

# Unveiling the Strengths and Biases of Media Influence on Disaster Response

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“The dream of the news is that it makes us care about other people and situations,” wrote the philosopher and acclaimed author Alain de Botton in his book *The News: A User’s Manual*; “but we cannot identify with people to whom we haven’t been introduced.”<sup>1</sup>

The value of media platforms and having journalists present on the frontlines witnessing and documenting the impact of disasters cannot be understated. They provide critical information to the public and raise awareness of the need for assistance, while risking their physical and psychological well-being in an environment of trauma and devastation. The media’s role, however, extends beyond the mere dissemination of information. Through the lens of human psychology, the media influences our emotional connection and ability to identify with the individuals and communities affected by disasters. By introducing the public to these unfamiliar realities, the media has the power to evoke empathy, ultimately shaping the collective response and resource allocation in the face of crises.

While the critical and generally positive impact of media platforms and journalists on the frontlines of disaster response is widely recognized, it is also important to acknowledge and understand the potential negative impact of media bias, which can occur through selective presentation or favoritism of certain viewpoints or ideas. This has the power to alter public sentiment and shape policy decisions, with potentially significant ramifications on funding and health care responses globally.<sup>2,3</sup>

Media bias during disasters can take other forms such as disproportionately covering news that draws higher public attention to human suffering and destruction to enhance viewership. This may divert attention away from equally serious but less sensational stories or events that require resources and assistance. Media outlets may devote greater focus and coverage of disasters that strike certain regions or countries while neglecting others for reasons of proximity, politics, or culture. As an example, disasters striking wealthier or politically prominent nations may receive extensive media attention while those striking poorer regions might go under-reported or overlooked entirely. Such bias can potentially have significant ramifications on resource allocation.

The 2010 Haiti earthquake, as an example, raised an estimated \$1087.33 USD per victim, in contrast to the Pakistan floods a few months later where global donations amounted to just \$16.36 USD per victim.<sup>4</sup> While multiple factors contributed to the disparity in donations, including donor burnout, geography, and disaster subtype, it is also partially attributed to the ten-fold differential in media coverage between the two events.<sup>5</sup>

News outlets with particular political leanings may also frame events through an ideological lens, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, media organizations with a focus on public health might emphasize the importance of vaccinations, preventive measures, and government interventions to curb the spread of the virus, while others may prioritize discussions around the economic impact of lockdowns, individual freedoms, and the potential side effects of vaccination. Such divergent narratives can lead to imbalanced public dialogue about disaster preparedness, funding, and response policies, influencing public opinion and shaping policy decisions. This may lead to unequal distribution of aid and adversely impact medical responses to future events.

Several other factors around media coverage of disaster events deserve consideration as well. Sensationalism and sensational reporting can distort the severity of disasters, leading to inaccurate public perception and subsequent resource allocation.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of social media and citizen journalism can introduce challenges such as misinformation, and debates around ethics and accountability have been previously raised. Cultural and linguistic barriers may result in disparities in reporting, while the long-term recovery phase of disasters often



receives far less media coverage than the immediate aftermath of the response phase, despite a clear need for sustained attention and support throughout the entire process.

As individuals and organizations attempt to mitigate media bias, it is essential that individuals evaluate information from multiple sources carefully, fact-check claims made, and seek diverse views through multi-regional media platforms. To ensure more balanced coverage of disasters, both governmental and non-governmental agencies should proactively establish early relationships with media organizations and disaster journalists. This includes facilitating

appropriate access to disaster sites and information while fostering a mutual understanding of the roles, ethics, challenges, limitations, and potential biases inherent in disaster journalism.

By fostering these partnerships and promoting transparency, disaster response and medical aid agencies can work collaboratively with journalists to provide accurate and timely information to the public, enhance public awareness, and facilitate the dissemination of critical updates during crises, all of which translates into needs-based resource allocations rather than media-created narratives.

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