

Mainstream media coverage of humanitarian crises falls short, new survey finds

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Credit: University of East Anglia

Mainstream media coverage of humanitarian crises is "selective, sporadic, simplistic and partial", according to a new consumer survey.

Respondents indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of mainstream news coverage and highlighted a desire for more investigative reporting and scrutiny of the aid sector itself.

The in-depth survey was conducted before the widely reported Oxfam UK sexual misconduct scandal by Dr Martin Scott, a senior lecturer in media and international development at the University of East Anglia (UEA), and humanitarian news agency IRIN News.

It investigated how people working or interested in the humanitarian aid sector view global media coverage of humanitarian issues. Does the coverage do justice to critical issues? Does it include sufficient field reporting and reflect subject expertise? What are the main news sources? What impact, if any, does news coverage have on the [respondents'](#) professional work?

Many of the 1,626 respondents, who included aid workers, researchers and government officials, said mainstream news coverage concentrates on a small number of crises, thus relegating most crises as 'neglected' or 'forgotten'. More than 70 per cent of respondents said the mainstream news media does not offer enough coverage of humanitarian issues. A common complaint was that mainstream news coverage was "sensationalist" and "lacked in-depth analysis". Reporting of humanitarian issues and crises was frequently referred to as "reductive", "cursory", "simplistic" and "shallow".

Overall, the most sought after aspect of reporting on humanitarian issues is expert analysis. "Respondents want more and bolder investigative reporting and more consistent expert analysis of humanitarian issues and crises, including analysis of the aid sector as a whole," said Dr Scott. However, many think there is insufficient investigative reporting on the sector.

One reader commented that "bosses are more likely to react to news stories about sexual harassment of and by employees, than to their own employees raising concerns". That view was echoed by UK International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt's recent words:

"Remember, we only learned about (the recent Oxfam scandal) from journalists, operating in a free press, in our democratic country."

Respondents indicated that quality news coverage can play an important role in shaping responses to crises, most commonly by stimulating further research and/or advocacy and by informing organisational or operational priorities.

"These findings show that news coverage of international [humanitarian crises](#) matters - and that quality journalism matters," said IRIN Director Heba Aly. "Readers are yearning for deeper, more meaningful journalism about the challenges our world faces; and when we as media organisations deliver that kind of reporting, we can have real impact. We shouldn't underestimate the power - nor the responsibility - that we hold."

Only three mainstream news outlets were mentioned by more than half of the respondents as a key source for news and analysis on humanitarian issues: the BBC, The Guardian and Al Jazeera English. Alongside The New York Times and the Washington Post, these were frequently described as the only "exceptions" to the mainstream news media's poor [coverage](#) of humanitarian crises.

Respondents identified the most popular specialist [news](#) providers as Devex, Foreign Policy, IRIN, Reliefweb, News Deeply, the Thomson Reuters Foundation and UN Dispatch.

Survey respondents included individuals working for international NGOs (28%), the United Nations (9%), academia (9%), national or local NGOs (8%), government organisations (8%) and in the corporate sector (5%). A majority of respondents were either mid-career (32%) or senior professionals (41%) and had either "some" (34%) or a "significant" amount (30%) of decision-making authority within their organisations.

While most were based in the US or Europe, others worked around the globe, from Mexico to Kenya, at headquarters and in the field.

More information: For further information about the project and to view the survey report "Attitudes towards media coverage of humanitarian issues within the aid sector", see <http://www.humanitarian-journalism.net>

Provided by University of East Anglia

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