

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS
MEDIA AND THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY
IN HAITI'S DISASTER

Mark Schuller

Introduction

Humanitarian space has a direct, if often under-appreciated, relationship with media. As the chapter by Bleiker, Hutchinson and Campbell argues, how disasters are framed within media can powerfully shape the response. For example, calling Katrina survivors “looters” reinforced a racialised, militarised, police response while calling to bear familiar “blame-the-victim,” racist narratives that can serve to excuse slow and inadequate response.

These tendencies were unfortunately exhibited in Haiti following the devastating earthquake. Arguably more than any other disaster before or since, Haiti’s earthquake quickly dominated global media. CNN offered round-the-clock coverage for two weeks, and blogs carried a special link for Haiti earthquake coverage for more than three months. Again deploying a familiar racialised narrative of Haitians being unruly serving as a

NEGOTIATING RELIEF

frame, images of raw suffering, human misery, and the unimaginable damage and scale portrayed a hell on earth, one that desperately needed foreign assistance and foreign control. Not surprisingly, the response was militarised; 22,000 US troops immediately mobilised to coordinate the emergency logistics, rebuilding the airport, clearing the rubble and assisting in the medical mission. Despite this role for which arguably the US military was singularly qualified to undertake, as a military response it was hierarchical and treated survivors as security risks. As a military, they prioritised the issue of security above all else, delaying aid and augmenting the culture of fear that divided non-Haitian aid workers from the aid recipients. According to WikiLeaks documents, security was not on the list of Haitian president René Préval's priorities outlined in a 16 January communiqué.¹ Yet, a day later, he requested the deployment of US troops (days after they had already been deployed) in a public relations effort to rationalise their *de facto* presence. On 20 January, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a directive to embassies to discipline "irresponsible journalism" because it was important to "get the narrative right" about US intentions in Haiti. Most upsetting to many within the humanitarian community was that the US used its foothold in the airport as gatekeepers, promoting a US aid "shock and awe" to the detriment of other donors, NGOs and aid agencies. The US military infamously denied landing rights to French NGO Médecins Sans Frontières while allowing the Pennsylvania governor to airlift two twenty-somethings from his state who had started an orphanage out of Haiti.

There are many other examples of how the international media's framing of the disaster normalised the continuing foreign control that space constraints prevent mention here. However, the relationship between the international media and humanitarian agencies is far from one-sided, as Secretary Clinton's attempt to influence media reporting highlights. This chapter documents and theorises two examples of humanitarians' efforts to actively influence the international media and its story about Haiti and specifically the response. Media agencies, and particularly the people who work for them in-country as correspondents, have to constantly uncover stories that are newsworthy. Wire services that make their money by outlets purchasing their stories are particularly under pressure to compete with one another for uncovering the "scoop." In this context, humanitarian agencies have opportunities to send stories out through press releases and press conferences. Increasingly since the advent of elec-

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS

tronic media, agencies have more tools to spread the message. The two examples in this chapter fall into two general approaches of training the foreign eye: “spotlights” and “mirrors,” focusing attention either towards or away from a particular phenomenon and back at the onlooker. The first effort discussed, the spotlight, was a direct approach to infuse the media with specific facts and a “spin” about how to interpret the facts. The mirror approach is more indirect; this second case arose not from official channels such as press releases or press conferences but an individual effort. The mirror case deflected attention away from critical on-the-ground realities as well as criticism.

Following a ten-year project of studying impacts of development aid on NGOs in Haiti, this chapter draws upon interviews and three rounds of quantitative research conducted in July–August 2010, January 2011 and June–August 2011. Quotes and statistics not otherwise attributed are based on this ongoing research.

Spotlight: the “light at the end of the tunnel”

As the first anniversary of the earthquake loomed, it was predictable that the international media would produce a story of “one year later” which would undoubtedly offer an assessment of the progress of the international response. Preparing for this media event, in fact creating it, agencies put out reports and press releases about the year in review. Many NGOs took the opportunity to detail their outputs: how many people received food distribution, how many litres of water in how many camps, and so on. Reuters’ AlertNet, a PR website for NGOs, assisted in this effort putting out these statistics. So-called “new media”—notably blogs like *Huffington Post*—offered humanitarians a more direct tool for shining the spotlight on their efforts. *Huffington Post* alone, in an effort to expand their coverage of Haiti, invited scores of new bloggers with some connection or expertise in Haiti. A few were independent scholars including the author, however the majority of *Huffington’s* new bloggers were NGO employees, most often directors or public relations staff. The majority of the stories coming out from *Huffington Post* sent to media search engines as “news” were simply NGOs’ PR. In early 2011 it was purchased by media conglomerate AOL, and so became the highest-circulation source of online news, surpassing even the *New York Times*.

In addition to NGOs’ direct reporting on the their efforts, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), who had taken the

NEGOTIATING RELIEF

lead in coordinating the many IDP camps, under the rubric of the Cluster for Camp Coordination and Management (CCCM), sent stories out. One of the primary tools of the CCCM is a database of the officially recognised camps, the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). In addition to being a tool for humanitarian agencies to coordinate their efforts, it was also a census of how many people were still living under tents or tarpaulins. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster used the DTM and camp ID to identify NGO actors providing WASH services.

Late on the morning on 11 January 2011, one day before the earthquake's anniversary, Haitian president René Préval and his dauphin Jude Celestin were metres away from a camp in Kanaran, which was to be the site of a day of reflection for a network of social movement organisations including FRAKKA (the Reflection and Action Force for the Housing Cause), BAI (International Lawyers' Office), Batay Ouvriye (Workers' Struggle), Bri Kouri Nouvèl Gaye (Noise Travels, News Spreads), Inivèsite Popilè (Popular University) and a range of constituent groups, including camp committees. The sun was hot, the wind blowing dust from the eroded mountains. People stayed in their makeshift homes dotting the jagged landscape, possibly to ensure their belongings didn't gust away. But the paltry attendance was more attributable to politics.

In this camp—not officially recognised—where some 60,000 people live, there is not one but two official committees. In one “turf” was the camp's only water supply and toilets. On the other sat an empty and ripped UNICEF tent, on which graffiti denouncing the other committee representative was written. In the neutral zone, dwarfing everything around it, including the tents, toilets and the wood structures that were to replace a makeshift school made on one side of the camp, people were building a sound stage using professional building materials and not merely scrap. “We're going to have a big crusade tomorrow,” boasted one committee member. While not wanting to be too direct, I asked who was going to come. He continued, saying that international organisations, the government and NGOs were going to be there today. A barber whose shop sat across from the sound stage said what was inevitably on many people's minds: “Instead of spending thousands driving people here, renting the equipment and all this, they could just give us food. We're starving.”

Most of the groups who staged events on 12 January were NGOs, to attract some foreign media attention to their efforts. Groups as divergent

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS

as Catholic Relief Services, CARE, World Vision and Oxfam held press events highlighting their achievements, but watchdog groups such as Amnesty International, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti and Disaster Accountability Project published reports critical of the lack of progress. Some progress was made in some areas. More children went to school in 2011 than in 2010; a little more of the rubble had been cleared; more people had moved into homes, mostly temporary or “T-shelters.” Despite figures coming from NGOs and individual success stories, life for the overwhelming majority of people in Port-au-Prince, especially the million-plus IDPs, only got much worse.

One index is cholera. The official count put out in January 2011 cited 3,600 people dead and 170,000 cases of cholera, barely two months after the outbreak began. According to UN cluster officials, this was very likely an under-count and was still not at its “peak.” “Cholera changed everything,” said a government official. Almost immediately the official population of the IDP camps plummeted. Said a sanitation expert, “Cholera most definitely played a role in individual families’ migration decisions. People are, have been, and will continue to move around. Cholera tipped the balance in favour of leaving the camps.” In a camp in Carrefour informally called Ti Bato (Little Boat), thirty-three cases of cholera were recorded out of 350 residents. As of January 2011, almost a year after the quake, the camp still lacked a single toilet. People defecated in the open air, twenty metres from the shelters.

Also in Carrefour, at an Adventist church, there were still no toilets when the cholera outbreak began in late October, ten months after the earthquake. Church leaders had been giving verbal warnings for people to leave. People stayed until, one day in November, eight cases of cholera were recorded in the camp. The next day, all 546 people fled the camp. Where did they go? Some went to another camp. Others pitched what was left of their tent after ten months of tropical weather in front of a friend’s house. Some may have squatted in an empty house. Some may have gone to unofficial camps like Kanaran. Others may have created a whole new camp recently “discovered” by aid officials.

In short, no one knows. “The thing is, IOM has responsibility to officially registered displaced people, not just people who live in camps. They have a responsibility to do some follow-up,” decried a Haitian government mid-manager. Many other examples can be cited about people abandoning their camp following the cholera outbreak, especially

NEGOTIATING RELIEF

if the camp did not have essential water and sanitation services. In one camp in Tabarre called Levi, only thirty of 486 people remained in January 2011 following the cholera outbreak. The camp never had a toilet, so people went to a neighbour's house. Neighbours' generosity has limits, especially after the outbreak of the faecal-borne disease.

Supervising a team of eight State University of Haiti students, the author conducted a study of a random sample of over 100 camps, one in eight of those in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area. Of this sample, as of August, 30 per cent of camps lacked a toilet, and 40 per cent lacked water provision.² Since the cholera epidemic, and the \$173 million UN flash appeal, almost no progress was made. In January 2011, follow-up research from the author recorded that only four additional camps had water or toilets: 26 instead of 30 per cent of camps still didn't have toilets, and 37 instead of 40 per cent of camps didn't have water.³ Eight camps closed because of the lack of services. Still another three closed because landowners—all three of them churches—forced people off their land. In all, one in four camps had closed between August 2010 and January 2011.

Water was a more serious concern: donors cut off emergency water rations at the end of 2010 in at least four camps studied. The last water distribution for Cité Soleil camps Tapis Vert (20,000 people) and Camp Nielo (763 people) was 31 December. "This doesn't make sense. We're in a crisis!" said a WASH cluster employee. "To turn the spigot off while we're in the middle of a cholera epidemic is tantamount to genocide."

Explaining this lack of progress requires attention to structural deficiencies in the system, and how aid was instrumentalised following the earthquake.⁴ Aid coordination was attempted by the Haitian government and the IOM, but to sum up, according to an IOM official, "The bottom line is we have no carrots and sticks. NGOs are private agencies and pretty much can do what they want."

The IOM declared the 31 per cent decrease in camp population a success, hailing it a "light at the end of the tunnel." This line was repeated by UN special envoy Bill Clinton on 12 January 2011, and hence appeared in dozens of news accounts. The facts discussed above argue that IDP's flight from the camps was a symptom of failure to protect, wherein people moved into more precarious situations and became more vulnerable to cholera. Rather than seeing this as a light at the end of the tunnel, this massive exodus was an oncoming train. The

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS

spotlight trained the eye of the international media to the numbers that put the international response effort in the best light—the statistics about services—as well as an interpretation and a catch-phrase to declare the fact of the IDP population reduction as a hopeful sign.

Possibly in response to critiques, the IOM later qualified this language, however this was only cited in a single article in March 2011. The spotlight already was turned off, with the official story being progress, equating the mere existence of IDPs as a failure. As of the submission of this chapter almost two years after the earthquake, rehabilitation or construction was only completed on 5,000 houses, whereas an estimated 175,000 houses were fit for demolition or required serious rehabilitation, according to a structural evaluation team. But the spotlight of the international media was already onto other stories, including other disasters such as the earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, Japan.

Mirrors: redefining the death toll

This housing survey, conducted by the Ministry of Public Works with financial support from USAID and technical support from a private engineering firm, was another important tool in the reconstruction effort. In total, 382,256 housing units were evaluated. Of these, 205,539 were tagged “green,” ready for human habitation, 99,043 “yellow,” requiring significant repair, and 77,674 “red,” which were so damaged so as to require demolition. As is typical with donor-funded projects, USAID commissioned an evaluation. Anthropologist Timothy Schwartz led the team contracted with conducting and writing the report. The report contained some important warnings to the donor and NGO community. Despite its technical successes and easy-to-understand coding system, the programme didn’t noticeably alter people’s decisions to move back into the homes. Most alarmingly, 73,846 of 115,384 (sic.) “red” houses had been re-inhabited by January 2011.

In addition to these carefully researched findings, Schwartz included others that were not a part of his mandate from USAID, about the official estimates of the death toll and the “legitimate” IDPs. According to his own blog on *Slate*, USAID denied publication of the report because it attempted to distance itself from these controversial claims. But Schwartz persevered, leaking the draft report to the press. One journalist, Agence France-Presse’s (AFP’s) Emily Troutman, published a story about it on 27 May 2011.

NEGOTIATING RELIEF

This story triggered a heated debate on a subject that for most Haitians was only marginally relevant and disrespectful. Blogs and public lists such as the 8,000-member “Corbett List” registered scores of email commentaries that degraded into *ad hominem* attacks. Like many other peoples displaced by the holocaust of the middle passage, Haitian culture grants a central role to its ancestors whose spirits return home, to *ginen*, Africa. The Haitian government’s official estimate of the dead from 12 January was 230,000, which was repeated by the NGOs and the media. As the first anniversary loomed, without citing additional research or proof, Haitian prime minister Max Bellerive announced that the earthquake killed 316,000 people. As Schwartz blogged, this was a deliberate inflation aimed at loosening up more funds for the relief and reconstruction effort. Dozens of news stories, including in large-circulation publications *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, repeated this finger-wagging, more editorialising than news reporting.

While basing Schwartz’s critique of the Haitian government on its lack of transparency in its research methods, the leaked report was similarly opaque. For its part, USAID distanced itself from the most controversial claims, citing inconsistencies and irregularities within Schwartz’s research methods. Only two stories that made it to Google’s daily news alerts reported this critique, despite the dozens that used the leaked report to lodge a critique against the Haitian government, many drawing on familiar narratives of Haitian incompetence, adding to Haiti’s unending bad press.⁵ The damage was already done. True, Schwartz was acting as an individual, not USAID, but as a humanitarian actor nonetheless. This attempt is primarily to deflect attention, as a mirror deflects light. Also as a mirror, Schwartz’s crusade was aimed at a clear, if unflattering, gaze back at the humanitarian effort, particularly NGOs who he argued were complicit in the inflation of the death toll for self-interested ends.

As a study of the impact of the housing evaluation, it was an important intervention. But the report that was leaked to the press—and uncritically repeated—did not explain the methodology for Schwartz’s un-commissioned campaign: for example, what sampling criteria were used, both in terms of neighbourhoods and individuals, how this sample represents larger trends, and so on. There seems to have been no recognition of the possibility that entire structures levelled to rubble would have been impossible to number, whose family members were all either dead or living in the IDP camps. The report cited precise num-

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS

bers, not rounded, to estimate both the numbers of dead and the “legitimate” IDPs, despite the conventions of rounding based on significant digits within statistical research, declaring there to be from 46,190 to 84,961 dead, giving an average of 65,575, a little more than a fifth of the government’s estimate. Part of the study’s argument rests on contrasting its precision with the Haitian government’s lack of precision. Conclusions were reached about IDP camps without researchers visiting the camps. The report estimated 258,085 “current” IDPs (range of 141,158 to 375,031 compared to the IOM’s estimate of 680,000 from the DTM), with 42,608 “legitimate” IDPs.

Researchers with the Small Arms Survey conducted an independent much more methodologically grounded, study of the death toll, with the result lower than the Haitian government’s estimate but significantly higher than Schwartz’s—158,000. This estimate first appeared in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial on 12 July 2011, eighteen months after the earthquake and a month and a half following the Schwartz report.

The debate was primarily focused on the death toll, leaving the other unsubstantiated claims about the “legitimate” IDPs, incendiary statements of people only in the camps for the free access to services unaddressed, and the most troubling finding of a majority of “red” houses being reoccupied. The total silence, the attention deflected away from this discussion of the “illegitimate” IDPs, was an insidious outcome of this mirror. With the public debate focusing on what most Haitian people consider a red herring—with nothing to be done about the dead, no one ultimately responsible for their deaths—the inflammatory and controversial allegations about living IDPs—whose rights were actively being challenged by a range of actors—became tacitly accepted by the lack of scrutiny.

Unfortunately, these allegations were not true. The DTM continued to enumerate just under 600,000 IDPs as late as November 2011, six months after the Schwartz report. The IOM contracted with French NGO ActEd to survey 15,446 IDPs about their intentions, publishing a report in early August 2011 when there were 630,000 IDPs still in the camps. According to this report, 94 per cent of IDPs wanted to leave the camps. The author’s survey of 800 families within eight IDP camps yielded a similar result, that 92 per cent of IDPs wanted to leave as of summer 2011. Since there was only 5,000 housing units built, and since 79.5 per cent of residents were renters before the earthquake, the IDPs can’t leave because they have nowhere to go.

NEGOTIATING RELIEF

In addition to not being able to leave, the “free services” that ostensibly were the magnet to the camps, notably water and toilet services, were being shut off as NGO contracts ended. As of October 2011, only 6 per cent of IDP camps had water services, and in November water trucking services had to stop per government decree. To the oft-repeated quote—amplified and justified by the Schwartz report—of people suddenly appearing in unused tents whenever a distribution was made, the author’s eight research teams spent five weeks in the same camp and noticed a constant level of comings and goings, economic activity and social life. In other words, they were all “real” camps. To the concern about the free aid being a magnet pulling tens of thousands of people from the provinces, the survey showed only 3.5 per cent came since 2010, with the mean year of migration to Port-au-Prince being 1993, which seems to follow the general pattern of Haiti’s rural exodus. In other words, all but 3.5 per cent are “real” IDPs.

Whether or not this deflection was intentional, certainly by a maverick humanitarian such as Schwartz who has published critical accounts of NGOs and missions,⁶ the unchallenged discourse has utility for many actors. Landowners and government officials such as Delmas mayor Wilson Jeudy, having lost the bid for Haiti’s presidency to Michel Martelly, who actively sought to close IDP camps, found justification. If the vast majority of IDPs and camps are not “legitimate,” a heavy handed, violent, response in reclaiming land could be arguably justifiable. The day following the APF’s story, Jeudy again destroyed an IDP camp on public land in his municipality, his second violent act within two weeks, citing a similar refrain of the IDPs being criminals. Jeudy employed armed irregular forces not formally employed by the police to rip people’s tents and destroy their belongings.

In addition to those who would reclaim land from IDPs despite their rights to life-saving services, this unchallenged discourse of “illegitimate” IDPs was also useful to humanitarian agencies increasingly on the defensive following billions in aid spent and little evident progress. If the number of IDPs were artificially inflated and the majority of those dwelling in under-serviced IDP camps are not “legitimate” victims, humanitarian agencies have lower obligations. For its part, USAID was the target of a bipartisan probe from the US House of Representatives, H.R. 1016, on 10 May 2011, calling the agency to account for the billions and apparent lack of progress. Indeed, members of Congress who

SPOTLIGHTS AND MIRRORS

represent large Haitian communities sent a scathing critique of the Haitian government for not protecting IDPs two days before AFP leaked the draft Schwartz report.

Whether or not Schwartz acting as an individual had intended these outcomes, the mirror the AFP article provided deflected attention and criticism against both the Haitian government and USAID and offered ideological support for reactionary positions, justifying forced evictions and lack of progress for IDPs. As a mirror deflects light away, redirecting it, this general approach works when there is already light shone in a particular area. It is a risky approach, because the elected official or agency holding a mirror and turning it to deflect attention somewhere else is under the spotlight. In this case, the agencies that most benefited from this attention being deflected away were not the ones holding the mirror.

Concluding reflections

As Kurt Mill's chapter on Darfur reminds us, the media framing of disasters wields a powerful influence on humanitarian space. As one of the most mediated disasters in recent history, the earthquake in Haiti raised the expectations and scrutiny for the humanitarian response. This chapter has shown that the relationship between media and humanitarian actors is complex. The structure of the international media offers opportunities to humanitarians to feed stories to stringers who need to produce. In addition, since the advent of blogs, humanitarian actors have become media agents as well. Given this iterative relationship, humanitarians who understand that financial flows to their agencies depend in part on their positive reflection in the media attempt to train a spotlight on the stories that put their work in the best possible light. The media also provides ideological cover to agencies that do not want the spotlight, and stories can act as mirrors deflecting attention, redirecting it somewhere else. Whether or not this spotlight or mirror approach only works because of the competition inherent in the for-profit media, the media's reflection of the humanitarian enterprise can increase or decrease humanitarian space. In Haiti's case, both efforts recuperated or defended space for humanitarian action. This chapter highlights some of the negative impacts of this effort to aid recipients who too often remain in shadows.