What aid workers think of 'what journalists really think'

By Camilla Burkot
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Any report claiming to illuminate what anyone 'really' thinks is bound to generate some controversy – and the latest from the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT), *The Aid Industry – What Journalists Really Think*, has done just that. This 14-page report summarises reflections from a sample of UK-based journalists – among them some who are quite unambiguous about their negative stance on aid – and paints a dark picture of the so-called 'aid industry'.

Taken at face value, the report suggests that aid work is perceived by most journalists as an increasingly corporate enterprise, raising suspicions about the diversion of public and charitable funds to inflated NGO staff salaries. The report also reflects concerns that aid organisations have become excessively territorial, staking claim to certain causes and 'policing' journalists' access to the field. On these grounds, the journalists interviewed suggest that critical media coverage of aid is not only justified, but well overdue.

Given the partisan nature of the report, it is unsurprising that it has attracted some equally blunt responses from members of the aid and development communities, charging that journalists reporting on humanitarian affairs are often equally (if not more) guilty of bias and arrogance.

While the sensationalism of the IBT report certainly makes good fodder for debate, the continuing online fallout from its publication last November unfortunately seems to have overshadowed a recent and far more nuanced panel discussion of the interdependence between aid organisations and the news media, chaired by IRIN CEO Ben Parker. Despite being convened on journalists' home turf at London's Frontline Club, the tone of that gathering seems to have been one of practical bridge-building between the fields, unlike the report. Among the key points raised:

1. Both aid and news media are big businesses with serious economic interests at stake, and both have an obligation to act as transparently as possible and manage expectations. That said, a 'mutual mistrust' can and probably should be maintained in order for each party to protect their own objectivity, so long as this is balanced with rights of reply prior to publication.
2. The rise of in-house reporting and 'advocacy journalism' mean that the distinction

between media and aid work is increasingly blurred.

3. On a practical level, it is often left up to aid organisations to provide transport, accommodation and security for journalists in the field, and/or these details are not discussed in advance – this can result in significant safety and liability risks for both sides, as well as misunderstandings and ill feelings that can colour the resulting media coverage.

A second unfortunate consequence of the IBT report is that it presents these journalists' opinions as a 'breaking story'. In reality, the challenges of negotiating access and advocacy through the media have been recognised as legitimate and complex subjects for a number of years (see just a few examples here, here, and here). It's not, in fact, the case that journalists and aid workers have been refraining from honest comment about each other until now, and it might have been helpful for the IBT report to more fully acknowledge this.

One final note is that the IBT report focused primarily on the aid–media relationship in the UK – again, it is perhaps not surprising, given the oft-acerbic character of the British press. But, to echo a point raised by other commentators, it would have been nice to see a more diverse international sample of journalists represented in the report.

To that end, it is encouraging to see a new fellowship from the Asia Pacific Journalism Centre (APJC), commencing this month, which aims to provide a select few members of the Australian media with the knowledge and training to report more effectively on development and humanitarian affairs.

Will a 13 day fellowship be sufficient to give journalists a complete understanding of the situations and dilemmas that aid workers routinely face? Probably not. But then again, neither would a 13 day crash-course in journalism encompass everything an aid worker needs to know about the press. The simple fact that constructive dialogue is happening in this region, at least, can only be a good thing.

About the author/s

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