HOW TO REPORT ON CHILDREN IN CRISES

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In times of war and other forms of disaster children are especially vulnerable, and powerless, which makes their predicament all the more compelling for distant audiences. Think about the implications of those words…

What you produce will be witnessed and absorbed by people who may have no experience of horrendous events endured by the children. Your subject may become the object of strangers' pity, sympathy or even generosity. The story you tell in words and pictures may galvanise them into action about the causes or consequences of yet another humanitarian crisis. But what happens to the children with whom you have engaged?

Even if they are still living at home with their family, children caught up in extremes of violence, drought, famine, or other forms of social upheaval are likely to be traumatised. How they respond to trauma may vary enormously according their age, background, and personality – factors you may know little about. And while you may regard yourself as the passing stranger simply reporting the facts, they may attach considerable significance to the interest you show in their circumstances.

Refugee camps can be bewildering and frightening places for adults, let alone children, especially if they are far from familiar surroundings. Such places are full of strangers, and the children lack reference points against which to measure their motives. Aid workers have complained that the arrival of foreign media can add to the trauma felt by children. It can raise false expectations among those who have some idea about the role of the media. It can exacerbate tension, especially if the need to meet deadlines overrides common courtesies and respect for people who already feel lost and abandoned.

Reporting about or interviewing children under such conditions can be especially problematic. You need to be able to give them time; if you cannot, think twice about engaging with them. They are not there for you; as an adult they see you as there for them. Before approaching children it is vital to seek advice about their circumstances from adults on the ground. And remember that everyone will be under pressure, and may not share your priorities.

When embarking on an assignment to a disaster area, try to be as well prepared as possible, physically and emotionally. If the going gets tough don't be afraid to share your fears and anxieties with colleagues. Look after each other, and take time out to recharge your batteries if you feel overwhelmed by what you witness.

The following guidelines are simply that – some pointers to help you get your bearings and avoid the risk of unwittingly causing harm when your primary intention is to 'get the story out'.

If you are using an interpreter, make sure s/he knows the ground rules, and is aware of the way you want to handle interviews with children rather than what you want out of them. Your empathy is wasted if the interpreter's interaction with the children is inappropriate. Explain that you want to know exactly what they are saying, and that the children are under no obligation to respond.

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Ten top tips

1. Put the best interests of the child first

Your reports can have unexpected consequences, so THINK about your motivation, the way the story is likely to be presented, and what comeback there may be on the child/ren. One key issue is their identity. For example, a (former) 'child soldier' who talks to the media may risk assassination if their controller realises s/he is passing information that might incriminate adults. Similarly child witnesses to atrocities may face retribution – even in refugee camps.

2. Seek permissions where possible

If children are in the custody of responsible adults, find out more about their circumstances before talking with them. It is entirely inappropriate to interview severely traumatised children, and the more distressed the child the more important it is to interview them in the presence of an adult known to them. Always check whether it is appropriate to identify them fully (by name or photograph).

3. Consider the pros and cons of full identification

Acknowledging the personal identity of a child is an important element of showing respect and gaining confidence, but revealing it fully to the public may not be appropriate. The child may have no objections, but as a responsible adult you have to consider the implications. Even when interviewing children who have lost contact with their families, be circumspect about revealing their full identity. Include sufficient clues to alert a genuine relative, but beware of supplying full identification in case you are putting them at additional risk. All media is now global – so your story may be seen by people elsewhere whose motives for contacting the children may be suspect. If in doubt, seek advice from adults known to the child.

4. Always explain

Try to ensure that the child/ren know what you are doing. You cannot be sure whether they regard you as friend or foe, so begin by explaining who you are, why you ant to talk to them and what you will do with the information you gain, and who your audience is likely to be. Show them your identification, and show them how your equipment works.

5. Give them time

A pressing deadline may control your agenda, but it means nothing to traumatised children. Where possible allow them to get to know you, even if it is only over a few days. Their welfare and livelihood are more important than their 'story', and they are more likely to open up once they have become more familiar with your presence. Above all really listen to what they are saying, rather than simply seizing on 'quotable quotes'. Even at the best of times individual children dislike being portrayed as representing a group or 'type'. You may be able to generalise after talking with several children, but try to acknowledge their unique experience rather than seeking 'iconic' images and stories about children in crisis.

6. Is that picture really necessary?

The tears of a child send powerful messages – but identifying a child unnecessarily may have both positive and negative consequences. If it is the tear you want, focus on the tear not the face. If it is the face you want, do not make it anonymous. Tell the child's story so that s/he may benefit, but always check on the identification issue.

7. Double check wherever possible

Children can be fascinating and compelling witnesses, but their lack of experience and vocabulary can lead to confusion. They may be anxious to please and tell you what you want to hear rather than what they know. The stories told by traumatised children may

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describe their feelings and fears as much if not more than actuality. Do not rely in them as 'hard evidence', until you have been able to check facts with other witnesses, or people who know more about the child's history.

8. Don't raise false expectations

A traumatised child may harbour false expectations, or fears, when a stranger takes a particular interest. Never bribe or coax them, and never make false promises however much you want to show sympathy and understanding. Children remain in situations of crisis long after the media has lost interest, and unfulfilled promises further damages their ability to trust adults. Singling out individual children or families for special treatment can cause problems after you have gone. If you want to help, agree with colleagues about some way of sharing your resources with a wider group – perhaps through a trustworthy local agency.

9. Make links

If you are telling a child's story, where possible try to ensure that there is some way of getting back in touch with child, through a named person at an aid agency for example. This is important not just for follow-up, but in case your story generates responses that may be significant for the child (from relatives outside the country, for example).

10. Focus on the positive

Don't be afraid to talk openly about the earthquake/battle/journey the children have endured, but try not to probe too much into the personal. They will know if you are trying to avoid the issue. Look for stories that encourage hope rather than despair - stories of personal endurance and heroism. Even in the worst circumstances there may be moments of joy and laughter, which help to emphasise our common humanity. Children have an extraordinary capacity for resilience, and merely telling positive stories can be a comfort when all else seems grim.

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Involving children – giving them a voice

Children tend to be seen rather than heard, especially in crisis situations. Try to ensure that their voices are heard. That means giving them time and space to talk rather than 'perform'.

Children function best among their peers, so one of the best ways of engaging with them is to work with a group. Ask if you can watch or join their games. Let them tell you what is it is about, and once you have shown interest they may clamour to tell you about each other. Always try to operate literally at their level, rather than standing over or apart from them. If they are sitting on the ground, join them. If they show interest in your recording equipment, let them examine it – touch it, even use it.

Children may want adults to hear their stories, but may find it difficult to tell them to a stranger. Let them know that children elsewhere want to know what has happened to them. They may find it easier to speak into a mic or a camera if they can imagine that there are other children on the receiving end. Once they get started, let them continue with minimal prompts. If one child stops there is usually another who will want to add their own contribution. Then ask them if they have any messages for the adults who are responsible for their welfare – or the conditions under which they are now living.

Children also delight in singing, especially as a group. Don't demand that they perform, but ask them if there are any songs they enjoy singing. Sharing a popular song can evoke happy memories and laughter, and in reminding them of normality may bring back elements of their story may be willing to share with you.

Traumatised children may feel the need to talk, but others may be too withdrawn to communicate easily. One of the simplest, and most helpful communication techniques is drawing. A few sheets of paper from your notepad may allow a child to express something of the anxiety going on inside. And once they have drawn something they may be willing to explain it to you. Their drawings and their explanation may make a very powerful story when put together.

Most important of all, you have a responsibility not to risk re-traumatising them. When they recount their stories, don't push for details if they show reluctance. However tantalising the account, let it go rather than risking emotional abuse. Bow out when a child becomes withdrawn, distressed or over-excited, and make sure a responsible adult is aware of what has happened.

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Some useful resources

American Press Institute, Crisis Journalism
http://americanpressinstitute.org/articles/publications/crisisjournalism/

The Communications Initiative
www.comminit.com/

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma
www.dartcenter.org
www.dartcenter.org/regions/london/index.html
www.dartcenter.org/regions/melbourne/index.html

Institute for War and Peace Reporting
www.iwpr.net

International Federation of Journalists Guidelines for reporting children
www.ifj.org/default.asp?Issue=Children&Language=EN

International News Safety Institute
www.newssafety.com

MAGIC website on media and children
www.unicef.org/magic/resources/resources_for_journalists.html
www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/childmedia.html

Media Channel
www.mediachannel.org

The MediaWise Trust Information on reporting children
www.mediawise.org.uk/children
www.mediawise.org.uk/conflict

One World - Information source
http://uk.oneworld.net

The Poynter Institute, enormous resource about disaster coverage
www.poynter.org

Reporting the World - Resources for journalists
www.reportingtheworld.org.uk

Save the Children UK, *Interviewing Children. A guide for Journalists and Others*
www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk/jsp/resources/details.jsp?id=556

UNICEF Media Guidelines
www.unicef.org/media/media_tools_guidelines.html

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