

How the Australian media cover humanitarian issues

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Abstract

This article reports on the quantitative analysis of a large-scale study of the coverage of aid and humanitarian issues in the Australian media in 1999. It should be read in conjunction with the qualitative analysis (forthcoming in AJR). The analysis indicates there are large variations in the amount and type of information on these issues available to Australian audiences, depending on their geographical location, print/television/radio and public/private media preferences. For some audiences, including private sector outlets in all media outside the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne media reach, extremely limited information is available on these issues. There are marked differences between mastheads/sections/programs within particular media outlets, and between print/television/radio media. Across all media there is a tendency for saturation coverage of a small number of issues, most notably East Timor in the period of our study, and the exclusion of coverage of a broader range of issues, events and regions. Coverage tends to be organised around themes of conflict and violence, to focus on certain international regions and to ignore or underplay others, to be sourced from international media outlets and to favour spokespeople not from the people most directly affected by the issues being reported.

Articles

Introduction

Journalism is a key institution in the production of public meaning and knowledge, and an important means by which people receive information about the world outside their immediate experience. What stories are selected and what issues do not attract media attention will have a significant impact on public discourse and political life. Many would agree that global issues such as extreme disparities in wealth, poverty, health and access to education and information, the displacement of millions of people and the social and environmental damage which accompanies war, civil conflict and other disasters need to be widely understood and urgently addressed. It is difficult to see how the politi-

cal will to tackle such problems will evolve unless these issues, and the developing world in which they have the most devastating impact, do not have a substantial presence in Western media.

Much research on international news flows has already demonstrated how the domination of Western media and news agencies results in a minority of the world's people and places receiving much more coverage than others, and how the scarce coverage of developing countries emphasises simplistic portrayals of violence and catastrophic disasters (Rampal, 1995; Mowlana, 1997). The result is that in the Western world "news audiences' understanding of our increasingly interconnected world is characterised by huge knowledge gaps" (Gasher, 2002, p. 10). Since the 1990s, there has been an upsurge of more specific research into the way Western media cover humanitarian issues (Moeller, 1999; Philo et al, 1999; Philo, 2001; Shaw, 1996). These studies have all commented on the inadequacies of coverage in the United States and Britain. However, little research has been done into how humanitarian issues are covered in Australia.

In 1999, as a step towards filling this gap, Australia's government aid agency AusAID commissioned the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism to carry out a study (Bacon & Nash, 2002) of the way in which the Australian mainstream media covers aid, development and humanitarian issues¹. This article reports on the findings of a content analysis that formed a part of this study. Our findings suggest that many Australians receive little information on a regular basis about humanitarian and development issues and that there are significant differences in the quality and amount of information received by different audiences.

In reporting our findings, we recognise the strengths and limitations of this type of quantitative analysis, which on the one hand is capable of "revealing patterns in news content and making evident previously unarticulated assumptions about how the news is structured and presented" (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991, p. 50), but on the other reveals neither the nuances of texts nor the processes by which they are generated. In a forthcoming article we will report on detailed case studies and associated interviews with journalists and aid workers. Taken together, the two reports on this research provide a valuable snapshot of the mainstream media in their coverage of these issues.

Our sample, which drew on AusAID's monitoring service, comprised 4278 separate media items published over six months between September 1999 and March 2000. We included all stories that mentioned aid, developing countries, development, disasters and human rights, as well as some specific topics such as landmines, Third World debt, AusAID and a number of Australian and international non-government organisations.

The study included metropolitan and national newspapers, ABC radio and television, SBS television and English-language radio, metropolitan commercial radio and all major television outlets.

We coded stories according to a number of variables including:

- ♦ Medium: print/radio/television;
- ♦ Masthead: for example, *The Sydney Morning Herald*;
- ♦ Type of coverage: news/features/editorial;
- ♦ Scope of coverage: number of paragraphs in print; time and duration in radio and television;
- ♦ Major story theme (in some cases there was more than one);
- ♦ Subject or topics covered in item;
- ♦ Region of world which is focus of item;
- ♦ Countries mentioned in item;
- ♦ First and second sources quoted (we did not code more than two sources).

The most striking characteristic of the coverage was its concentrated nature. This reflects a general tendency of the media to concentrate on a few stories at any one time (Jacobs, 1998). This tendency is particularly striking in the production of international news which, apart from a small number of local stories about aid policy, provides the context in which the selection of aid, development and human rights issues is usually made (Putnis, Penhallurick & Bourk, 2000).

The period for our study began shortly after the ballot for the independence of East Timor in August 1999 and nearly half (2035 – 47.6 per cent) of all stories in our sample were about East Timor. We expected the East Timor independence and intervention of Australian military forces to be very strongly represented. As a story, it satisfied the conventional news values of timeliness, geographical proximity and conflict, including violence and horrifying pictures. The use of Australian troops satisfied what Hartley (1992) has called cultural and emotional proximity, or the quality of "Wedom", around which much of the coverage was organised. In narrative terms, it lent itself to coverage of heroes (Australian soldiers) and victims (the Timorese people), and "goodies" (Australians, Timorese leaders and humanitarian agencies) versus "baddies" (the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesian militias). Even so, we were surprised by just how strongly East Timor dominated coverage during this period. The Australian media poured major resources into the story, leaving little space, time or resources for other issues competing for coverage at that time.

Although they received far less coverage than East Timor, two other stories were prominent. One hundred and ninety-two (4.5 per cent) separate stories covered the imprisonment of CARE Australia workers Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace, arrested and accused of spying by the Yugoslav Government in September 1999. This story received bursts of coverage until March 2000. It was one of very few stories in our sample that concerned the role of aid agencies in broader geopolitics.

The Mozambique floods of February-March 2000 also received intense coverage, but only over a couple of weeks. Two hundred and one (4.7 per cent) stories in our sample and more than two-thirds of all stories on Africa over the period were about the floods. These floods received far more coverage than devastating floods in the Mekong Basin that occurred during this period. Mozambique disappeared from view after that, and when very serious floods recurred a year later (albeit with less loss of life) there was scarcely a mention of them in the Australian media.

Two-thirds of all stories (2857 – 67 per cent) touching on development and humanitarian issues were published in metropolitan newspapers. Less than a quarter of all items (939 – 22 per cent) were published on radio and only 11 per cent (482) on television. The ratio of coverage between the three media did not vary significantly when we discounted stories on the major topic, East Timor.

Table 1 shows the proportion of stories on the Mozambique floods, the imprisoned CARE workers and East Timor in print, radio and television. The concentration on these three stories was even stronger in broadcast media than in print media.

Table 1: Concentration on three biggest stories across television, radio and print media

Stories	Television	Radio	Print
Big Three	68.1	62.3	54
- East Timor	45.3	46.1	48.5
- CARE Workers	8.9	9.2	2.9
- Mozambique	13.9	7	2.6
Other	31.8	37.7	46

Even those television news and current affairs programs which generally carry little coverage of international issues ran stories on East Timor, with nearly half (218 – 45.3 per cent) of all television stories being about East Timor.

What parts of the world are covered?

Putnis et al have previously reported on the preference in selection of international news by Australian television news producers for stories from the United States and the United Kingdom, but also have noted a preference for geographic proximity. Given the narrower focus of our study on development and humanitarian issues, it is not surprising that our study showed a concentration of aid and development stories from South-East Asia, reflecting both the region's proximity to Australia and government regional policy and foreign aid objectives (Putnis, 1998; Putnis, Penhallurick & Bourk, 2000). This narrower focus excluded most stories on the US and Western Europe which would have dominated a total sample of international news during the period.

Although most of the stories about South-East Asia were about East Timor

(more than 82 per cent), even when stories about East Timor were excluded, more than a quarter of all stories related to South-East Asia. Apart from South-East Asia, Australians receive very little coverage about humanitarian and aid issues from any region of the world unless a huge natural disaster or major conflict occurs with perceived global or national implications. Southern Africa (6.3 per cent) and Eastern Europe (8.0 per cent) received more attention than the Pacific (5.4 per cent), although this was really only a reflection of the dominance of the Mozambique floods and CARE workers' imprisonment stories. Once these two stories were discounted, the Pacific did receive more coverage than the other two regions.

Apart from the Mozambique floods, Southern Africa was very poorly covered, with only 34 stories over six months from that region. During the period of the study, the only media outlet to have a correspondent in Africa was the ABC. *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* were the only print publications to have a regular stringer in Africa. In 2001, that stringer left Africa and at the time of writing had not been replaced.

Table 2: Coverage of regions with and without East Timor

Coverage of regions Region	(% where region indicated)	
	All stories	Stories not about East Timor
South-East Asia	66.1%	26.6%
Eastern Europe	8.0%	17.5%
Southern Africa	6.3%	13.8%
Pacific	5.4%	11.8%
North Asia	4.5%	9.8%
South Asia	3.6%	7.9%
North America	1.9%	3.8%
North Africa	1.9%	4.2%
Middle East	0.9%	1.9%
South America	0.6%	1.2%
Western Europe	0.3%	0.6%
Central America	0.1%	0.3%
Other	0.3%	0.6%

The Pacific region also received little coverage, despite its geographical proximity. Most of the very limited North Asian (4.5 per cent) coverage concerned human rights abuses in China and famine in North Korea.

Relevant stories from North America (nearly all US) focused on the globalisation protests in Seattle, conflict over peacekeeping troops in East Timor and policy over infrastructure/environmental issues in developing countries, particularly China and Taiwan. Western European stories focused on globalisation and genetically modified foods. As we have already pointed out, the low pres-

ence of these regions in our sample reflects the specific focus of this study on humanitarian and development issues, whereas an emphasis on “cultural proximity” in general news selection would have given North America and Western Europe a stronger presence in a total sample of international news.

South and Central America were barely visible in the Australian media during this period. Of 21 stories on South America, most were small news items. There were 10 stories about floods in Venezuela and Argentina and eight (four of which were editorials) on the arrest in London of former Chilean president Augusto Pinochet. There were two items on the United Nations being unable to raise funds to assist refugees in Colombia. Very few stories mentioned Central America.

Aid and development stories tend to follow sites of international conflict, so the patterns we observed in 1999 and 2000 would not be expected to remain stable. For instance, at the time of our study, the Middle East received little coverage, but the number of stories later increased as conflict between Israeli and Palestinian forces increased. In early 2003, coverage of the Middle East eclipsed nearly all other international news when US, UK and Australian forces invaded Iraq.

Later in 2000, after civil crises erupted in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, the Pacific region also briefly attracted more media attention. Spasmodic reports of violence in the Solomon Islands continued, but there was no substantial coverage until Australia’s intervention during 2003, when the country finally received some more intense coverage.

Within regions, some countries are mentioned far more than others. A mere 10 countries accounted for nearly 90 per cent of all mentions (see Table 3). During the six months analysed, Australian audiences received little information about aid and development issues in most of the poorer countries of the world.

Table 3: Media concentration by top ten countries (% of stories)

East Timor	47.6
Indonesia	19.4
Former Yugoslavia	5.7
Mozambique	4.9
PNG	3.8
USA	2.8
India	2.4
Cambodia	1.2
China	1.2
Thailand	1.1

Again, reflecting the domination of three big stories, East Timor, Indonesia, Yugoslavia and Mozambique received the most mentions. When the three main

stories are excluded from the analysis, Indonesia received twice the coverage of any other country, but as Table 3 shows, there were few stories about aid and development issues in other Asian countries. Papua New Guinea, a close neighbour and historically Australia’s largest aid recipient, received the next highest number of mentions.

Only Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, India and China received more mentions than the US, which reflects the importance of the US as a source of general international news and the strong global influence of United States-based institutions on international development policy. The cultural and political power of the US means that even in a study of media treatment of humanitarian issues, the US is more strongly represented than most poorer countries.

Story themes

Journalists think in terms of stories, not issues. When deciding whether an idea will make a good story, they consider what story themes are likely to be preferred by editors and executive producers. Hall and others have suggested that conflict is the most important of all news values (Hall et al, 1978). To put it in the words of one Australian wire agency journalist we interviewed:

Aid has a very low priority in this country, both in terms of news and politics and government approaches. I don’t see many aid stories that are newsy. Midwives going to Fiji wouldn’t get a look in, but if they were taken hostage ... oh God yes, that would be big. That’s the way it is.

We coded stories according to the overall story themes. The categories we chose were:

- ◆ Stories where the emphasis is on unfolding political events, rather than overt conflict;
- ◆ Stories about overt political conflict;
- ◆ Stories about other forms of conflict, usually involving overt violence;
- ◆ Local hero stories;
- ◆ Human interest stories (including celebrity stories);
- ◆ Stories about crime, including major human rights abuses and war crimes;
- ◆ Stories about development (both grass roots and structural);
- ◆ Natural disaster stories;
- ◆ Stories about corruption or other abuses, including by aid organisations;
- ◆ Other.

We found that nearly two-thirds of stories (64 per cent) that touched on development and humanitarian issues did so in the context of ongoing stories of conflict and broader political developments.

- ♦ Political conflict (31.5 per cent);
- ♦ Other conflict, mostly involving either internal or trans-border violence (19 per cent);
- ♦ Political but explicitly about conflict. However, these were usually short items announcing political developments (13.8 per cent).

Most East Timor stories were heavily focussed on the role of the Australian and Indonesian governments or the role of the United Nations. This pattern was even stronger in print coverage, where 69 per cent of stories were about ongoing political or other conflict or political developments (see Table 4).

The other most common themes were:

- ♦ Human interest (8.1 per cent);
- ♦ Stories about infrastructure or grassroots development (6.9 per cent);
- ♦ Natural disasters (6.3 per cent);
- ♦ Crime (4.4 per cent) – mostly stories about major crimes against human rights or war crimes (e.g. in East Timor (67 per cent) and the charging of Chilean ex-president Augusto Pinochet);
- ♦ Corruption, abuse or other negative stories about aid programs or organisations (4.1 per cent);
- ♦ Local heroes – stories about the work of Australian volunteers and others (3.1 per cent).

Table 4: Narrative themes across all media

<i>All stories</i>		<i>Stories not about East Timor</i>	
Narrative themes	% of narratives	Narrative themes	% of narratives
Political conflict	31.5%	Other conflict	26.3%
Other conflict	19.0%	Political - other	15.9%
Political - other	13.8%	Natural disaster	11.9%
Human interest	8.1%	Political conflict	11.9%
Development	6.9%	Human interest	9.2%
Natural disaster	6.3%	Development	8.1%
Crime	4.4%	Corruption	6.8%
Corruption	4.1%	Local heroes	3.4%
Local heroes	3.1%	Crime	2.1%
Other	3.0%	Other	4.4%

Only a small percentage of stories (6.9 per cent) relevant to development or humanitarian issues focused on either grassroots or infrastructure development. Many NGO workers interviewed noted how difficult it was to get media coverage of aid and development work. This is because news values favour drama, immediacy and conflict rather than long-term problems or “good news”. Once

the international media focuses on a major disaster or conflict, aid and humanitarian work may attract some interest so long as the media remains focused on the major event. Even these stories will mostly position humanitarian agencies and their work as incidental to the major media event.

While politics and political and other conflict were also dominant themes in radio coverage (almost 60 per cent), there was less emphasis on these themes. On the other hand, there were more human-interest stories on radio (22.3 per cent of radio stories, but only 13.7 per cent of all stories). These included stories about fundraising activities and the experiences of aid workers. However, almost a quarter of all human interest stories were about Pratt and Wallace, who achieved celebrity status during their imprisonment, e.g. there were several stories about the birth of the Pratt baby.

Television also had less emphasis on politics and conflict than print media and more emphasis on natural disasters, reflecting the priority producers give to strong visual material.

Subjects

As well as looking at broader themes, we looked at subjects mentioned in articles. We developed the subject list through an initial coding of subjects mentioned in a smaller test sample. Where more than one relevant topic was mentioned in an item, we coded each of them.

Violence was the most prominent subject, followed by peacekeeping to prevent further violence (almost all stories in the context of peacekeeping were about preventing further violence in East Timor) and foreign/economic policy concerns (almost always broad political or economic policy concerns rather than aid policy concerns). There were very few stories about aid policy or about the long-term underlying factors affecting development and humanitarian issues. This finding further emphasises the point made in the previous section, that conflict is at the core of many stories about aid and development and is usually the context in which other topics are raised (see Table 5).

Table 5: Subjects in stories across all media

Subjects in stories	(% of all subjects)
Violence	16.5%
Peacekeeping	12.1%
Policy	10.6%
Human rights	9.4%
Other emergency aid	9.3%
Infrastructure & economy	7.6%
Refugees	7.0%
Aid organisation	6.0%
Floods	3.3%
Globalisation	3.0%
Health	2.8%
War	2.8%
Grassroots development	1.6%
Environmental sustainability	1.1%
AIDS/HIV	1.0%
Landmines	1.0%
Famine	0.7%
Third World debt	0.6%
Other	3.5%

(Note to Table 5: war refers to war between nations, not civil conflict, which is covered by violence and peacekeeping.)

Table 6: Coverage of subjects in print, radio and television

Coverage of subjects by medium			
Subject area	Print	Radio	Television
Violence	19.4%	6.3%	15%
Peacekeeping	13.3%	8.9%	10.3%
Policy	12.5%	4.2%	9.7%
Human rights	11%	5%	7%
Infrastructure/economy	9.2%	4%	3.3%
Refugees	6.4%	9.2%	7.3%
Other emergency aid	6%	21.1%	10.2%
Globalisation	4.1%	0.7%	0.4%
Not listed	3.3%	4.7%	2.5%
Aid organisations	2.7%	15.5%	10.2%
War	2.7%	2.5%	3.9%
Health	2.2%	4%	4.9%
Floods	1.9%	5.1%	9%
Environ sust	1.3%	0.9%	0.6%
Grassroots development	1.2%	2.9%	2.3%
AIDS/HIV	1%	1.4%	0.9%
Famine	0.7%	0.5%	1.2%
Third World debt	0.6%	0.5%	0%
Landmines	0.5%	2.6%	1.3%

Different media accentuate different subject areas according to the relative advantage which technologies and formats give them in attracting audiences. Table 6 compares the coverage of subject areas across the media.

Subjects such as Third World debt, the social and economic impacts of globalisation policies, environmental sustainability, AIDS, famine, landmines and grassroots development receive little coverage in any media.

Stories about the impacts of globalisation on developing countries were more likely to be covered by print as opposed to radio or television. Of all topics coded, the debt burden carried by developing countries received least coverage on radio and television, and only landmines received less coverage in newspapers. The landmine issue was strongly promoted by AusAID staff during this period, with graphic images and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and other politicians readily available for radio interviews. A number of stories were published, but this example illustrated how much public relations effort is required to achieve visibility.

Because stories about grassroots projects usually feature neither conflict nor violence and are perceived as slower and less dramatic, they get little space in a media agenda which favours “bad” news. Of the 116 items that mentioned grassroots development, 73 per cent were about East Timor.

Across the period, there were only 50 items that mentioned famine as a subject (only 16 of these related solely to famine). Thirty-four of these were print stories, 10 were television and six were radio stories. Although there was a very serious famine in Mongolia during this period, it received almost no coverage.

Of 234 reports on floods, 202 of them were about Mozambique. There were almost as many broadcast stories on this topic as newspaper stories, which was unusual because overall there were twice as many print items in the sample. This reflects the availability of strong pictures provided by international suppliers of news.

While international coverage of the Mozambique floods did include some comment about possible environmental causes, this issue made no impact on the Australian coverage. As the President of Mozambique, Joachim Chissano, complained at the time, despite an escalating crisis, the story of the floods did not take off until a set of sensational images of stranded people, including a mother giving birth in a tree, was transmitted by international news feeds. During this period, there were also serious floods in the Mekong Basin and in South America that received little coverage. Even very serious disasters in developing countries receive only fleeting coverage without dramatic images. Journalists we interviewed during the project self-mockingly referred to the “cultural adjustment” applied in decisions about the news value of loss of life.

Sources

Journalists' selection, editing and placement of sources plays a significant role in structuring the narrative and implanting meaning in stories (Hall et al, 1978; Erikson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). It is mostly through this process that individuals and organisations have a voice in the media.

We coded the first and second people quoted in each story and also whether they were an Australian or overseas source. Additional sources in stories with more than two sources were not coded. The first source plays an important role in framing a story, particularly in news coverage. News sources that are quoted second are more likely to be responding to the first point of view or providing an alternative perspective.

We grouped sources as:

- ♦ Politicians;
- ♦ Government officials (including AusAID);
- ♦ NGO aid organisations;
- ♦ United Nations organisations;
- ♦ Aid workers (no organisation identified);
- ♦ Experts (lawyers, doctors, researchers);
- ♦ Local people (excluding officials);
- ♦ Political leaders (Jose Ramos Horta and Xanana Gusmao were not elected at this time but were political leaders who were strongly represented in the East Timor coverage);
- ♦ International financial institutions;
- ♦ Military spokespeople;
- ♦ Others (including journalists, business people and unions).

Table 7, which sets out our findings for the use of sources, shows that "authorised knowers" or official sources – politicians, officers of organisations, government officials, military officers – dominate media discourse about aid and development issues, far outweighing voices of other individuals, including "experts" (doctors, lawyers, etc) or local people affected by disasters.

Politicians, both from Australian and overseas, accounted for 24.2 per cent of all first and second sources. Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Alexander Downer, was by far the most important political source, accounting for 4.1 per cent of all sources. Downer was the first source on 4.3 per cent of occasions and second source on 3.8 per cent of occasions. When Australian sources were considered separately, the presence of politicians was even stronger (36.5 per cent). The preference for political sources was even stronger in newspapers. More than 29 per cent of all first sources in newspaper stories about humanitarian and development issues were politicians, with

Alexander Downer accounting for 12.8 per cent of all Australian sources quoted in print coverage.

Government officials, both Australian and overseas, were 14.4 per cent of all first and second sources (this includes specific mentions of AusAID at 0.6 per cent) in all media and 17.1 per cent in print media. When military spokespeople (mostly Australian defence forces serving in East Timor) were included, journalists used politicians, government or military spokespeople as the first source in 44.2 per cent of all stories and 55 per cent of print stories. This again reflects the broader political context in which much reporting of humanitarian and development issues occurs. Experts, including doctors and lawyers, were quoted on 8.3 per cent of occasions.

Aid organisations attach considerable importance to obtaining a voice in the media as a way of both raising the profile of issues and fundraising. Aid workers, mostly officers talking on behalf of NGOs or the United Nations, were strongly represented in coverage, accounting for 32.2 per cent of first sources and 30.4 per cent of all sources quoted. However, after United Nations representatives (12.3 per cent) were excluded, this proportion dropped to 18.1 per cent of all sources.

When overseas sources are considered separately, the United Nations accounts for nearly a quarter of all sources quoted. This illustrates the important role that the United Nations plays in public discourse about international aid and development, leading several experienced journalists who were interviewed to recommend that journalists interested in becoming international reporters should develop a strong understanding of the role of the United Nations.

Table 7: Sources quoted in stories across all media

SOURCES IN STORIES (% of source type)							
Sources	Total	First	First Aust'n	First o'seas	Second	Second Aust'n	Second o'seas
Total aid sector	30.4	32.3	33.0	31.7	28.9	31.0	26.2
United Nations	12.3	12.7	0.0	23.7	11.7	0.0	18.4
Other NGOS	18.1	19.6	33.0	8.0	17.1	31.0	7.8
<i>CARE</i>	4.6	4.8	10.3	0.0	4.2	11.6	0.0
<i>World Vision</i>	1.9	2.4	5.2	0.0	1.0	2.9	0.0
<i>Oxfam CAA</i>	1.4	1.7	3.6	0.1	1.0	2.7	0.0
<i>Red Cross</i>	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.3	1.0	8.0	1.1
<i>ACFOA</i>	0.8	0.9	1.9	0.0	0.5	1.4	0.0
<i>Amnesty</i>	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.0	0.6
Other NGOs	5.4	5.7	7.5	4.1	4.9	5.6	4.5
<i>Aid workers*</i>	2.4	2.5	3.0	2.1	2.1	3.0	1.6
All politicians	24.2	23.6	25.3	22.2	25.2	30.0	22.5
<i>Downer</i>	4.1	4.3	9.2	0.0	3.8	10.4	0.0
<i>Gusmao/Horta</i>	2.1	2.2	0.0	4.0	2.0	0.0	3.2
Government	14.4	13.6	9.9	16.8	16.0	8.3	20.4
<i>AusAID</i>	0.6	0.8	1.7	0.0	0.3	0.8	0.0
Experts	8.1	7.8	8.4	7.3	8.6	9.7	8.0
Military forces	7.6	7.0	8.7	5.5	8.6	12.0	6.7
Local Person	6.2	5.9	4.5	7.2	6.7	4.1	8.2
World Bank/IMF	2.6	2.9	0.0	5.4	2.0	0.0	3.1
Other **	6.6	6.9	10.2	3.0	6.0	8.0	4.9

* Aid workers' organisation is not identified. Counted in Other NGOS

** Included in other are businesspeople and journalists

Where figures are italicised, they are counted as part of figure (in **bold**) above

While print coverage provided the strongest voice for political sources, radio sources were more evenly spread between groups, giving a greater voice to aid organisations in discourse around international aid, development and human rights issues.

Aid organisations (including United Nations and Australian and overseas NGOs) accounted for 54.5 per cent of all first and second sources interviewed for radio. This was proportionately more than double their use in print media (22.6 per cent). Proportionately, NGO sources (apart from the United Nations) accounted for 43.6 per cent of sources, compared with 15.7 per cent overall.

Local people (including those directly affected by disasters) were also less likely to be interviewed for radio than quoted in print, perhaps because of the ready availability of NGO sources with up-to-date information. It may also reflect the preferred radio practice of bringing commentators into the studio

rather than interviewing them on the telephone. Radio also makes little use of interpreters for non-English-speaking sources.

Television stories supplied by international news agencies often don't include interview footage or are reduced to footage with voiceover in the news compilation process. An analysis of sources used by television journalists showed that, like radio journalists, they were proportionately more likely to provide a voice for aid organisations, although the difference with newspapers was not as marked.

Politicians (14.6 per cent), government officials (7 per cent) and military personnel (7.4 per cent – mostly in East Timor coverage) accounted for 29 per cent of television sources, compared with 23 per cent of radio sources and 55 per cent of sources in print coverage.

While the coverage across all mainstream media reveals some strong patterns, as this analysis has shown there are significant differences between media. This demonstrates a need identified by Shaw in his work on the reporting of global crises to analyse each medium and even publications separately as well as cumulatively (Shaw, 1996). We now turn to the distribution of coverage within print, radio and television media.

Newspapers

Newspapers play a major role in setting the agenda for the other media, and provide an archive to which journalists, educators, researchers, activists and others refer. During the period of our study, newspapers published more than two-thirds of all stories in our sample, although many of them were very short.

Story length influences how many sources and perspectives can be presented. We categorised print news by word length into items of 1-3, 4-10, 11-20 and more than 20 paragraphs. Paragraphs in newspaper reportage are usually short (35-40 words).

More than half of all print news items were between 11 and 20 paragraphs, allowing for only a small amount of background and brief mention of two or more viewpoints. Only 3.5 per cent of news items were more than 20 paragraphs, while 43 per cent of all news items were less than 10 paragraphs. Many of these shorter stories did not quote any source or quoted only one source.

Print features give a fuller picture or can analyse issues from a range of perspectives. Sixty-four per cent of print features during this period were on East Timor, again showing how one major story can push all others to the periphery.

We subdivided this category into three subcategories:

- Features which were reportage by journalists 44.2 per cent (288)
- Columns or comments by staff journalists 39.4 per cent (256)

- ♦ Opinion pieces by non staff journalists 16.4 per cent (107)

In his study of British media coverage of global crises, Shaw concluded that compared with the more homogeneous television coverage, newspapers exhibited varying styles, ethos and positions, all of which were part of “marketing and ideological strategies to maintain and extend readerships and influence” (Shaw, 1996, p. 97). Our research suggests that the much smaller Australian market is similarly differentiated. (Note that our sample does not include several metropolitan Sunday newspapers that carried only a very small number of stories on humanitarian and development issues.)

The Australian, the country’s only national daily newspaper (apart from the specialist business *Australian Financial Review*), covered more items on relevant issues than any other newspaper (see Table 8). This reflects the editorial policy of *The Australian*, which positions it as an overt contributor to foreign policy with a strong regional focus. It asserts a role for itself not only in providing a forum but also as being prepared to promote its own views.

According to Morgan Readership surveys in March 2000 (Roy Morgan Readership Survey, 2000), *The Australian* had a readership reach of about 429,000 on weekdays and more than double that for *The Weekend Australian*. These readers are 3.4 times more likely than the general population to have an annual income over \$60,000 and most have a degree or diploma. According to a 2001 Newspoll survey (Newspoll, 2001) this group is more likely to be strongly in support of overseas aid than people on lower incomes or who left school before the age of 17.

The Fairfax broadsheets, *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Sydney (weekday readership 857,000) and *The Age* in Melbourne (readership 681,000), published fewer stories than *The Australian* – but significantly more than any other Australian paper, followed by *The Canberra Times* (readership 127,000) and the *Australian Financial Review* (readership 333,000) (Roy Morgan Readership Survey, 2000). Their readers are also more likely to be in higher income brackets and more highly educated than the general population.

Table 8: Stories in publications (proportions of all print stories)

	East Timor stories	Other stories
<i>Australian</i>	280 (9.8%)	324 (11.1%)
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	279 (9.8%)	207 (7.2%)
<i>Age</i> (Melb.)	203 (7.1%)	251 (8.8%)
<i>Aust. Fin. Review</i>	122 (4.3%)	174 (6.1%)
<i>Canberra Times</i>	133 (4.7%)	147 (5.1%)
<i>West Australian</i>	61 (2.1%)	81 (2.8%)
<i>Herald Sun</i> (Melb.)	54 (1.9%)	61 (2.1%)
<i>Courier-Mail</i> (Bris.)	48 (1.7%)	56 (2.0%)
<i>Daily Telegraph</i> (Syd.)	60 (2.1%)	43 (1.5%)
<i>Advertiser</i> (Adel.)	25	27
<i>Sunday Canberra Times</i>	26	24
<i>Sunday Age</i>	17	24
<i>Mercury</i> (Hobart)	10	18
<i>Sun-Herald</i> (Syd.)	20	5
<i>Sunday Herald-Sun</i> (Melb.)	14	11
<i>Northern Territory News</i>	15	6
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i> (Syd.)	14	3

It is significant that in the only two Australian capital cities in which two daily newspapers are published, the Fairfax-owned *Age* (454 stories) and *Sydney Morning Herald* (486) each carried more than four times as many stories as their much more widely read News Ltd tabloid competitors, *The Herald Sun* (105 – readership reach 1,503,000) and *The Daily Telegraph* (103 – readership reach 1,191,000) respectively. On the other hand, the tabloids in Sydney and Melbourne carried about the same amount of coverage as *The Courier-Mail* (readership 605,000) and *The West Australian* (readership 668,000) and considerably more than News Ltd’s Adelaide *Advertiser* (601,000) and Hobart *Mercury* (132,000), the only metropolitan newspapers in their respective cities.

The Canberra Times on Sunday alone offered as much coverage as the daily Adelaide *Advertiser*. Australians who source most of their information about aid and development issues from the tabloid press in Sydney or Melbourne, or the only local daily newspapers in Adelaide, Hobart or Darwin are receiving little information on these issues.

The Sydney Morning Herald focused very strongly on East Timor and carried fewer stories on other issues than either *The Australian* or *The Age*. Asked about this, one senior journalist on the paper described the strong focus on East Timor as an “organic” decision rather than a deliberate policy, resulting from the paper’s editorial strength, with four senior reporters with substantial experience in reporting on Indonesia. While *The Sydney Morning Herald* ran 26 editorials on East Timor in the sample period, *The Daily Telegraph* ran only four.

The lack of coverage by *The Daily Telegraph* reflected a deliberate policy

in the allocation of resources at the time of this research project. The paper did not have a full-time foreign editor. The part-time editor was expected to publish a certain quantity of Hollywood-derived entertainment stories each day.

Apart from *The Australian*, which has its own correspondents, at the time of the study, News Ltd publications in Australia shared five correspondents, two of whom are in London, two in New York and one in Los Angeles. Previously, the papers shared correspondents in Hong Kong and Bangkok, but these were lost during a phase of cost cutting.

Editorial policies reflect marketing assessments of readers' and potential readers' views as well as some concerns and preferences of professional journalists. The foreign editor of one News Ltd paper said: "We have to do the big strategic stories. Then we go for a good mix – lighter, brighter, quirky – human interest as well. If it's nice and sexy we will pick it up and run with it."

The differences between newspapers are even starker when we compare features and opinion pieces published in the daily broadsheets (*The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*) and the tabloids (*The Herald Sun* and *The Daily Telegraph*) in Melbourne and Sydney (see Table 9).

Table 9: Features in Melbourne and Sydney dailies

Features in Melbourne and Sydney dailies	Number of stories		
	Columns	Opinion pieces	Reportage
Newspapers			
<i>Age</i>	28	23	54
<i>Herald Sun</i>	7	1	3
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	29	20	58
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	9	3	6
Broadsheets total	57	43	112
Tabloids total	16	4	9

Looking beyond Sydney and Melbourne (see Table 10), *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Australian Financial Review*, followed by *The Canberra Times*, all carried considerably more features than other newspapers, allowing for more discussion, sources and perspectives. The *Australian Financial Review*, directed towards a higher-income business audience, carried a relatively high number of features.

Table 10: Feature stories in print (top ten publications)

Newspaper	No. of stories
<i>The Australian</i>	172
<i>SMH</i>	110
<i>The Age</i>	106
<i>AFR</i>	96
<i>Canberra Times</i>	47
<i>West Australian</i>	19
<i>Courier Mail</i>	19
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	18
<i>Sunday Age</i>	14
<i>Herald Sun</i>	10

Australians living in the major population centres of Sydney and Melbourne (and to a lesser extent Canberra) have greater opportunities to receive debate, analysis and a range of perspectives about development and humanitarian issues in their newspapers than people living in other capital cities.

Radio

Radio feeds off the daily news, seeking new angles, sources and ways of developing stories. English-language coverage of aid and development issues in the Australian media is heavily dependent on ABC Radio. Metropolitan ABC stations accounted for 36.7 per cent of stories, 15.5 per cent of ABC stories were on Radio National and a further 5.1 per cent were on regional stations. Fifty-seven per cent of all radio coverage in the sample was broadcast on the ABC, which is a significant imbalance considering the large number of commercial radio stations and their larger share (about 70 per cent) of the available audience. SBS, with 2.5 per cent of stories in the sample, was under-represented because most of its coverage is in languages other than English, which were not included in the sample.

Compared with print coverage, the balance between news and features in radio is much more heavily skewed towards features (44 per cent compared with 23 per cent), appearing to allow for greater depth of coverage.

Table 11 shows the duration of news items: 38.8 per cent of radio news comprised items of more than two minutes' duration, often allowing for one or more sources to make several points.

Table 11: Duration of radio news stories

Duration	
30 seconds or less	23.8%
31 seconds to 2 minutes	41.3%
2 to 5 minutes	32.8%
5 to 10 minutes	2.0%

There were only 21 instances of feedback and talkback coverage of aid and development issues in six months of coverage, comprising 2.2 per cent of all radio coverage. Most talkback occurs on commercial radio, which overall has little coverage of aid, development and human rights issues. Talkback coverage does occur when there is an international crisis with an Australian connection (e.g., East Timor or the Tampa refugee crisis) or a huge global crisis (e.g., the 2001 terrorist attack on the US and its aftermath).

Talkback formats and program content are constructed in relation to specific audiences and their views. Most of the few items of talkback were on 5DN in Adelaide (six instances) and 2UE in Sydney (seven instances), while 2GB, 4BL, 5AA, ABC Radio Wide Bay, Radio National and 2BL all had one call each. A talkback producer told us that if they were ever short of a story, they could be sure of an audience reaction by running a negative story about Australia's aid program. Market research indicates that the audience of these shows is older and not highly educated, and therefore likely to overlap with that part of the Australian public that is less sympathetic to aid (Newspoll, 2001, p. 23).

ABC audiences in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra would appear to receive more stories about aid, development and human rights than the rest of Australia. ABC 702 Sydney broadcast 8.9 per cent of ABC stories, ABC 774 Melbourne 8.3 per cent of stories and ABC Canberra 6 per cent of stories. This can be compared with 4QR with 4.7 per cent of stories and 5AN Adelaide with 3.3 per cent. It would appear that ABC Radio follows the patterns of print, and that the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne axis receives a greater coverage than the rest of Australia.

Commercial AM stations broadcast 26.6 per cent of stories. As expected, those stations that feature "talk" had more coverage than other stations: 2GB (Sydney) had the most stories, followed by 3AW (Melbourne), 2UE (Sydney) and 5DN (Adelaide). However, these stations all carried fewer stories than ABC metropolitan stations in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

Most commercial FM stations, which attract a large younger audience, broadcast very little international news. The Triple M network (2.1 per cent of all radio stories) had more stories than any other FM station but fewer than any of the ABC metropolitan stations and all but one of the commercial AM stations.

Television

An Australian Broadcasting Authority study confirmed in 2001 that the source of news and current affairs most used by Australians is commercial television. More than 80 per cent of people claimed to get information from television, although many also read a newspaper or listened to radio, particularly ABC news (ABA, 2001).

Publicly owned networks ABC and SBS published 62 per cent of all coverage (ABC 41.6 per cent, SBS 20.6 per cent). Channel 9 (16.6 per cent of all coverage) broadcast nearly half (44 per cent) of all stories carried by the privately owned networks. Several television journalists who were interviewed told us they thought the quality and quantity of international news overall was decreasing, although this trend may have been reversed after the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001 and the US Government's launch of its so-called "War on Terror".

The low level of development and humanitarian stories on television needs to be seen in the context of the production of overseas television news. The flow of wholesale news from international suppliers means there is little incentive for Australian television to produce its own international stories unless a major humanitarian crisis occurs nearby – for example, the tsunami in PNG or the independence ballot and its aftermath in East Timor – or a story becomes a global media event when a presence becomes a matter of audience credibility – for example, the aftermath of September 11.

In a study of how five Channel 10 stations repackaged international news feeds as stories for Australian audiences, Putnis et al found overseas news feeds were quite literally the basis on which story lists were drawn up. These were dominated by UK and US news. The researchers noted a tendency to "substitute ready made overseas human interest and entertainment stories for more expensive and difficult to get Australian stories" (Putnis et al, 2000).

During this period, SBS television news broadcast a greater range of aid and development news stories. For example, it carried four news stories on Ethiopia, the only television news outlet to carry any news on this country. SBS also carried occasional news reports that were much longer than other television news (the station carried one item of 7 minutes 40 seconds' duration during the Mozambique floods).

Overall three big stories – East Timor, the imprisoned CARE workers and the Mozambique floods – accounted for three-quarters of television features. Sixty-eight per cent of these stories were about East Timor and most were between 5 and 10 minutes' duration. Many of these features were on the ABC's *The 7.30 Report*, which had a reporter based in Timor during September. Given the investment in resources required to send reporters and crews overseas and the intense interest in East Timor, the program regularly carried short updates.

The imprisoned CARE workers' story, the only significant story with negative connotations for aid organisations, was taken up by most current affairs programs, including *A Current Affair*, *Today Tonight*, *Four Corners*, *Sunday*, and *The 7:30 Report* – especially after SBS's *Dateline* broadcast allegations about possible links between Pratt and Wallace and intelligence agencies. As has been noted by McCarthy, this coverage stopped short of examination of the impact on aid organisations of their increasing role at sites of global conflict (McCarthy, 2000).

There were four features on the Mozambique floods, comprising two stories on *The 7:30 Report* and one each on *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*. World Vision paid for a *Today Tonight* reporter to fly to the Mozambique floods and the story would not have happened without this intervention.

There were only 27 television stories on Africa that were not on the Mozambique floods. Of these, five were about floods in Madagascar around the same time as the Mozambique floods and five were about the work of CARE in Somalia, flowing out of SBS's *Dateline* program on spy allegations against CARE workers. Only five of these 27 stories were broadcast on commercial television.

Conclusions

Based on the sample covered, our study suggests that:

- ◆ Humanitarian and development issues mostly receive attention in the Australian media in the context of ongoing coverage of major international conflict or major natural disasters but then only if there are visual images;
- ◆ A large number of the poorer countries of the world in Africa, South America and Asia receive almost no coverage in the Australian media;
- ◆ Within a pattern of overall low coverage, some Australian citizens are being provided with more coverage of humanitarian and development issues than others. These patterns of coverage suggest an information divide along income, education and regional lines which is likely to have political implications;
- ◆ In this context, national public broadcasters play a critical role in providing the opportunity for all Australians, especially those living in cities where there is only one newspaper, to receive a wider range of perspectives than provided by their daily papers;
- ◆ Apart from incidental coverage in the context of major conflict, Australian mainstream media audiences receive very little coverage of issues such as the longer term, grassroots impact of globalisation, poverty and armed conflict on the world's poorer citizens and countries.

This study is limited both in the range of media sampled and the period it covers. It also needs to be complemented by audience studies to establish how audiences receive and interpret information about these issues. One issue which could be considered in such research is the combined impact on the political world-view of audiences who are exposed both to the amplification of crime, its link with ethnicity and the stereotyping of immigrants from countries in which Islam is widely practised (Manning, 2002, 2003; ADB NSW, 2003) and to little news about life in developing countries.

International political developments since 2000 are likely to have accentuated the patterns revealed in this study. The "War on Terror" has become the overarching frame within which Australian international and much local news is selected and interpreted. This frame imposes a heavier, tighter characterisation of "Wedom" and "Theydom" in the selection of news (Hartley, 1992).

Our findings for radio and television suggest that the public broadcasters – the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service – play a key role in bringing a wider range of stories and voices to their audiences. It is disturbing, therefore, that in 2003, ABC management decided to reduce funding for current affairs programs *Foreign Correspondent* and *Four Corners* and ABC radio and to axe the children's program *Behind the News*. These changes further diminish Australians' access to stories of global significance.

During our study we interviewed a number of journalists and aid workers who in discussion predicted most of the trends in coverage revealed by this study. While nearly all who were interviewed saw the coverage as inadequate, some journalists blamed the weaknesses in coverage on the need for "good stories" and a perceived lack of audience interest. Other journalists said there should be more attention given to the developing world in international news but that this would require structural change in ownership, management and editorial policies in news organisations. They were pessimistic about the likelihood of this occurring.

The media's collective claim to any special rights in a democracy rides partly on a responsibility to communicate important information to citizens (Curran, 2002, p. 225; Bacon & Nash, 1999). Although what is "important" is a matter of opinion, many citizens would agree that issues of global disparities in wealth, health and human rights are significant ones which should be delivered accessibly to audiences so they can be widely understood and addressed politically. Our study would suggest there are significant gaps in mainstream media organisations' coverage of these issues. These weaknesses need to be addressed in the context of developing an Australian media more appropriate for a contemporary democracy in a world of increasing international tension and disparities in wealth.

Notes

1. In the rest of this article, for brevity's sake, we will refer to this collection of issues as "development and humanitarian" issues.

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