC’s *annus horribilis* was 1996, during which nine of our expatriate staff were murdered, six of them in Chechnya. Only a few days after the Chechnya murders, a boy soldier — one of Africa’s “new warriors” — approached an ICRC delegate, who was probably being a bit too pushy, and said, “If you aren’t careful, we’ll do a Grozny on you!” That was chilling. It was a genuine threat that brought home to us just how fast news travels these days, and what a problem this can be. The people one meets in the middle of the bush probably have access to a satellite dish somewhere. They learn from *CNN* and *BBC World* how things work; they see how vulnerable relief agencies are; and they use this knowledge.

The ICRC’s response to this reality is not to communicate less. On the contrary, somehow we have to get through to those waging the modern conflicts — no easy task when the belligerents are so often youngsters armed to the teeth and stoned out of their minds. At the same time we also need better communication with the type of media that broadcasts the hour-long background/discussion programmes late of an evening.

This brings us to the problem of denunciation. The ICRC showed extreme caution and reserve during the Second World War, at one stage keeping to itself knowledge about the concentration camps because it was frightened of the consequences for its POW operation that might follow any public appeal. Much soul-searching ensued, and it is clear today that there are times when the ethical imperative requires you to speak out. As a tool for actual change, however, going public is grossly overrated. I speak from experience as one of those who have both talked to the media about General Mladic and ethnic cleansing, and made representations about ethnic cleansing to General Mladic himself. Talking to the media is easier, believe me. The point is, however, that you can denounce whomever you want nowadays — the cavalry will not come. Humanitarian agencies should therefore think twice before taking that course. They should bear the ethical imperative in mind — as a last resort — but should not overplay the condemnation card at a time when the response that can be realistically expected in no way matches the problem.

What makes the dilemma facing the ICRC during the Second World War so harrowing in retrospect is the impression that despite the horrific

facts known to the ICRC, the Allies and a few others, we failed to leave no stone unturned. Such a situation would be unlikely to arise today since that knowledge would be — is — freely available to those who could make a difference. The problem is rather the lack of political will to take the action needed.

Finally, in response to the exaggerated media focus on issues of humanitarian concern, we should acknowledge the complexity so often involved in these situations. If what we are dealing with is a conflict, let us describe it as a conflict; if it has a political crisis at its core, talk about a political crisis. Any humanitarian response should naturally be given its fair share of attention, but not the lion's share. The public deserves to be told what is really going on; there is no justification for glossing over the complexity involved. The larger picture should be amply reported.

Unfortunately, gathering and conveying information about complex emergencies is a difficult, painstaking process that requires preparation. It makes no difference whether you are a humanitarian worker or a journalist, you need time to understand. Humanitarian organizations have to learn to dispense information about multifaceted situations in a clearer, more credible fashion. In 1984, when relief agencies had a better image than they have today, that great iconoclast Germaine Greer wrote something about the Ethiopian famine of that time that I found wrong, unjust and certainly inapplicable to my own organization. Still, her statement stuck in my mind: relief workers should be encouraged, they should be supported, but for heaven's sake they should not be believed. It was a terrible thing to say; I hope it is wrong. But it is salutary for us always to bear that harsh judgment in mind, to make a point of proving her wrong.

If you do not know something, you can always say "I don't know". There is no justification for improvising. Perhaps you can say "Nobody knows", because that is often indeed the case. Shortcuts are a poor idea. I know few people in humanitarian agencies who have ever been happy with monumental statistics, such as that the Khmer Rouge killed one million people — or now perhaps two million, according to a recently revised estimate — or the number of rape cases in Bosnia, or the number of innocent civilians killed in the former Yugoslavia. The ICRC encountered this problem when it stated that there were 110 million landmines laid worldwide, basically a UN figure that we used quite freely. When a British agency challenged it, we had to do some rapid back-peddalling. Shocking figures will naturally boost your chances of appearing on the evening news; there is a huge demand for them. But if you do not know who did the counting, think twice or you may end up regretting your lack of circumspection.

Finally, it must be said that relief agencies no longer have privileged knowledge of what is happening in the field. When I started working for the ICRC, reporters were queuing up in front of our field offices because we went further and we knew more. But journalism has since developed into a very tough profession. Just consider the risks that many journalists take these days as a matter of course. Some know more than relief workers, or at least as much. This reality should serve to foster dialogue.

In conclusion, if we stick to the facts and do not shrink from admitting that the world is a complex place, if we recognize the value of taking the trouble to listen to those who truly know a situation, if we exercise caution, if we spontaneously distrust the shocking figures that pop up so often in our line of work, then we will at least be taking steps towards greater credibility. And credibility is vital.