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Communicating from the Crisis

Are media trying to save lives or spread propaganda?

Sažetak

Istraživanjem o utjecaju propagande na novinarstvo u kriznim stanjima pokušava se saznati imaju li novinari dovoljno znanja za pošteno, nepristrano i uravnoteženo izvješćivanje. U potrazi za vijestima tijekom kriznih stanja posebno se naglašava važnost provjere izvora. Mediji u sukobima mogu odigrati pozitivnu, ali i negativnu ulogu. Najteže od svega je uravnoteženo izvješćivanje o terorizmu.

Ključne riječi: komuniciranje, kriza, novinarstvo, propaganda, mediji

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Introduction

Wars, armed conflict, riots and different natural disasters are today part of daily news coverage. We see many suffering people on our TV screen. Some of the images cause surge of emotions, frustration and anger. A large part of the incidents that bring a crisis onto the international agenda is generated by the media. But is that coverage fair and balanced? Can someone steer media? Do journalists have enough knowledge to be able to keep them away from propaganda?

When it comes to content of reporting, or safety and security of the aid workers or reporters, it is vital to have a good knowledge of the political, ethnic, religious or cultural background of the area and the changes taking place. In information gathering, it is of prime importance to understand the role and behaviour of the local informants and sources. Relevant information has to be filtered out from biased propaganda. In this article I shall discuss the influence of the media and of the parties to the conflict or crisis when disseminating information relevant for information gathering or "environmental scanning".

New technology and new players

BBC World's anchor Nik Gowing has in several occasions talked and written about the new information technology which can be used not only by journalists but by everyone. He writes that it is a self-perpetuating myth that increasingly there is less media coverage of humanitarian emergencies. The revolution in information technology and low-cost, lightweight means of recording and transmitting means there is now more reporting than ever from even the most remote and dangerous theatres of conflict and natural disaster. The question in today's 'noisy' emergencies is, who are the 'noise' generators? There are now many more than most assume.

New light communication technology makes possible online, real time reporting but also new kind of news creating and manipulation. The reporting may not be always as accurate and objective as most would want. Coverage of terrifying events as hurricane Catharine, the Asian tsunami, war in Iraq, war in Afghanistan, civil unrest in Kenya or massagers in

Mogadishu show how the hole world can be online with BBC World, CNN, al Jazeera or al Arabiya.

The impact of the media coverage can be immediate and profound, but it might be skewed in the rush to establish even basic facts at speed. More worryingly, the evidence is that in some emergencies it can polarise, radicalise and destabilise. The message is manipulated by governments, militaries, politicians, rebels, scientists, civil rights activists – and often by the media too.

The new low-cost, real-time technology is central to the changes – especially the mobile phone and hand-portable satellite phones. There is also a new, often self-taught group of people, who Nik Gowing calls "cadre of information doers or bearers of witness". They don't have to be accredited journalists. They are often locals who start to assist foreign reporters and turn to professional "fixers" as they are called by journalists. Or they can be ordinary citizens with small digital camera, who want to witness some events which no one else can cover. But the power of what they record and feed to a growing amount of publication or broadcast platforms can be enormous. For example in Iraq majority of the TV news material and the images are done by the local journalists. It is too dangerous for the foreign media representatives to travel out from the Green Zone, and this is why they sent out their local co-workers to gather material and do the interviews.

People who work in environments of crisis and catastrophe must possess a complex mix of professional skills. It's not enough to be a good doctor, refugee worker, administrator or journalist. To succeed you must have an all-round ability to function, to observe the various activities and interest groups that influence a situation, and to process all the information rationally..

The media, particularly the English language press, tend to use theatrical terms when reporting on crisis areas, as if the whole process of conflict or crisis were a drama unfolding on a stage. This has been especially noticeable as the war against terror, launched after the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, is building up to a war in Iraq. The same process was apparent – and still is - in Kosovo, where a humanitarian disaster culminated in the war in 1999 and the unbalanced situation has continued ever since.

Taking up and talking about theatrical terms is important, when one tries to understand, how news events and news coverage can be

studied from the entertainment point of view. For example huge natural disasters have many elements of drama; fear, emotions, anger, victims, heroes, timeline and so on. Same elements can be found from wars.

The terms are also familiar to officers leading the military operations. Generals and press staff appearing at public briefings regularly referred to the 'theatre of operation/war', and to 'actors', when they were speaking of Kosovo and the air strikes against Yugoslavia, and of the organisations or people involved there.

Thus, it seems pertinent to try to analyse the various roles taken by different organisations active in a disaster area. One focus might be the 'role', 'content', or function' that the media – that is, journalists – assign to the different actors. Relief organisations and aid workers are ascribed specific roles, as are the other actors in areas of crisis or disaster.

Why, then, is this scrutiny of the different roles and contents important?

Since 1978, I have worked as a journalist reporting on international disasters and conflicts. All through the seventies, eighties and nineties, I followed the Cambodian civil war, the famines in the Horn of Africa, the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Balkan crisis, the war in Kuwait and the recently the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to my work as a journalist, I have worked for almost four years as an information officer of the International Red Cross in the Balkans during the war in Bosnia and in Eastern Europe in connection with the 1999 Kosovo crisis, and since 2001 as the director of communications for the Finnish Red Cross.

In the course of this work I have noticed that reporters tend to structure conflicts through the interest groups, parties and organisations involved. These frames of reference are needed to present a coherent view to readers or viewers, but also because they facilitate writing the report itself.

By giving clearly defined roles to the different parties, a complex political and social conflict is made to seem a structured chain of events. To understand this casting and the background for the assigned roles has a vital importance if someone tries to find out a neutral and impartial picture of the conflict. The "frames" have been chosen in order to make the report or news item more understandable, the story more clear, but

sometimes it seems that with this attempt one easily loses also some elements of the credibility of the story.

In most cases the journalist's job is to structure the surrounding world and its events, to function as its interpreter. Of course there are also cases where journalists directly channel the propaganda of some interest group, a government, a guerrilla group, or some other organisation.

The 'role maps' or frames of reference used by journalists should not distort the content of what is happening or what is being reported. The framework should not lead the reader or viewer astray, but this is always a very real risk. According to studies by the University of New York and by the Princeton Survey Research Associates, the choice of a reference framework may endanger the balance of reporting as well as imbue the report with implicit meaning or values.

Some news items are always presented in the same frame of reference. In leading US newspapers a third of the news on the front page contains an element of polarity or competition: a conflict between two parties, winners versus losers, good versus bad. (Rosen, 1999).

Taken to extreme, this may lead to a situation where news is presented in propagandistic way in black and white as a factual series of events. This serves to support solutions chosen by those in power rather than to present a balanced view of the consequences of actions taken.

This was the conclusion drawn by Stig Nohrstedt, who studied the US coverage of the gulf war in Kuwait. The American press was favourably inclined towards the United States, President George Bush and the Western coalition and less favourable when it came to Iraq and President Hussein. The military aspects of the situation were emphasised, and initiatives for negotiation and the role of the UN were played down.

This perspective seemed to have a wider impact. During the first stages of the Gulf War the Swedish and Finnish media stressed the importance of the UN in solving the conflict, but as the war dragged on, they shifted towards the American view. (Nohrstedt & Ottesen, 2001).

One of my own hypotheses is that "in the role casting", that is in the media's coverage of a crisis, relief organisations and aid workers, especially outside the conflict area itself, are often used as mouthpieces of the victims to describe the human suffering, and as mediators of political balance in armed conflicts. They are made to function as a kind of referee,

interpreting among other things humanitarian law and human rights agreements.

To draw a role map may clarify a complicated chain of events, but what happens, if the preassigned roles don't fit, do not reflect reality or if the roles significantly change? Examples of this could be the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). In 1999, the KLA was presented in the Western press as the legal defence army of the Albanians in Kosovo, although a few years earlier they had described it as an anarchist terrorist organisation. Now KLA or people who have had an important role in the organisation, are the ones who are campaigning for the independent Kosovo, and might soon be the new leaders of a newly born state.

The same kind of shift has happened in the case of the PLO. In the seventies – for example, in relation to the strike against the Munich Olympics on 5 September 1972 – the PLO was unequivocally presented as a terrorist entity. During the first years of the 21st century, the organisation was still branded as a terrorist group, especially in Israel and the United States, but now in the year 2008, it is seen as the key actor, when President George W. Bush is trying to find a solution for the peace in the region. Now the “bad one” is organisation called Hamas, a militant Palestine group.

The changing role of the news media

In the early seventies, the Finnish media analyst Pertti Hemanus wrote that part of the mass media is openly propagandist, while another part works through or with latent or hidden propaganda. This is called indoctrination. Such covert influence strengthens common social attitudes and beliefs. There are many basic examples of covert moulding of our thinking. Presentation of world events is often skewed to a Western viewpoint in the news. Entertainment and advertising show people living middle class existence.

The world as presented by the media does not seem to have changed very much in 30 years, at least not in relation to the need for news reporting to be objective. Hemanus has pondered this question and notes that Western journalistic culture traditionally upholds the norm of

objectivity – taking sides is not allowed in the choice of news items, its content, or its journalistic presentation. But is such objective reporting possible? Hemanus clearly thinks the journalistic culture itself makes wholly objective reporting an impossibility.

He takes no stand, however, on the normative question of whether or not striving towards such objectivity is desirable. Striving for truth, balance, and the presentation of multiple views, are issues journalists have always grappled with. What this soul-searching and debate has led to is another matter entirely.

During the last two decades, the mass media – and news reporting – are said to have veered sharply in the direction of entertainment. This is a result of commercial competition. The trend towards infotainment/entertainment came to a sharp halt, at least for a while, in the United States, with the terrorist strike against the World Trade Center towers on 11 September 2001. Television news, in particular, became more serious and fact orientated. But only for few months.

Four months after the events in New York the US media had returned to their old ways, giving less space to experts and more to opinion, speculation and comment. As a result, the public's trust in the news media has collapsed. In September 2001, 56 per cent of Americans found the news reporting excellent, in November the number was down to 30 per cent. The reasons for this breakdown in trust are that 'the news' moved abroad and became more complex, but also the US government and its department of defence have severely restricted the journalists' access to information. (The Pew Research Center, 2002).

A third reason is to do with money. For financial reasons, the large television companies and publishing houses have cut back their teams reporting on the war on terrorism. Analysts find it significant, that the public started to lose interest in news reporting, although the press and television were unanimous in supporting the government's policy. It can indeed be inferred that the media can best preserve the trust of the public by functioning as an independent agent for the dissemination of information.

The globalisation of news coverage seems to be of vital importance. Up until the 1980s the analysis of information media was focused on national news and information and the influence these had on national culture and so on. The unit of analysis was one person, or one nation. International media were seen as outside – foreign – influences.

Globalisation and the electronic media – 24-hour satellite channels, the Internet, mobile communication – has changed this nation-centric thinking in about a decade. International news is instantly available to many nations. The CNN news channel can be seen simultaneously by more than 850 million people. Global news therefore has totally new audiences, international messengers and even wholly new social frames of reference. Internationalism has become a psychologically effective reality.

Though CNN's once dominant credibility ratings have slumped in recent years in US, mostly among Republicans and independents, as Pew research Center have found out. The study shows that TV news audiences have started to select their news channels based more on of their political backgrounds.

The Fox News Channel's believability ratings have remained steady both overall and within partisan groups. Nonetheless, among those able to rate the networks, more continue to say they can believe all or most of what they hear on CNN than say that about Fox News Channel (32% vs. 25%).

The partisan nature of these ratings is underscored by the fact that, while roughly the same proportion of Republicans and Democrats view Fox News as credible, Fox ranks as the most trusted news source among Republicans but is among the least trusted by Democrats.

The public's evaluations of media credibility also are more divided along ideological and partisan lines. Republicans have become more distrustful of virtually all major media outlets over the past four years, while Democratic evaluations of the news media have been mostly unchanged. As a result, only about half as many Republicans as Democrats rate a variety of well-known news outlets as credible a list that includes ABC News, CBS News, NBC News, NPR, PBS's NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, the New York Times, Newsweek, Time and U.S. News and World Report. (The Pew Research Center, 2004).

The relief industry and the humanitarian aid market

Humanitarian aid workers are well advised to remember that not everyone sees relief work as the selfless helping of others. Securing,

storing, transporting and distributing relief material involves many factors, and the local press, in particular, may show a lively interest in such things. The ultimate aim of humanitarian relief work is of course to help people in need.

But this is not the only facet of the work in relief operations. For example, during the bombing of Yugoslavia, a decision was made to help cities which were then in opposition to the ruling government. Food and energy supplies were thus given a political dimension. Specific donations are often linked to certain products and purchases. During the war in Bosnia in 1993–95 considerable food aid, mostly grain, was brought into the area. This grain was cited at world market prices and the aid shipment was given a rather large monetary value. In reality, the cereal was surplus grain stores to be got rid of.

Many states have granted aid funds – for example to Bosnia – which are linked to domestic purchases. The humanitarian aid shipments are part of international business and trade. This can lead to tensions.

The humanitarian aid market represents about 50–55 billion US dollars a year (Girerdet, 2000).

Business and trade linked to relief shipments are often determined by the publicity around specific projects and operations.

The conflicts and the decisions surrounding them also have many other economic links, which aid workers and journalists covering the events in the field should be aware of.

Complex armed conflicts, natural disasters, and humanitarian aid operations

The Finnish analyst Katarina West recently noted that a glance at the areas of conflict and crisis will show that they are run almost exclusively by the UN, The International Red Cross, humanitarian non-governmental agencies, peace-keeping forces and those who fund relief operations. In evaluating the future of Afghanistan, for example, it is to be remembered that whatever political situation unfolds, the relief organisations will play a vital role in the country.

Katarina West uses the term *humanitarian shadow state*, where a multinational, technocratic community of relief workers and administrators have taken over and replaced the splintered organs of state. This is a topical issue, but West confuses some of the terms, and shows that despite their expertise she apparently has insufficient knowledge of the mandates of the different organisations in crisis areas. Such a mixed bag of mandates misreported in the media can very quickly affect the security situation in a relief operation, and misunderstandings can sometimes stop or hinder the whole project.

For journalists it's important to remember that some international organisations operate on a purely political mandate. This applies to the UN and its organisations, the EU and the EU's humanitarian aid effort. Inter-governmental organisations, like NATO, also operate on a political mandate. Some international organisations have a special mandate based on international agreements. The best example is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is an internationally recognised neutral organisation whose status is guaranteed by the 193 signatories to the Geneva Convention. The status of the Red Cross differs from other organisations in other ways as well.

Apart from the Red Cross there are dozens of private relief organisations that receive state funding from different nations. The religious aid organisations constitute a sector of their own, and in addition there are thousands of other non-governmental organisations functioning as relief agencies for different reference groups.

Why is it important to recognise and know the mandates and backgrounds of different organisations? In an international crisis the aid organisations are a significant source of information for journalists. If the data they provide isn't put in the right framework, the assessment of the situation may be wrong. The mandates of the organisations and agents also influence what they do and what they leave undone.

The media's role in the coverage of conflicts, refugee crises and natural disasters

For as long as they have existed, the press and other media have reported on wars and armed conflicts, great natural upheavals, refugee

crises and floods. And they have always been blamed for having influenced wars in one way or another, whether by contributing to the build-up to them starting, or the way they subsequently develop.

The depth of the worst European crisis since the Second World War, the civil war in Yugoslavia has in many contexts been blamed on journalists. The media were central to the sowing of hate among different groups, to constructing images of the enemy, to the spread of lies and incitement of revenge.

In all states of socialist Yugoslavia both electronic media and the press were tightly controlled by those in power. It was thus relatively easy to steer the writing and emphasis of media workers in the 1980s and especially after the outbreak of civil war. The reporters themselves found it to be their patriotic duty to support nationalistic tendencies, in Bosnia as well as Serbia and Croatia.

The role of the press in an escalating crisis is nothing new. For example, the Spanish-American war in 1898 is said to have been fanned into flame by the self-conscious arrogance of the American newspapers. Decades later some American politicians and military leaders claimed that unpatriotic commentary on the Vietnam War in the American media was to blame for their defeat. And nothing seems to have changed, especially in the United States.

In 2001, the media were castigated for uncritical support of the political and military leadership, when they lauded the war against terrorism declared by President George W. Bush. Allegedly, the media have played a strategic part in the US administration's build-up of the operation against Iraq.

Although the media have always been important as reporters of conflicts and disasters, it is only over the past few decades that there has been serious discussion about the media, in fact, having significant power and direct influence over the birth, development and solution of conflicts.

This debate has been fuelled by the rapid development of the electronic media and information technology during the last decade. Nowadays, television cameras can zoom in on aeroplanes leaving their bases in real time, and a few hours later on the bombs falling over, for example, Yugoslavia or Afghanistan. This means that, in many cases, those being bombed can watch their own fate unfolding on international news channels as it happens.

The intensified news reporting has also led the various participants in conflicts to make use of their own media to spread their view, that is their own propaganda.

After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 the war began in the Persian Gulf. It has been called the first real television war. For the first time, American television reporters were able to file reports live from an enemy capital, and for the first time representatives of an enemy government were able to speak directly to American politicians and at the same time a broader public. A new page was opened with the second Iraq war where hundreds of journalists have been embedded by the US and British military.

In the early stages of the war in Yugoslavia and indeed during the whole Balkan crisis the local media had a pivotal warmongering role, inciting hatred and enmity. The international media played a different role. During the war in Bosnia the reporting by CNN, BBC and other international news and photo agencies significantly changed the Western view of the war. Only in retrospect has the debate begun over whether the presentation of the war in Bosnia was, in fact, all that it seemed to be in terms of old-fashioned news criteria: honest, balanced, neutral.

During the so-called Great Lakes crisis in Africa more than 500,000 people were killed and millions were made refugees. The president of Rwanda later admitted that he had effectively exploited the ignorance of the foreign correspondents and directed international opinion the way he saw fit.

Osama Bin Laden – who has been named the world's number one terrorist – has repeatedly sent video interviews out into the world by way of a television station in Qatar.

Just as the role of mass media in humanitarian crises has changed, the role of other agents in the arena – has also changed. As recently as in the 1970s, there were only a few international aid organisations in the world, but today there are hundreds of different agencies that spring into action .

The enormous rise in the number of relief agencies is dictated by the multiplication of funds directed to aid, but there is another reason. The organisations have learned to make use of the media to market their contributions. Crisis journalism, with all it entails of military operations and relief efforts, has become part of the media's news 'entertainment'.

There is reason to ask whether all those involved are professional enough in their activities, whether ethical ground rules are observed, and whether the work is sufficiently responsible.

The media's controversial role

'The heroic times of war correspondents are clearly over. Now they must decide for themselves whether to continue as mediators of propaganda, builders of myth or helpmeets to the war makers. The media and the army have fought a long and bitter 30-year war and the army has won.

After the Persian Gulf War, Kosovo, Chechnya, Iraq or Afghanistan it is painfully clear that future wars will be reported in accordance to the strict norms of the witchdoctors of armies and governments. 150 years of independent war reporting has come to the end of the road.' Thus, the illustrious *Sunday Times* war correspondent Philip Knightley, author of the book *First Casualty*, commented on the changed role of the media in crisis reporting.

There are a few main reasons for this change. Even in the midst of crisis, commercial competition between news media continues. This lessens the desire or ability to withstand the military's restrictions on access to and dissemination of news. War correspondents often move quickly from crisis to crisis. The nature of their work is such that obstacles, failures or difficulties in general are not analysed or stored.

Armies work in a totally different manner. They are institutions where a lot of effort and resources are used not only for advance planning but for recording the course of operations and later analysing and drawing lessons from the events. Knightley contends that both the US and British military continually update their instructions and manuals regarding the role of journalists in a crisis and how to work with correspondents and reporters. Every mistake as well as every successful move is analysed in detail.

During the war in Kosovo NATO had a meticulously planned information strategy, which even mapped out the rhythm of the daily briefings. At the end of the war in 1999, when NATO marched into Kosovo, the troops were followed by 270 members of the press. In

comparison, at the height of media interest in the Vietnam war, there was a maximum of 500 journalists covering the conflict. (Knightley, 2000).

The relationship between political decision making and the media, known as the CNN phenomenon since the Gulf War more than ten years ago, has been significantly refined during the past decade. Political and economic powers are no longer at 'the mercy' of the media. World leaders make use of top scientists and expert psychologists in order to get the media to support their political and economic decisions.

We are thus currently in a situation where the media, quite often unwittingly, act as advocate for an interest group. It is disturbing that a working journalist may not even be aware of the fact that he or she is putting someone else's strategy to work.

News or entertainment?

The general public may not necessarily know where Bosnia is, or which groups are aggressors or victims in Rwanda, but it is the responsibility of the media to try to explain to them why they should know. They should also be able to explain such things in a way that makes them seem interesting and worth knowing.

The seeds of lack of compassion lie in ignorance. Accidents, crises and disasters always engender a lot of emotions, anger, fear, excitement, and even rage. The media make use of these emotions and may thereby knowingly or unwittingly create dangers for aid workers.

Dr Anu Mustonen of Finland has studied the emotional content of news reporting and the fact that the media present such a Ferris wheel of feelings. In a state of heightened emotion, self-control may slip and rational thought become confused. Problems, conflicts and repellent things are at the heart of drama. The more the media public is made to suffer and fear for the characters in, let's say, a television soap, the more satisfying the relief when a solution is shown.

Factual material is also tinged with emotion. Our general news criteria stress emotional content, at least indirectly, since news is supposed to be novel, special, interesting. Conflict and negative feelings are underlined: good news is no news.

In the media language of the West the world is seen through a problem frame, with weighty problems and danger more in evidence than positive things. A sedate, everyday existence does not contain enough experiences, surprises and feelings and it is not newsworthy. Emotional experience is born of identification and empathy.

Propaganda or truth?

Crisis always spawns propaganda. The concept is often linked to dictatorial rulers, which is why many people are surprised to find that almost all armies today have detailed and well researched manuals and guidelines for psychological warfare, operations pertaining to publicity and information.

John Merrill, legendary for his thoughts on media ethics, has said it is hard to give a precise definition of propaganda, but in journalism propaganda might be to knowingly present something just a bit off the facts. Any partisan, fraudulent, irrational, distortive or oversimplifying report from which facts are left out and a balanced view avoided is propagandistic. The important thing is not always what has risen to the level of news but what has knowingly been left out. In field work, the person responsible for security must be especially aware of precisely that which is not necessarily news.

The Balkan wars, Bosnia or Kosovo, have been mentally very hard for many Western journalists. For the first time the refugee or victim has had a 'European' face. The cruelty and vicissitudes of war have also been brought home to many journalists, who have been faced with the killing of civilians, rape, and mass murders. Many reporters have asked themselves whether it is at all possible to remain an observer, coolly deferring to journalistic rules of ethics laid down in distant newsrooms. One of the main problems with those rules of ethics and the serving of truth is that no rule can say precisely what truth is.

Another frustrating problem is that the ethical norms do not acknowledge the conflict between truth and ethics. What is the truth? Can a news story be true, if it leaves out certain facts? Or if the journalist clearly takes a stand? Can truth be only what is stated or known, or may that which is left unsaid also be the truth?

Manipulating the messenger

The nature of armed conflicts has changed totally during the last decade. In the past, ideologies confronted each other, for example in Latin American countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador or Guatemala. The parties in the civil wars had clearly different views of how society should function. Although the wars were fought locally, their defining character was in a broader struggle between East and West. The Soviet Union or Cuba gave covert support to their chosen sides.

In former Yugoslavia, this constellation broke down in the beginning of the 1990s. Ideology no longer explained war. The crisis in Yugoslavia was diametrically different from the Central American conflicts, and it seemed to start a whole new type of conflict: Rwanda, East Timor, Central Africa, Niger. In this type of civil war the conflict is not contained within the borders of one state but spills over into neighbouring countries.

Another explanatory factor is the role of the media. Many civil wars are founded in hate and propaganda spread by the local media. Often the crisis smoulders and grows in secret, without outsiders noticing anything going on.

In the early stages of war in Bosnia, Chechnya or Rwanda there was hardly any country with a diplomatic or other representation in the area. The 'frames' for understanding the conflict were actually built by the first foreign correspondents' coverage. The reports by the first journalists to reach their stations were constructed from the materials these reporters then had. And whatever basic facts were wrong or misunderstood in these initial reports took a long time to correct.

The situation is probably unchanged. It seems probable that officials at the Finnish Foreign Ministry, if suddenly faced with a surprising development in some small Central Asian or African country, would have to rely on the framework given by the international news agencies to get a grasp on the situation.

In an area without strategic significance, a crisis that has demanded a lot of victims may fester for quite some time before anyone takes notice. On the other hand, some small country may be designated important and is suddenly the focus of everyone's attention.

How to collect information – the process of environmental scanning

If a journalist wants to be independent, neutral and impartial, he needs to collect a lot of information from different sources. When it comes to sudden disasters or slowly developing trends in human suffering, there has to be systems to collect and analyse information in a rapidly changing external environment. Multinational corporations have for years used highly sophisticated methods of environmental scanning to evaluate information.

For some this has been a key to their success. Information means profit, a rising stock price and lavish bonuses for management! They know already today what is likely to happen tomorrow. But, increasingly, the politicians and information officers have adopted the techniques of environmental scanning too. Finnish government established a unit for this after tsunami, because there was so much criticism about the slow response from the government side. The process has helped them in a rapidly changing world. But what exactly is environmental scanning?

It is not necessarily something completely new. Communicators and journalists do it every day, but often on an *ad hoc* basis. All of us can be better scanners. Environmental scanning reduces the random nature of the information flowing into the organisation. It focuses on relevant information that can be distributed immediately or used for planning.

Scanning is a kind of radar that systematically sweeps the world for new, essential information. The operators of that gathering process translate information into understanding and knowledge, which will help the organisation's security, actions, planning and decision-making. Scanning can provide important early warning signals to managers too.

The most common source of new information is the media and the Internet. Every day when we read the national or local newspapers, surf the web, listen to the radio or watch TV, we receive a lot of new information. Some of it could be used immediately but too often we forget to take action.

A few simple examples. Regular news about ethnic demonstrations or small clashes could be a signal that there might soon be a real war. New rules, regulations and decisions made by the government or local authority may significantly change the role and situation of a delegation.

One or two letters criticising the humanitarian operation in a newspaper might indicate that there is something wrong with its activities or at least that the image of operation might be changing. For the humanitarian organisation the letter could be an early warning sign that soon there will be more public criticism, or even demonstrations.

The main objectives of scanning are: detecting social, political, economic, humanitarian and ethical trends or events important to the movement; analysing potential threats, opportunities and changes implied by those trends; developing an orientation in the thinking of management and staff; alerting to trends that are converging, diverging, speeding up, slowing down or interacting.

But what environment should journalists monitor? You don't have the resources to monitor everything. Focus first of all on the core areas of activity and start with the customers and stakeholders; that is, issues relevant to beneficiaries, the authorities, politicians and donors. Then select the most important enterprises associated with a particular organisation. Finally, take the macroenvironment, where changes in the social, economic, political, and technical sectors affect us directly or indirectly.

It is important to remember to monitor values, lifestyles and attitudes too.

Passive scanning is what most of us do when we read magazines and newspapers. However, the organisational consequences of passive scanning are that we do not systematically use information for action and planning and we miss many indications of change in the environment.

In active scanning, it is important to include information resources that represent different views of each social, economic, environmental and political sector. The first step in establishing environmental scanning is to decide which level of scanning commitment is best for your organisation: irregular, periodic or continuous. Irregular systems are used on an ad hoc basis and tend to be crisis-initiated. Periodic systems are used when planners periodically update a scan, perhaps in preparation for a new planning cycle. Continuous systems use the active scanning mode of data collection to systematically assist strategic planning.

A quick way of getting started for a journalist is to interview major decision-makers on the most critical trends and developments that could affect the institution. Use the interviews and conversations with your

colleagues (including those at other institutions) to identify critical trends and developments.

Also examine programme reviews on the internet, the last institutional self-study and the current master plan. What do you look for? Seek signs of change. Review the social, political, economical, environmental and technical sectors, looking for signs of change. Look for signals of potential events on the horizon.

Look for forecasts by experts. Many national and international organisations and institutions provide regular forecasts. Look for indirect effects. It is important to remember that many trends or events that do not have direct implications for us nevertheless have second or third order effects.

Select the best statistical resources. For example: government ministries, UN agencies, the World Bank, the EU, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Write abstracts. These are excellent vehicles for crystallising thoughts and communicating what is known about changing trends and patterns. Be aware that there are few guidelines on how to do scanning.

There are no hard and fast rules that lead to correct interpretations. The data do not speak for themselves. The skills, abilities, experience and judgements of the scanner are critical to interpreting data.

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