



# ATTITUDES TOWARDS MEDIA COVERAGE OF HUMANITARIAN ISSUES WITHIN THE AID SECTOR

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# INTRODUCTION

**In this short report, we examine how those involved with or interested in the aid sector view media coverage of humanitarian issues globally. What do they think of the ways in which mainstream and specialist news outlets cover humanitarian crises? What are their main sources of news and information and how useful do they find them? What impact, if any, does news coverage have on their work?**

We worked with IRIN News to help to answer these questions. In January 2018, IRIN carried out a survey of individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved in the aid or development sector, including both IRIN readers and non-readers. A section of the survey focused specifically on perceptions of IRIN's coverage, but respondents were also asked about their media preferences and habits in general. The answers to these questions form the basis of the discussion below.

This research and short report are part of an ongoing academic research project into humanitarian journalism. The Humanitarian Journalism research project is investigating how the news media report on humanitarian crises, what shapes their coverage and what influences it has. It is supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The research team includes Dr Martin Scott (University of East Anglia), Dr Kate Wright (Edinburgh University) and Dr Mel Bunce (City, University of London). For more information, see [www.humanitarian-journalism.net](http://www.humanitarian-journalism.net)

## Methodology

In total, 1626 respondents completed the survey, including 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 organisation.

It is important to note that regular readers of IRIN News were over-represented in this sample. 59% claimed to use IRIN either 'regularly' or 'heavily', whilst 41% used IRIN 'occasionally' or 'never'. Given this will have an effect on some of the results, the following discussion should be read with this in mind. It is also worth noting that this survey was carried out before the widely reported sexual misconduct scandal at Oxfam UK in Haiti.

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# SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**The survey revealed multiple interesting trends and preferences amongst respondents. The most significant ones are listed below. The main implication is that our respondents want much more and bolder investigative reporting and more consistent expert analysis of humanitarian issues and crises, including analysis of the aid sector as a whole.**

- There is widespread dissatisfaction within the aid industry with the quantity and quality of mainstream news coverage of humanitarian issues and crises.
  - a. 73% of respondents agreed that mainstream news media does not produce enough coverage of humanitarian issues.
  - b. Mainstream news coverage was also regularly criticised for being selective, sporadic, simplistic and partial.
- Those involved with or interested in the aid sector rely on a very small number of mainstream news outlets for their news about humanitarian issues: primarily the BBC, The Guardian and Al Jazeera English.
- The most commonly used specialist news outlets are Reliefweb, IRIN, the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Foreign Policy, UN Dispatch, Devex and News Deeply, although none dominates.
- There is a significant discrepancy between the perceived importance of investigative journalism and consistent coverage of ongoing crises, and the news media's performance in delivering such content. Both are highly valued, but neither are understood to be well provided.
- Solutions-oriented coverage and 'early warning' reporting were perceived to be the worst performing aspect of the news that respondents consume. However, both were also judged to be amongst the least valued aspects of news coverage.
- Breaking news is the best performing aspect of the news that respondents consume, but also the least valued.
- Expert analysis is the most highly valued aspect of humanitarian news coverage and respondents felt their current sources of news performed relatively well in this area.
- Respondents did not have a strong preference for news with a very specific geographic or thematic focus.
- Respondents claimed to care far more about the depth and detail of news content, than its presentation.
- News can play an important role in shaping the work of those working in the aid industry, most commonly by stimulating further research and/or advocacy and by informing organisational or operational priorities.



# 1. CRITICISMS OF MAINSTREAM NEWS COVERAGE

The results reveal a widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream news coverage amongst those working in the aid industry. Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents agreed (47%) or strongly agreed (26%) that the mainstream news media do not produce enough coverage of humanitarian issues and crises. This sentiment was particularly likely to be expressed by those working for INGOs (77%) and by those in executive management (C-Suite) positions (76%).

Of the 13% of respondents overall (and 19% of non-IRIN readers) who thought that mainstream news does produce enough coverage of humanitarian issues, many commented that, 'it's not so much the quantity but the quality that is the problem'. Indeed, the qualitative responses revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the nature of mainstream news coverage, in four particular areas.

## 1: Selective

First, many respondents felt that mainstream news coverage concentrates on a small number of crises, leaving most 'neglected' or 'forgotten'. One stated that, 'there is a cherry picking of crises that doesn't relate to the severity', whilst another commented that coverage focussed, 'only on bigger catastrophes not the daily suffering of people worldwide'.

## 2: Sporadic

Second, respondents also regularly commented that, when crises were reported, the news media had a 'short attention span'. In this regard, mainstream news coverage was frequently described as 'sporadic', 'irregular' and 'fleeting'. As one respondent explained, 'we rarely see humanitarian issues in the news unless it is a catastrophe and then it is only covered for about 2-3 days'.

## 3: Simplistic

Third, and perhaps most common, was the complaint 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'. One survey respondent stated that, 'in terms of quality, depth and analysis: abysmal'. Another wrote that news coverage, 'remains dramatic but often light touch, not going sufficiently to the causes'.

## 4: Partial

Finally, respondents often claimed that coverage was often 'incomplete' or 'partial' because it was perceived to be shaped by commercial or political interests. One wrote that, 'mainstream media only communicates enough humanitarian issues to not 'rock the boat' on their sales, logins and downloads'.

# 2. SOURCES OF NEWS

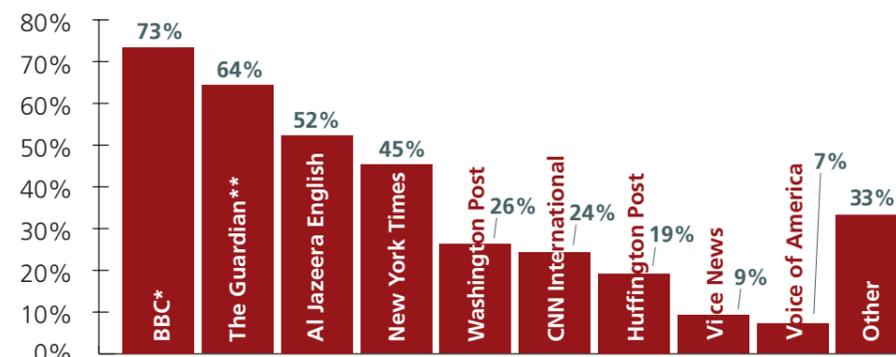


Figure 1: Responses to the question: What are your key mainstream sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues? (Select all that apply).

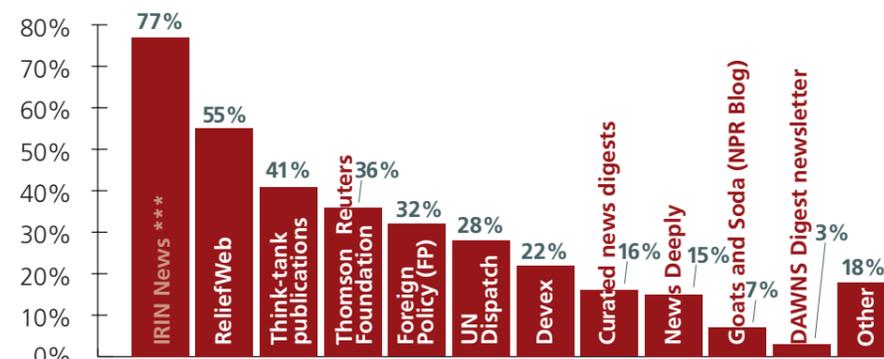


Figure 2: Responses to the question: What are your key specialist sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues? (Select top three).

The results show that respondents rely on a very small number of mainstream news outlets for their news about humanitarian issues and crises. Only three news outlets were mentioned by more than half of respondents – the \*BBC (including the BBC World Service) (73%), \*\*The Guardian (including the Global Development site) (64%) and Al Jazeera English (52%). Alongside the New York Times and the Washington Post, these outlets were frequently described as the only 'exceptions' to the general problems of mainstream news coverage described above.

The results highlight a number of interesting features regarding respondents' specialist sources of humanitarian news. First, they signal the importance of news aggregators in this field. Three of the most popular sources of news and information were news aggregators, including Reliefweb (55%), DAWNS Digest (3%) and other curated news digests (16%) (such as Humanitariannews.org and Humanitarian NewsCuratr). Second, the results highlight the importance of non-journalistic sources as a resource for news and information within the aid industry. 41% of respondents selected 'think-tank publications' as one of their 'top three' specialist sources of news.

Finally, while a handful of specialist news outlets are consumed by a significant percentage of respondents, including the Thomson Reuters Foundation (36%), Foreign Policy (32%), UN Dispatch (28%), Devex (22%) and News Deeply (15%), none dominates the field. \*\*\*Unfortunately, these results do not accurately show how IRIN News' reach compares to these outlets. Although 77% of respondents selected IRIN as one of their top three sources for news and analysis on humanitarian issues, this is likely to over-estimate IRIN's reach since regular IRIN readers were the main target audiences for this survey.



# 3.

## THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF HUMANITARIAN NEWS COVERAGE

	Most important aspects of news coverage of humanitarian issues and crises (Top three)	Performance of respondents' main sources of news about humanitarian issues and crises (Above average)	Performance of respondents' main sources of news about humanitarian issues and crises (Below average)
Expert analysis	58%	31%	15%
Investigative reporting	54%	24%	21%
Consistent coverage of ongoing crises	52%	25%	23%
Impartial, neutral reporting	52%	23%	16%
Voices and stories from the field	43%	23%	18%
Solutions-oriented coverage	42%	15%	37%
Early warning coverage	42%	22%	29%
Breaking news	31%	37%	9%

Table 1: The perceived importance and performance of different aspects of news coverage of humanitarian issues and crises

### The results

Table 1 shows that, of the news coverage that respondents do consume, the four most highly valued aspects were; expert analysis (58%), investigative reporting (54%), consistent coverage of ongoing crises and issues (52%) and impartial or neutral reporting (52%). The four least valued aspects of news coverage were; voices and stories from the field (43%), solutions-oriented coverage (42%), early warning coverage (42%) and, in particular, breaking news (31%).

Regarding the performance of the news media in these particular areas, Table 1 shows that respondents perceived the news media they consume to perform relatively well in offering breaking news (37%) and expert analysis (31%). By contrast, their existing sources of information were perceived to perform relatively poorly on issues such as investigative reporting (21%), consistent coverage of ongoing crises and issues (23%), early warning coverage (29%) and especially solutions-oriented coverage (37%).

### Further Analysis

**A comparison between these two sets of results reveals a number of interesting issues.**

#### Breaking news

First, these results show that breaking news was both the best performing aspect of respondents' news sources, but also the least valued. Put simply, respondents' current sources of news perform best at what they value least. By contrast, what they value most of all from their news coverage is expert analysis. Given this, it is somewhat reassuring that they perceived their current sources of news to perform relatively well in this regard, as it was the second most highly rated feature of news coverage. Despite this, it is also the case that less than a third (31%) of respondents stated that their sources for news about humanitarian issues performed 'above average' in terms of expert analysis. It is also worth remembering that many respondents considered 'think-tank publications' as a key source of news and information.

#### Investigative reporting

Second, there was a significant discrepancy between the perceived importance of investigative journalism and the news media's performance in delivering such news. Despite being the second most valued aspect of news coverage, less than a quarter (24%) judged their current sources of humanitarian news to be 'above average' for this criteria. As one respondent put it, 'there's just very little scrutiny of the sector'. Investigative stories were also often mentioned as being, 'the kind of stories [that] have had the most impact'. One respondent wrote that, 'the scandals are those that make me reflect most on the change that needs to be made in areas of my control'. Another commented that, 'Data protection, sexual harassment

of employees, sexual violence committed by UN/aid agency staff, and any other big scoops on internal aid workings and performance. Bosses see and react to these news stories even if employees have been shouting about them to no response for years'.

#### Ongoing coverage

Third, there was also a discrepancy between the perceived importance of consistent coverage of ongoing crises and the news media's performance in delivering such news. Over half (52%) of respondents cited this as one of the 'top 3' most important aspects of news coverage. In response to a later question, such coverage was also frequently cited as being likely to have impact. One respondent described it as a 'no-brainer' that the most impactful form of news was that which, 'highlights crises that don't [ordinarily] make the news... Congo Brazzaville, South Sudan, 'niche; needs of certain populations in crisis'. It is unfortunate, therefore, that this was also one of the areas in which news coverage was perceived to perform least well.

#### Solutions-orientated coverage

Fourth, solutions-oriented coverage was judged to be by far the worst performing aspect of the news that respondents consume. As one respondent put it, 'there is little coverage of what works'. However, it is vital to note that solutions-oriented coverage was also judged to be one of the least valued aspects of news coverage. Only 42% of respondents selected this as one of the 'top three' most important aspects of humanitarian news. Moreover, in a later question, when asked, 'which themes do you find most useful' (with no restrictions on the number of topics that could be selected) less than half of respondents (47%) selected 'success stories and best practices'. In summary,

whilst respondents' news sources may not perform particularly well at providing solutions-oriented coverage, it appears there may not be as much demand for it as is often assumed.

#### Early warnings

Fifth, the results in Table 1 reinforce the point, made earlier, that the news media are perceived to perform relatively poorly in providing an 'early warning' function. However, as was the case for solutions-oriented coverage, this was also rated as one of the least important aspects of news coverage of humanitarian crises and issues.

#### Voices from the field

Finally, in general, their were mixed views on the importance of voices and stories from the field. Although 43% selected this as one of the top three most important aspects of humanitarian news coverage, others saw this as either somewhat irrelevant to or actively detracting from the value of news coverage. For example, one respondent complained that there was, 'plenty of coverage about issues through personal stories but hardly any critical analysis of issues or policy'. This is significant because there is a growing consensus, at least within many mainstream news organisations, around the importance of including voices of affected communities (often instead of NGO representatives) within news coverage.



# 4. STYLE VS SUBSTANCE

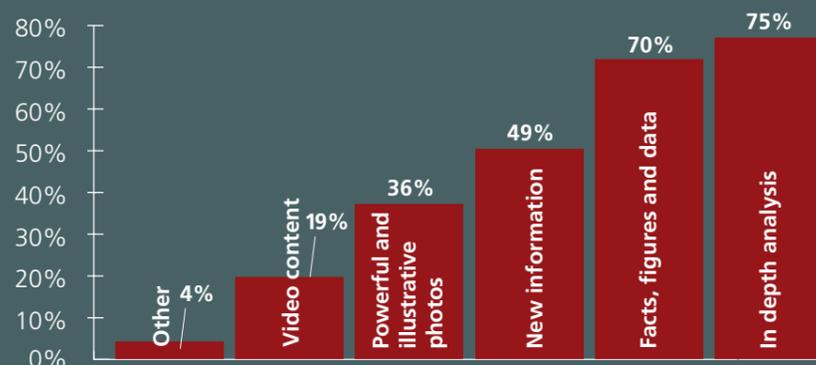


Figure 3: Responses to the question: 'What features make you engage more with stories?'

### Depth or detail?

The results in Figure 3 and Figure 4 reveal two other relatively strong preferences amongst the respondents. First, Figure 3 shows that there was a much stronger preference for in-depth analysis (75%), data (70%) and exclusivity (49%) than there was for powerful imagery (36%) or video content (19%). This suggests that those working within the aid industry may care significantly more about the depth and detail of their news content, than the way it is presented.

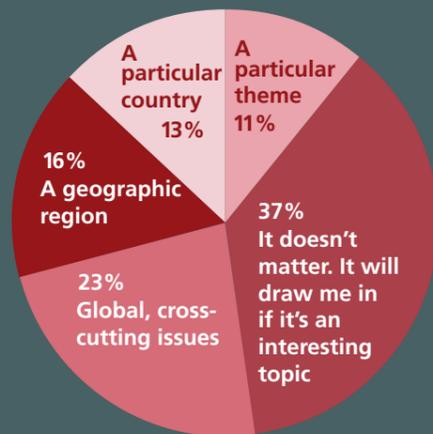


Figure 4: Responses to the question: 'What categories of news about humanitarian issues do you find most useful?'

### Geographic focus

Second, the results in Figure 4 show that, in response to the question – 'what categories of news about humanitarian issues do you find most useful' – the most common answer was, 'it doesn't matter – it will draw me in if it's an interesting topic' (37%). A further 23% of respondents claimed that global, crosscutting issues were of most interest. Relatively few claimed that they would find stories about a particular geographic region (16%), a particular country (13%) or a particular theme (11%) most useful. This is significant because it suggests that there may be a relatively limited appetite for news verticals or specialist news sites that have a very specific thematic or geographic focus.

# 5. THE IMPACT OF HUMANITARIAN NEWS

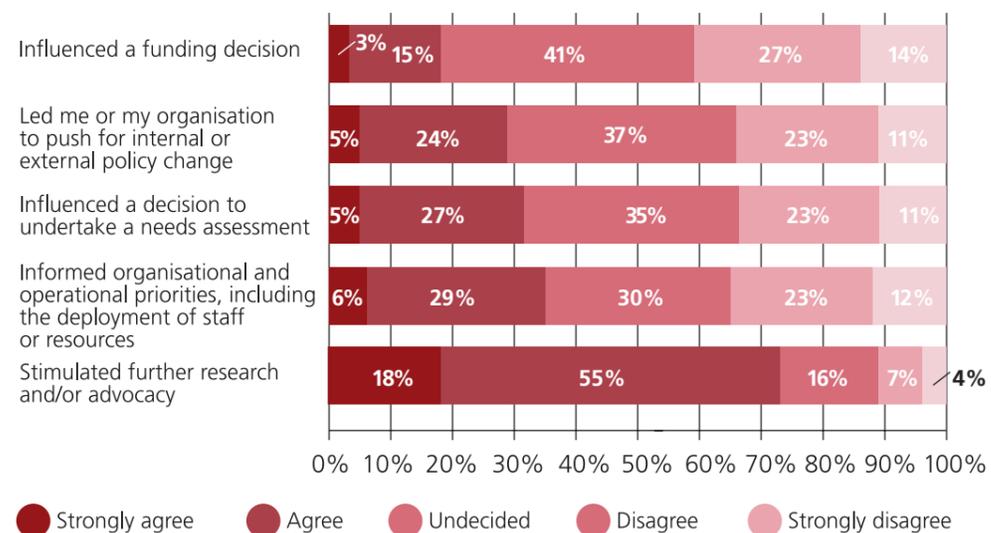


Figure 5: Responses to the question: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statements? On at least one occasion in the last year, IRIN content has...'

Despite widespread dissatisfaction with mainstream news coverage and some discrepancies between the importance and performance of different aspects of news coverage, there was also evidence to suggest that news can play an important role in shaping the work of humanitarians. Almost half (47%) of all respondent who used IRIN News at least 'occasionally' said that it was either 'important' or 'very important' to their work. This was particularly the case for executive management (C-suite) staff (53%).

It is also interesting to note the kinds of impacts that audiences say news content can have on their work. Figure 5 shows that nearly three quarters (73%) of users of IRIN News claimed that, in the last year, IRIN content had 'stimulated further research and/or advocacy'. In addition, around one third of respondents claimed IRIN News content had informed organisational or operational priorities (35%), influenced a decision to undertake a needs assessment (32%), and/or led to a push for policy change (29%). For example, one respondent wrote that, 'I found IRIN's in-depth coverage on Rohingya crisis very informative and used as a reference for formulating our organization's response plan.' Finally, 18% claimed that IRIN News had 'influenced a funding decision' in the past year.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

[www.humanitarian-journalism.net](http://www.humanitarian-journalism.net)

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