



# Stories in distress: Three case studies in Australian media coverage of humanitarian crises

Wendy Bacon and Chris Nash

## Abstract

*This article reviews three case studies in the Australian media reporting of international humanitarian crises. The case studies cover a six-month period in 1999 and draw on all media over that period. The three case studies are: the violence in East Timor at the time of the 1999 independence ballot, the imprisonment in Yugoslavia of Pratt and Wallace, two employees of CARE Australia, and the floods in Mozambique. While the three case studies collectively exhibit many of the standard characteristics of media coverage of humanitarian issues, individually they differ significantly in the scale and orientation of coverage. We suggest that a significant factor in these differences was the relationship between the sources for the stories and the journalists, which in turn depended on other factors. We review the adequacy of the Hall and Ericson positions on the source-journalist relationship in explaining these differences, and suggest that a field analysis derived from Bourdieu is helpful in explaining the involvement of sources from the political, economic and military fields, which in turn impacted on the relationship of the media to the stories.*

## Introduction

On December 27, 2003, while many people in the Western world were enjoying their Christmas holidays, more than 40,000 Iranians were killed in an earthquake in the ancient city of Bam. Audiences around the world hearing the news might have paused to wonder what it would be like to be in such a disaster. After an initial blitz, coverage in the Australian media subsided, only briefly resurging with a burst of short stories marking a visit to Bam by the heir to the

British throne, Prince Charles. His visit was reported to be part of a Blair Government plan to improve its relationship with Iran in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq.

The Australian Red Cross attempted to revive interest with a press release on January 30 drawing attention to the return home of its aid worker Andrea Neil. Headlined "City the size of Geelong reduced to dust", it quoted Neil as saying:

The extent of the destruction is phenomenal and indescribable. A city roughly the size of Geelong in Victoria has been reduced to dust and rubble. Almost half the city's population has been lost to the earthquake and up to 75,000 people remain homeless. It will take authorities at least two to three years to rebuild.

According to media monitoring company Rehame, this press release achieved 16 media hits. Five local papers in Melbourne published sections of it almost word for word. ABC Radio stations in Melbourne, Canberra and Newcastle and Radio National's *Life Matters* (60,000 listeners nationally) broadcast interviews with Neil. Byron Bay's *Echo* newspaper published 35 words. From the point of view of audience size, by far the most significant "hit" was an article in Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* (circulation over 400,000). This included several additional quotes from Neil describing the impact of the earthquake but carried the misleading headline "Australian caught in earthquake devastation", which was incorrect.

After these few brief reports, the Australian media lost interest in the people of Bam, which is not unusual. We reported earlier (Bacon & Nash, 2003) on a content analysis of the Australian mainstream media's treatment of international aid and humanitarian issues in a six-month period between September 1999 and March 2000. That analysis indicated strong patterns in the selection of subject matter and thematic frames for media coverage of humanitarian issues and events, in the selection of authoritative sources to bear witness to and interpret events and issues, and differences between the different media technologies in how news narratives were constructed.

In this second article, we have chosen three case studies from our research to explore some issues relevant to the news selection and production processes in the coverage of humanitarian and aid issues. The three case studies are the independence ballot and aftermath in East Timor, the imprisonment of two CARE Australia workers in Serbia and floods in Southern Africa. Together, these three case studies accounted for 57 per cent of the 4268 separate items in the content analysis, reflecting the concentrated nature of the news agenda. (Bacon & Nash, 2003, p. 7).

### Theoretical approaches

The relationship between journalists and their sources is a fundamental one in the production of news and current affairs. For the past three decades there have been two major theoretical poles in the analysis of this relationship. Stuart Hall and colleagues in 1978 argued from an Althusserian Marxist position that the social production of news is “structured in dominance” by the relationship between “primary definers”, who are the acknowledged institutional leaders and spokespeople in the political and economic fields, and “secondary definers”, who are the media. The primary-secondary distinction is processual, in that the media need sources to articulate and thereby authorise the various interpretations of events they are reporting, but also hierarchical in line with the base-superstructure template of Althusserian Marxism. This relationship between sources and the media, although always contested as a “site of struggle”, results in a structured “over-accessing” of the media by the holders of political and economic power to give their interpretation of news and current events, which then assists in the reproduction of their power (Hall et al., 1978). Those who propose a contrary view (“counter definers”) to the holders of economic and political power are systematically disadvantaged.

While the hierarchical element of determination in the relationship is asserted rather than demonstrated, Hallin (1986) reports that subsequent empirical studies have confirmed Hall’s observation that the views and opinions of “primary definers” dominate the interpretative frames of media coverage. Our own study also confirmed that politicians and other official sources dominate media discourse in this area of reporting (Bacon & Nash, 2003, p. 16). If Hall’s Althusserian framework advanced in 1978 and reaffirmed two decades later (Hall, 1996) is deemed to be flawed, then some other theory will need to account for the patterns of dominance revealed by the empirical studies.

The alternate pole in the theoretical debate is articulated by Ericson and colleagues (1989) and draws on the liberal pluralist research traditions in media studies to argue that relations between sources as “authorised knowers” and journalists are not structured in dominance but are fluid and dependent on the particular social field in which the sources and journalists are engaging. Ericson does not so much refute Hall’s approach as avoid the macro power analysis in favour of the micro (Ericson, 1989, p. 3). His research documents the detail of source-journalist relations of a variety of news rounds – police, business, etc. – to demonstrate that in many instances the media hold much greater power than the sources in deciding whether or not to produce and publish a report, and in what terms the report should be framed. However, by resolutely focusing on the microanalysis of these relations, Ericson ignores any larger patterns of social power.

More interestingly, Ericson takes a relational approach to the ontological issue of what news is. That is to say, he argues that news is a representation of

the relations between journalists and their sources (Ericson, 1989, p. 377). This relational approach is resonant of Lewin's American "field theory", which was informative for Bourdieu's early formulation of his own influential theory of fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993). Influenced by Marxism, however, Bourdieu is crucially concerned with the reproduction of social power in the economic, political and cultural fields, and while he strongly rejects the Althusserian account of the media as "ideological state apparatuses" that Hall favours, his conceptualisation of different fields of power having "homologous" structures is scarcely more enlightening on the specific patterns of causality within and among the different fields of social power.

There is a burgeoning body of research and analysis using Bourdieu's field theory to analyse journalistic production in the media (Benson, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993). We plan to discuss these developments elsewhere; suffice to say here that we take a relational approach to the nature of news production – that is, we agree with Ericson that the form and content of news coverage manifests the relationship between journalists and their sources in the field of media production. We also agree with Hall that there is a pattern to the power relations represented in the news that resonates with the larger relations of social power, and we agree that a Marxian approach, though not Althusserian structuralism, is likely to prove most productive to an analysis of these patterns. We conceive of the production of news as a sub-field of cultural power and therefore contestation, in which the terrain of the conflict includes both the material production process, particularly with respect to the allocation of staff and resources in time and space, and also the symbolic repertoire of genres, narratives, words, sounds and images available for construction of the stories. The object of the contest is to determine the final form and content of the media representations. The conduct of the contest might involve actors and resources drawn from the four fields of social power: political, economic, coercive and symbolic (Mann, 1989). If there are persistent patterns of symbolic representation that support the political, economic and/or coercive power of the "primary definers" or "authorised knowers", those patterns will emerge from the way the contests are waged in all their historical and geographic contingency, within a terrain structured by the abstract relations of production in the different fields of power (Harvey, 1996; Garnham, 1990).

Our specific concern is with media representations of humanitarian crises. For Shaw, a global crisis is recognisable by the occurrence of significant pressure for international action to resolve it (Shaw, 2000). He argues that during the 1990s, humanitarian issues were increasingly represented within highly mediated global crises. For example, Western military intervention in Kosovo was framed as a "humanitarian" story.

Shaw argues that the media is contested space in which journalists in varying contexts negotiate the nature of the way crises will be represented, which is

also common ground for Hall, Ericson and Benson. Shaw also stresses the importance of the form of narrative, the particular form in which stories are told: "[It is] important to grasp the dynamics of television, newspaper and other media coverage, especially the relations between film, commentary and text in generating television impact." (Shaw, 2000) Put another way, the preferred patterns of textual form in media coverage constitute part of the terrain within which and for control over which the contested negotiations for coverage take place.

Shaw's approach fits with our findings (Bacon & Nash, 2003) that there are distinctive patterns of humanitarian news coverage across the various technologies and between different types of publications in the Australian media. There may also be ways in which humanitarian stories differ from other news coverage, in that the location of the story is often international, which may distance the vested interests of both primary definers and audiences, and therefore the media, in the content of the story, as well as impose resource and logistical constraints on the production of coverage that does not apply to domestic news coverage.

But while broad patterns and gaps in coverage do emerge, it is important to recognise that they are open to negotiation and change through actions of particular journalists in specific instances. That is to say, they are produced by dynamic interaction of agents in a structured terrain of resources and power. Repeatedly in our interviews, journalists and editors stressed the importance of those promoting humanitarian issues understanding the type of "story" or narrative they were looking for. But even within this general imperative, it was clear there is constant negotiation between journalists about what and how particular stories will be done. We heard many anecdotes of ideas that either had not been taken up or had been dropped after initial coverage, and alternatively when journalists had successfully pushed against initial resistance. Editorial policies, both covert and overt, and the results of the negotiation between media professionals around the selection of stories impact on the extent to which media provide a forum for particular information and different viewpoints and perspectives.

### **East Timor 1999: An emergency on Australia's doorstep**

For many years, one of the biggest problems facing those who struggled to keep the possibility of independence for East Timor alive (counter-definers in Hall's terminology to the primary definers among the Australian political and economic elites) was the difficulty of getting their story into the media, and hence contesting the primary definition of a fait accompli. However, during the 1990s, Australian media interest gradually increased as the movement for independence gained international support, that is, as international institutions offered an alternative primary definition to that of Australian political leaders.

A key point in the generation of media interest was the 1991 Dili Massacre, in which Indonesian soldiers killed more than 200 people during a peaceful demonstration. Images of this atrocity by independent photographers (US journalists Alan Nairn and Steve Cox and British filmmaker Max Stahl) were broadcast around the world, re-invigorating the solidarity movement for East Timorese independence and helping recast the story frame from one of "lost cause" to one of political conflict and human rights. The work of these freelance journalists contested the orthodox "secondary definition" of the institutionalised media that incorporation into Indonesia was a *fait accompli*. Independent filmmaker John Pilger entered the country secretly in 1994 to make a documentary shown in 1996 to millions around the world (Pilger, 1996).

Mainstream media interest further intensified in the lead-up to the August 30 independence ballot. By now, some Australian journalists were allowed to enter East Timor. Their reports focused on militia violence and its links to the Indonesian military, and contested the morality of Australian Government support for Indonesia, for example, Mark Davis's *Four Corners* program "Licence to kill" (March 15, 1999) and Channel 9's *Sunday* program "Secret military and intelligence ties" (May 30, 1999). Our study focused on the most intense period of coverage after the ballot and included the intervention of the international peacekeeping force led by Australian troops.

It is unusual for a major international story to involve Australia as a lead player, giving Australian primary and secondary definers an opportunity to perform before a global audience, which was further incentive to cover a story with two key narrative ingredients: political conflict and violence.

There were dramatic and shocking pictures, especially for a few days after the ballot. Once the Australian Army became involved there was also a strong local connection, widening the range of available narrative themes. Australian soldiers provided a "local hero" angle that resonated with the Pacific battles of World War II. The Indonesian military and militia were "villains", while the Australian Government was variously portrayed as "betrayers", "rescuers" and "player on the global stage". The people of Timor were initially the brave "independence fighters", then "stoic sufferers" and finally the "grateful survivors" rescued by Australian heroes. This story was so big in news terms that even media outlets that usually carry little international coverage looked for their own angle on the crisis.

A number of foreign editors interviewed for our study bemoaned the lack of space for other international stories during this period. Given Australia's strategic role and strong community interest, it is worth noting how quickly the coverage waned in the mainstream media. By November, there were only 229 stories across all mainstream media. In both December and January there were just over 200 and by March, only 118. The contest for coverage has a diachronic or temporal dimension as well as synchronic between competing stories.

Sixty-one per cent of the stories about East Timor, including those addressing aid, development and humanitarian issues, were constructed within the frame of political conflict over independence. Most of the coverage consisted of short news stories that focused on violence, emergency aid, refugees and (after Australia's armed forces were committed) peacekeeping. This underlines the range of powerful forces in the political, economic and coercive (military) fields that engaged with the media in the contest and negotiations over the coverage. Only a sprinkling of stories dealt with economic infrastructure in East Timor and even fewer with grassroots development.

As in the overall sample, the story was covered most intensively by broadsheets – News Ltd's *The Australian* and John Fairfax and Sons' Melbourne broadsheet *The Age* and Sydney-based *The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*. Both the latter published more stories than their competitors: News Ltd's Melbourne-based *Herald Sun* and Sydney-based *Daily Telegraph*. No paper covered the story as strongly as the *SMH*, reflecting the strong interest of then-editor Paul McGeogh in international reporting. There was also strong coverage in *The Canberra Times*, especially when its Sunday paper was taken into account. *The Canberra Times* ran nearly twice as many stories as News Ltd's Brisbane metropolitan paper *The Courier-Mail*. News Ltd tabloids Hobart's *Mercury* and Adelaide's *Advertiser*, the only metropolitan newspapers in their respective cities, carried even fewer stories.

On the day of the independence ballot, approximately 600 journalists from around the world gathered in East Timor. While the ballot story itself had a "good news" frame of jubilation, a theme of potential conflict had already been established. So there was no shortage of journalists present when the anti-independence militia violence began to occur even before the result was announced.

As news of militia terror spread, aid organisations provided familiar and authoritative sources for the media at a time when local sources were too frightened to speak. "We are terrified and in strife here," Oxfam International's Jeremy Hobbs was quoted as saying over his satellite phone to the *SMH* (September 1, 1999) as militia demanded that 50 East Timorese be handed over. Hobbs was also quoted on ABC-TV news, *The 7.30 Report*, *A Current Affair*, SBS TV, 2UE (Mike Carlton) and 3AW.

Commercial television news programs, which are the major source of current affairs for most Australians, were slow to take up the story. According to the Media Monitors report of September 1, neither Channel 10 nor Channel 7 news, nor *Today Tonight*, included the escalation of violence in their broadcasts on that day. Channel 9 did carry a report of the escalating violence, although one reporter told us he was disappointed his newsroom did not focus on the story until it reached what he called its "pointy" end of maximum violence. Channel 9's *Sunday* program dispatched its anchorperson, Jim Waley, to Dili.

On the same day, the *Herald Sun* in Melbourne devoted 27 paragraphs to a  
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story headlined "The Caviar Crusader" about *60 Minutes* reporter Richard Carleton's expulsion from East Timor, focusing on the food he carried. This is an example of where reporting of celebrity sources (in this case the reporter himself) is judged to have high news value, with the result that other stories are excluded.

Despite the frightening scenario described by aid workers and journalists on the ground, there was a lull in the coverage. On September 2, East Timor was crowded out of the broadcast media by a big "good news" aid story – the release of imprisoned CARE workers Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace (see below).

With the ballot yet to be announced but believed to be strongly in favour of independence, the main news focus shifted to politicians in Australia and the United Nations. "We can help – if Jakarta will help us" and "Time for us to send in peacekeepers" wrote Paul Kelly and Greg Sheridan in *The Australian*. The print media were now actively promoting intervention, creating a public issue and defining a particular type of response as the only one adequate to the situation. As secondary definers, they were constraining the decision-making terrain for the Australian primary definers, the Government and military, by representations of the situation based on the authority of their journalists' direct witness and the interpretations of international primary definers such as international aid agencies and the United States Government, which was threatening sanctions against Indonesia.

The weekend pages also provided space for some broader pieces, such as Sian Powell's "Blossoms in the dust". This article was one of the very few which attempted to interpret events in the context of the lives of the ordinary people of East Timor, who had "endured terrible privations for more than two decades". Powell interviewed Dili residents who told of their experiences, such as "Marita", who "went to the market yesterday, but it was quiet and she was petrified. .... 'People have been shot,' she says, holding baby Gaudincio." (*The Australian*, September 4, 1999). Powell's feature followed a standard format of focusing on a few individuals, but by doing so she did give the East Timorese an identity beyond that of fleeing victim.

Two days later, the militia forces were reported to be in control of East Timor. "Plea for peacekeepers as terror grips Timor: evidence emerges of Indonesian involvement in the worsening violence" was the headline in *The Age* (September 6, 1999). *SMH* foreign affairs editor Hamish McDonald, who reported that the militia were openly firing on independence supporters, and other journalists called for intervention by an outside force. Journalists were playing a critical role in getting the story to the rest of the world, framing it in a way that put pressure on governments and international organisations to act. The secondary definers were representing the situation in ways that created expectations of action by primary definers.



From Ericson's perspective, this would be an instance of the media exercising power over the representation of the situation at the expense of governmental sources, and hence indicative of a lack of entrenched structures of dominance. From Hall's perspective, it would be an instance where the perspective of the international primary definers and counter definers – local people, human rights activists, NGOs – was more persuasive than the accounts of Australian primary definers as a causal narrative, given the events the journalists were witnessing on the ground. As secondary definers they exercised their power to choose between competing definitions. For Hall, whether or not it indicated a fundamental breach in Australian primary-secondary power relations, or was simply an exception that proved the general rule, would require deeper and more extended analysis.

Increasingly now, journalists fled the country. CNN left on September 6, as did five charter planes of broadcast equipment. As Fairfax's Tim Dodd reported:

Saturday night was the last for some time which is likely to have television coverage of militia violence, and the security forces' tolerance towards it, quickly displayed on screens around the world. The danger has made it impossible to move around town and report events. (World's media flees militia bloodshed, *SMH*, September 6, 1999).

From a field analysis drawing on Bourdieu and Thompson, it could be argued that the coercive power of the Indonesian Government and aligned militias was being exercised over the symbolic power of the media, who needed protection if they were to continue reporting an alternative view. That protection was not available.

The media then continued to exercise their symbolic power over representation in absentia, and used the fact that they were forced to do it from a distance to bolster the authority of their perspective. Sian Powell wrote in *The Australian* on September 7: "The media have gone but the story won't go away." She drew her readers' attention to the link between the media, public outrage and political action: "Without public outrage fuelled by graphic television coverage, the international pressure will eventually slacken, the Indonesian police and military will not be brought to account."

Even metropolitan newspapers that usually carry little coverage of humanitarian issues were now gripped with the crisis. "IN THE GRIP OF ANARCHY", screamed Adelaide's *Advertiser*, a paper that usually carries only a relatively small amount of overseas news. This and other media outlets included aid agency telephone numbers for those who wanted to donate to funding appeals.

CARE Australia put out a release in which one of its managers, warning of

a massive humanitarian crisis, called on the Indonesian Government to restore order. But CARE also put out another release on the same day, announcing the birth of Samira and Steve Pratt's baby. This release, motivated by an interest in boosting visibility, received wider coverage than the East Timor one.

During the next two weeks, Australia's aid agencies experienced a rare intense interest in their appeals, plans and programs. NGOs interviewed for this study told us it was easy to get a voice during this period.

On September 12, Channel 9's *Sunday* program broadcast an expose with an extraordinarily strong introduction: "Ross Coulthart reveals the secret history of our collaboration with Indonesia's military and intelligence services (which) ... makes us complicit in the horror now taking place in East Timor." *Sunday's* Web page included links to support groups for East Timor ([http://news.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover\\_stories/article\\_370](http://news.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/cover_stories/article_370)).

Media pressure on the Australian Government was intense. The prominent frame of its failure to stand up to the Indonesian Government demanded a response from the primary definer, the Government. From Hall's perspective, this demand validated the underlying power and responsibility of the Government to act; the secondary definers could represent the situation in ways that put powerful pressure on the primary definer to act, but ultimately it is only pressure: the decision lies with the Government, which could then choose to both act and represent its actions in terms that rebounded to its benefit.

The print media and ABC television paid intense interest to the political story regarding the form that a peacekeeping force should take. To a lesser extent, they also covered the humanitarian crisis. By comparison, radio programs, particularly on the ABC, demonstrated a strong interest in the humanitarian crisis, giving more access to aid organisations that were arguing that thousands of East Timorese were at risk while the United Nations and politicians slowly worked towards a decision about intervention. This represented a pattern revealed in our overall sample (Bacon & Nash, 2003). Meanwhile, the story had gone off the boil for commercial television news. But once a decision was made to send Australian military peacekeepers into East Timor, journalists could also return. "Our boys and girls" to the rescue became the overwhelming narrative, especially for commercial television and News Ltd's tabloid newspapers.

Military public relations now played an important role in structuring media access, especially television coverage, by restricting journalists to areas considered safe by the military. We were also told by one army public relations officer that in some cases military and journalists' footage became mixed up so that images on television had been shot by a military crew but not identified as such. These restrictions and the danger and expense of sending crews to East Timor resulted in fairly shortlived coverage on commercial television.

Once back in East Timor, Australian reporters continued to take the initiative in documenting human rights abuses and pursuing the issue of accountability. "Diggers find tortured bodies dumped in well", wrote the *SMH*'s Lindsay Murdoch from Dili on September 23. ABC's *Four Corners* did two major reports on October 11 and October 18, and Channel 9's *Sunday* program followed up with another major report on January 5, 2000. *Four Corners* opened the new year on February 14, 2000, with "the story behind the East Timor crisis and how it plunged Australian-Indonesian relations to an all-time low". The program claimed Australian intelligence had warned the Government of impending violence.

By the end of our sample in March 2000, reporting had slowed to a steady trickle of newspaper stories about business opportunities in East Timor, the adequacy of aid and the prosecution of human rights abuses. Few Australian journalists were left in East Timor. One of these was Tim Dodd, who relinquished his Fairfax staff position and moved to Dili with an arrangement to supply copy to Fairfax papers.

Four years later, East Timor is an independent country and the work of nation-building continues. While the East Timor elections in 2001 attracted quite a lot of print media attention, they received only passing mention on commercial television. Aid organisations and support groups battle once again to get coverage for their programs and for the failure of local or international organisations to hold accountable those responsible for atrocities. There is very little media appraisal of the reconstruction process, the role of major aid agencies or the living standards of East Timorese people.

Until May 10, 2004, when the ABC's *Four Corners* carried a major report on the issue, Australian NGOs promoting the case for East Timor receiving a larger share of Timor oil resources than allowed for in 1990s deals with Indonesia, found it very difficult to get coverage, relying once again on independent film making and the alternative press. An exception is *Age* economics editor Tim Colebatch, who wrote about the issue: "They fooled me. Perhaps they fooled you, too. These days the spin doctors are everywhere, and they know how to pull the wool over our eyes." (*The Age*, March 11, 2003)

In summary, the following points emerge from analysis of East Timor media coverage:

- ♦ Humanitarian issues came to the fore in the context of a political crisis, which is not unusual in the contemporary global context. Media representations of the crisis in these terms, with the associated violence, increased pressure on the international and Australian authorities to intervene in the short term. However, it also established the rationale for the media caravan to move on once the crisis had been stabilised and violence controlled.
- ♦ There was contestation and negotiation within and between both the pri-

mary and secondary definers about how the situation should properly be dealt with. This contest and negotiation related to both the material dimension of the production process, e.g., whether staff or freelance journalists should provide the coverage, who would control the movements of journalists on the ground and provide protection for them; and also to the symbolic side, e.g., to whom would media reports attribute responsibility for the violence, what demands would the media make on the Australian Government to intervene, what angle for the stories would best suit the established relationship between the various media outlets and their regular audiences.

- ♦ Throughout the crisis, NGOs and aid agencies retained their status as authoritative media sources, in contrast to the direct media criticisms of the role of government and its reluctance to intervene. However, once the Australian Government decided to intervene militarily, it recovered its position as an authoritative source, often through positive coverage of Australian military activities on the ground in East Timor. Ultimately the East Timor intervention was a substantial popular success for the Government and military, and there was no effective challenge to the assertion of Australian economic interests in the region. Existing power relations and vested interests in the Australian political, military and economic fields, in the short to medium term at least, were advantaged by the results of the contest in the media field.

- ♦ However, the coverage was not one-dimensional. Once the media were interested, it was possible for a short period to publish many stories about East Timor that would ordinarily not have been published, including stories about the impact of developments on ordinary people. Radio provided a strong forum for reporting the humanitarian dimension of the story. Media outlets that usually take little interest in international or humanitarian issues lost interest once the immediate crisis was perceived to be over. During the period of crisis the print media and some current affairs broadcast media played a strong advocacy as well as a reporting role.

- ♦ Aid organisations got a large amount of media access during the crisis but this waned once other authoritative sources were available. Once the media lost interest in the story, it was difficult to get adequate coverage of the rebuilding process or adequacy of assistance offered. Other concurrent humanitarian issues, even catastrophes, did not make it on to the news agenda in the context of crisis. Some aid organisations resorted to bolstering their negotiating position by supplying resources to the media in order to sustain coverage.

### **CARE workers imprisoned: Bad news for aid agencies**

CARE Australia workers Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace were detained in Yugoslavia in March 1999 and charged with spying. Their arrest fell outside

our survey period, but their release, as already explained, occurred at the height of the coverage of the crisis in East Timor in September.

This analysis of part of their story provides a shorter case study of one of the few stories in our six-month research period that focused on the role of aid and aid workers and was perceived to be "negative" from the point of view of aid agencies. As with East Timor, the CARE story highlights the increasing tendency for humanitarian disasters to occur in the context of global crises, which influences the frame of media coverage, in particular the relations between the media as secondary definers and the primary definers in the political, economic and military/legal fields.

From the start, CARE Australia adamantly rejected the allegations of spying. For the most part, the media accepted that denial. In a survey of coverage at the time of Pratt and Wallace's imprisonment, McCarthy found that *The Australian* ran the story as its front page lead on "six of eighteen days the story appeared and the subject of editorials on three of those days" (McCarthy, 2000, p. 31). According to McCarthy, the Australian press presented the case as a focus for emphasising the lack of respect for law or human rights by the Milosevic regime in Yugoslavia. He quotes a number of headlines from *The Sun Herald* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, including "Branded for the crime of lying" (April 17, 1999) and "Fury over secret spy trial" (June 2, 1999).

The release of Pratt and Wallace was a major "good news" story that got extensive coverage even though it occurred during the unfolding humanitarian crisis in East Timor. The story then disappeared off the news pages until February 3, 2001. On that evening, SBS's *Dateline* led its program with an investigative piece by Graham Davis alleging Pratt had been involved in a CARE Canada contract to recruit monitors on behalf of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The monitors' alleged role was to gather intelligence in Kosovo.

Davis revealed in the program that CARE Australia chairman Malcolm Fraser had been told that *Dateline* had this information while Pratt and Wallace were in prison, and had asked that it not be broadcast. McCarthy documented the division between those in SBS who had taken the view that the story should run whatever the consequences and those who wanted to hold it. "For seven months *Dateline* remained ready to run the story should another news organisation get hold of it." (McCarthy, 2000, p. 37). In the debate following the program's broadcast, CARE Australia said the existence of the contract was already public knowledge and the program was a "beat-up".

The rest of the media, including commercial television, vigorously took up the story. Most reports were short, consisting of a repeat of allegations and a denial by CARE. The effect of this constant repetition amplified the allegations. It also framed the story simply as "spy or not spy".

Some print media carried headlines that suggested an acceptance of the thrust of the program: "Pratt helped peace monitors" (*The Australian*, February 3, 2000); "CARE workers' role revealed" (*The Advertiser*, February 3, 2000). *The Australian's* Matthew Stevens wrote that Pratt had provided logistical support for OSCE: "It seems difficult to sustain an argument that he was not compromised by this." *The Sydney Morning Herald* was initially more favourable to CARE: "Pratt furious at 'monitoring' allegation" (*SMH*, February 4, 2000). After the initial reaction, through editorials and further reports, the media began to explore the wider issues, including the implications of humanitarian aid being delivered in a military context.

Other aid agencies did not enter the debate at first. A couple of days later, however, Médecins Sans Frontières' Fionna Terry was interviewed saying the deal would disappoint people in the aid community. She told the *SMH* that there was a culture of "justification" in the aid community. "It derives from the fact that the money comes from donors and that skews accountability away from people you are trying to assist, towards donors whether private or government," she said. This was outweighed, however, when the ABC's *Four Corners* ran a more positive report about Pratt and Wallace five days after the *Dateline* report, revealing a division between the secondary definers which weakened the political impact of the story.

The story developed further when Sue Neales, who had reported for *The Age* in 1992, said her perception was that CARE had sheltered members of the US State Department while she was a reporter in Somalia (*SMH*, February 9, 2000). CARE Australia's then chief executive, Charles Tapp, said no one currently in CARE Australia had worked for the organisation eight years ago. He said: "Any aid worker found to be involved in any covert activity would be immediately dismissed."

Neales later explained to *Dateline* that she had kept quiet about this for eight years because she

made the judgement that the story the world needed to know about at that time was that there were hundreds of thousands of people around Baidoa starving ... you are very aware as a journalist that if you write negative articles about aid agencies, particularly in a crisis like this, it does affect public donations.

*The Age* reported:

It is a fact of life for aid workers in the field that Western governments, Western militaries, want to use them to glean information for them be they warring factions or allied peacekeepers to deliver humanitarian aid, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to avoid the overt and subtle pressure to comply.

Its report relied on two anonymous European Union sources. *The Australian* argued that a "vigorous debate is needed urgently to define the role of aid bod-

ies and at what point that role become compromised" (February 4, 2000). Just as it seemed this debate might happen, the story disappeared.

In terms of primary/secondary power relations, coverage of the CARE arrests initially followed the normal pattern: the views of government and NGO primary definers were consensual on the merits of the issue, and were supported in secondary definition by the media. However, the critical report from *Dateline* went to a fundamental issue of integrity for NGOs, with enormous ramifications for security of their personnel in the field, and the fundraising capacity of CARE. As such, it could not be ignored by other media, and their treatment of the allegations as serious placed CARE in a position where it had to defend the integrity of its operations, which is an unusual terrain for an Australian aid agency to find itself in. Within that terrain, the issue was never properly resolved, especially from the point of view of journalists who might now feel compelled to treat aid workers in general, and CARE operatives in particular, as objects of scrutiny in crisis situations rather than as authoritative sources occupying the moral high ground vis-à-vis governments.

Unlike the resolution of the East Timor crisis, the CARE contest resulted in a stalemate for the primary definers of government and aid agencies, and while there have been no apparent immediate constraints on the material operations of governments, military or NGOs in crisis situations, the symbolic terrain for future coverage has shifted to include the issue of the integrity of NGO operations, with potentially disastrous effects for the credibility of any organisation that gets caught in the crossfire.

#### **'Natural disasters': Mozambique floods, February/March 2000**

Between September 1999 and March 2000, there were a number of serious disasters around the world. Hundreds lost their lives in floods in China and Venezuela. Thousands were killed in an earthquake in Taiwan and thousands more faced starvation in Mongolia. There was a devastating cyclone in India. Eighty thousand were forced to leave their homes when a volcano erupted in the Philippines. These disasters registered on the Australian media radar with a few news flashes or briefs. The only disaster to receive more than fleeting attention was massive floods that ravaged Madagascar, Mozambique and other parts of southern Africa, drowning thousands and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Hundreds more died of preventable diseases as waters receded.

As the floods spread in January, the South African Government sent helicopters to rescue thousands of people in Mozambique, one of the poorest countries in the world. By February 10, the Mozambique Government had appealed for international assistance. Still the global broadcast media, which plays a crucial role in reaching mass audiences, did not cover the floods. *The Australian*

later reported that the President of Mozambique, Joachim Chissano, complained that the failure of the international media to pick up the story delayed the aid effort (*The Australian*, March 10, 2000).

Although there were some small items in the print media, the floods crisis had been under way for three weeks before Australian broadcast news editors decided it had sufficient news value to justify coverage. The turning point came when pictures by freelance camera people of South African helicopters winching people out of trees in an ocean of water passed through the gateway of global news distributors. These were followed by even more gripping shots of a woman giving birth in a tree. These images would be replayed and published many times over during the following weeks.

In Australia, public broadcasters ABC and SBS were the first to broadcast the floods story, on February 24 and 25. Two days later, a Channel 10 report warned the situation was worsening. The next day, *The Canberra Times* published a Reuters piece which explained that food distribution had stopped because there were no available helicopters. "The lives of thousands of people are in immediate danger," Channel 9 anchorperson Brian Henderson told his audience on February 29. This began the most sustained burst of television coverage about a natural disaster during this six-month period. By now, international aid community concern that foreign governments, particularly the United States, were failing to respond had been taken up by the international print media. *The Australian*, *SMH*, *Age* and *Canberra Times* started publishing stories from mid-February, while News Ltd metropolitan papers were slower to do so.

The only Australian newspapers to have a reporter on the ground in southern Africa were the *SMH* and *The Age*, which shared a stringer, Irish journalist Ed O'Loughlin. He was the journalist who provided the broadest context and range of sources in his reports. His articles (February 29, March 1, 2000) explained that floods were also occurring in other parts of southern Africa, including Zimbabwe, where 33 people had died. He placed the plight of rural workers who had "lost not only their crops but their homes" in the context of ongoing absolute poverty.

Once the story was established in television and print media, radio outlets covered the disaster by telephone link-up to Mozambique, interviewing aid workers in Australia and using news feeds. On March 2, then Opposition Foreign Affairs spokesperson Laurie Brereton and NGO Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (Oxfam CAA) released media statements calling for more funds from the Government. Oxfam executive officer Jeremy Hobbs complained:

The Mozambique Government has appealed for foreign aid and ... the Australian Government's initial response was minimal. Since then, a series of floods, heavy storms and a cyclone have caused widespread destruction and left thousands homeless and stranded.



Hobbs secured several radio interviews but Brereton was not interviewed on radio or television. The releases were taken up only by the *The Canberra Times*, *The Age* and *The West Australian*. Two days later, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, announced that Australia would provide assistance to the flood victims. His release received much more coverage than the earlier releases or the criticisms of governments by international aid agencies.

Apart from international media consumers, Australian audiences were shielded from criticism of Western donors, which included a scathing column by *Time* reporter Tony Karon in early March: "Forget about 'Ask not for whom the bell tolls ...' when it comes to a natural disaster in an impoverished African country, it takes some pretty gruesome images and a dramatic death toll before the industrialised world even hears the bell."

Of 202 stories that appeared in February and March 2000, only 165 quoted a source. The rest were images with voice-overs, or news briefs. Of those stories that did use a source, two-thirds used only one source, so that a single voice was used to set the perspective for the audience. More than half of these single sources were a United Nations or NGO official, including those from the World Food Program, some Australian NGOs, CARE, World Vision, Red Cross and Oxfam CAA. This reflects a lack of discursive analysis around the disaster. As the story shifted from the dramatic rescues with helicopters to disease in make-shift camps, newspapers did publish some longer, more reflective articles. Sources quoted in these reports were primarily locals and aid workers.

After the initial crisis was over, aid agencies tried to maintain the momentum in television by persuading current affairs and features editors to provide personal angles and social context. Since no Australian television crews or print reporters were sent to Mozambique, features had not been produced. So World Vision offered support to reporters from Channel 9's *A Current Affair* and Channel 7's *Today Tonight*. Both outlets produced a story with this support.

With a scarcity of resources, Australian international editors are dependent on stories supplied through wire services. It is significant that while wire agencies and international papers did distribute stories exploring broader issues relevant to the floods, these were taken up by the Australian media in a very limited way. News Ltd's *Herald Sun* published an article about a call for the cancellation of Mozambique's international debt which was sourced from Reuters (March 16, 2000). *The Age* took up the issue of the dangerous exposure of landmines by floods (Receding waters expose landmines [sourced from *The Washington Post*], March 10, 2000) and *The Canberra Times* pursued questions of why international aid agencies were so slow to respond to the floods (Political row dogs flood rescue bid [sourced from Reuters], March 9, 2000).

Other stories were ignored altogether. For example, Reuters distributed an item raising questions about environmental causes of the floods. The only

Australian outlet to mention the environmental angle was *The Bulletin*, in a piece by Susan Greenberg (March 14, 2000), which stated: "Some environmental activists accused South Africa of causing the flooding by straightening rivers and destroying grasslands." The article ended with a description of the birth of the baby in the treetop.

Our media monitoring sample finished on March 31. The last report appeared on March 29, a 25-paragraph article published in *The Canberra Times* entitled "Aid rush recedes with the floods". Written by experienced African affairs reporter *The Guardian's* Chris McGreal, it discussed the "daunting task" Mozambique faced as the international spotlight shifted away. "The lakes of floodwater that consumed whole towns are trickling back into Mozambique's rivers, but the TV cameras have gone and with them the international attention that set off the scramble to rescue a drowning people." (*The Canberra Times*, March 25, 2000)

And so, Mozambique and indeed the rest of Africa disappeared from view. Australian audiences were never told if enough aid funds were raised. Did the feared disease epidemics break out? How many people were left homeless and for how long? Were the foreign governments as insensitive and slow as some reports suggested? If journalists had been following these issues they might have noticed that in May 2000, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid put out a release pointing out that Australian Government African assistance had dropped by 37 per cent since 1996 and that there were no additional funds for Africa in the new budget. "Mozambique has recently asked the international community for \$450m to assist it to recover from the devastating floods this year," said Janet Hunt. "Australia's response has been 'Sorry, but we can't afford to help.'" This release was ignored by the media. Australians were never told that while international donors did eventually pledge the \$450 million, the Mozambique Government complained that by 2002 only half the money had been received.

We can make the following points about the coverage of the Mozambique floods:

- ♦ Broadcast media were only able and willing to play a role in pushing reluctant governments into committing more funds to aid efforts once visual images were available.
- ♦ Australian commercial television stations would have been unlikely to do anything more than brief news items on the Mozambique floods if World Vision had not resourced coverage.
- ♦ The role of human causes such as dam construction, poor farming practices and underlying poverty which play a role in "natural disasters" were ignored by most of the media in their coverage. Reports tend to be brief, emphasising estimates of loss of life and damage.

- ♦ The media did not follow up on the disaster or how the money was spent. Aid organisations did not actively supply information once the crisis was over.
- ♦ There was a lack of Australian correspondents anywhere in Africa. The only journalist who regularly reported from southern Africa used a wider range of sources.

Natural disasters like the Bam earthquake or the Mozambique floods that occur outside the context of a global political crisis with large-scale violence have little material relevance to primary definers in government or appeal to secondary definers in the domestic media. Spectacular images that meet the symbolic needs of the media can precipitate coverage, but even to get that coverage aid agencies increasingly have to bear the material cost of transporting the journalists to the disaster site, or pay their own staff to generate the images that they then provide to the media. Such coverage can then snowball into demands by secondary definers for action by primary definers of government, which is the goal that drives the agencies to provide the resources for coverage, though the aid agencies can also ride the media coverage to initiate their own parallel fundraising activities.

However, humanitarian disaster as spectacle with no material interests involved, as in Mozambique and Bam (in contrast to East Timor and Kosovo), can have a fragile relationship to the interests of the affected local population. They tend not to be given their own voice in the media coverage and to be swiftly relegated to oblivion once the high cost of international news coverage forces the media to move on.

Precisely because the media contest and negotiation operates largely on symbolic terrain in such coverage, without any significant economic, political or military motivation for coverage, the dynamics of media narratives become the determining factor in coverage. This narrative usually resonates with the moral superiority of extending a hand to those in need, which may ring hollow for those on the receiving end of the transient attention span.

## Conclusion

These three case studies illustrate the relevance of an analysis of the intersecting power relations at play in the political, economic, coercive and symbolic fields that affect both the material production of media coverage and the symbolic language of its representation. Such an analysis does help explain the gaps and patterns in coverage in different types of humanitarian stories or indeed whether particular humanitarian crises are likely to be covered at all. These three examples would appear to confirm Ericson's view that the form and content of news manifests the relations between the journalists and their sources. But they also confirm Hall's view that the political, coercive (mili-

tary/legal) and/or economic interests of the primary definers are a major if not paramount consideration in whether a story might be covered, how it is covered, and what the consequences of coverage are. Given that the meta-theoretical approaches of Hall and Ericson are incompatible, there is a demonstrated need to transcend their differences by moving to another mode of analysis. We suggest that a field analysis drawing on the approach taken by Bourdieu would be a fertile way of approaching the interaction between the different fields. Our research indicates that the interplay between the powerful forces in the different fields is strongly related to the type of coverage humanitarian issues receive in the media.

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### Authors

Wendy Bacon is an Associate Professor in Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney. Chris Nash is an Associate Professor and Director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at UTS.

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