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Building media capacities to improve disaster response: lessons from Pakistan

By Adnan Rehmat, Internews

The 8 October earthquake had a devastating impact on the media in affected areas. Dozens of journalists were killed or went missing, and newspaper offices, broadcasting facilities and press clubs were destroyed. The capacity of the local media was significantly reduced, and local and national outlets struggled to respond adequately to the tragedy with news and information about the nature and scale of the earthquake and the progress of the relief effort.

The media response

Pakistanis first learnt of the disaster from private television channels and FM radio stations. It took a couple of hours before the state-owned electronic media broke the news. In the affected regions, there was no private radio or TV, and the only source of mass information – the state-run Kashmir Radio and TV – was silenced by the earthquake: 40 of its 160 staff were killed, and its buildings wrecked. With the region's small printing presses and most press clubs also damaged, and with dozens of journalists either dead or losing relatives, the business of local news generation came to a halt. The disaster presented the classic paradox: news about the calamity and its impact was going out to the world at

large, but those affected – at least 3.5 million people – had no means of finding out what was going, what to do or how to get help.

The information gap

To gauge the state of information access, the Pakistan office of Internews, an international media development organisation, conducted a snapshot survey two weeks after the earthquake in Batagram, Balakot and Mansehra in NWFP, and Muzaffarabad, Bagh and Rawalakot in Kashmir. These were generally the worst-hit cities. According to the survey, before the earthquake about 81% of households had a radio, and 52% had television sets. Of these, three-quarters of radio sets and virtually all TV sets were destroyed by the earthquake. When asked about their sources of information, 68% of respondents said they were dependent on word of mouth, 28% on the radio, 21% on newspapers, 15% on TV and 11% on the local administration. At least 8% said they were not getting any information from anywhere. No one mentioned the mosque or religious leaders as a source of general information.

In the absence of conventional sources of information, rumours abounded: about when the next

earthquake was due, or that daubing kerosene on your tent will get rid of mosquitoes, or that bottled water was medicinal and only fit for hand-washing, not drinking. Against this background, it was imperative that a cheap and practical means of information access was established.

Rebuilding the media

Radio was the obvious answer: sets were cheap (less than a dollar), information could be provided in local languages, and broadcasts could reach large numbers of people. Given the lack of local equipment and expertise, operators elsewhere in the country had to be called on; within a month, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority had issued ten three-month, non-commercial emergency licences to private FM stations outside of the affected area. The Authority bypassed the usually lengthy process of security vetting of would-be operators (to clear them of links with India or with jihadi/militant groups), and made available frequencies usually controlled by the military. The idea was that, since the licences were non-commercial, they would be taken up only by 'serious' volunteer broadcasters committed to helping people.

Within weeks of the earthquake,

Internews, with funding from the UK and Switzerland, launched the Pakistan Emergency Information Project (www.internews.org.pk) to rebuild media capacities affected by the disaster in Kashmir and NWFP. This work primarily includes developing the emergency broadcast sector, building radio production facilities, providing small equipment grants to emergency FM stations, training journalists in humanitarian reporting and the production and distribution of a daily one-hour news and information programme on humanitarian issues, called 'Jazba-e-Tameer' ('The Spirit of Recovery'). The programme was produced by a group of ten journalism students. The volunteers travelled daily across the earthquake region to report on relief efforts, including feedback from affected populations, the international and local humanitarian community and government authorities.

Four months after the initial information access survey, Internews conducted a follow-up. This showed that the new community radio regime had rapidly become a major source of independent, reliable and useful information. In the initial survey, in late October 2005, 28% of respondents had cited radio as one of their primary sources of information. In the follow-up survey, this had gone up to 70%, and respondents mentioned at least one of the seven emergency radio stations on air at the time of the survey as their station of choice. The follow-up survey also revealed that more people were consuming more media. In the initial survey, 15% of respondents had reported watching TV; in the follow-up survey, this had risen to 24%, all of whom said that TV was one of their primary sources of information. Virtually all watched state-run channels. A third of respondents gave newspapers

as one of their primary sources of information, up from 21% in October 2005.

Lessons from Pakistan

The Internews Pakistan Emergency Information Project shows how an often-neglected aspect of post-disaster relief – the provision of reliable information for survival and recovery – can be achieved in little time (100 days), and with little money (about £150,000 of the £300,000 project funding has been spent to date).

The key lessons of the Pakistan experience are that information about relief, reconstruction and rehabilitation is critical for survival and recovery in disaster regions; and that, if the local media lacks the capacity to provide the kind of specialised information that is needed, outside help must be provided, and swiftly. The primary focus of media assistance should be:

- Support to enable specific local private and state outlets to broadcast, so that they can provide vital news and information to victims. If no FM stations are available, the regular licensing rules should be suspended to enable stations to be established; 'suitcase' radio stations are very affordable, and are easy to set up and operate. Infrastructure needs include transmitters, antennas, mobile radio studios (these are usually not immediately available in-country and need to be imported; all taxes and duties should be waived) and generators.
- Support for production teams and journalists working for and with media outlets in the disaster zone. Production needs include mobile production equipment such as minidisk recorders, portable computers, satellite phones, transport

and technical support.

- Support for the broader journalistic and media community to cover the disaster and relief efforts with speed and accuracy. Needs include: access to information sources such as humanitarian relief organisations, the government and the military; access to technical assistance in the form of satellite telephones, field production equipment and transport; and assistance to coordinate, share and update information.
- Distribution of radio sets (preferably one to each family, and preferably solar-powered or crank radios that require no batteries). In Pakistan, Internews imported 10,000 radio sets for distribution among earthquake-affected people, but they remained stuck in customs for several weeks, despite permission from the government to import them.

The period between a disaster and the arrival of relief is the most crucial time, when lives are saved. Accurate humanitarian information flows to and from affected populations in local languages is critical for survival and faster recovery. The swift deployment of resources in the aftermath of a humanitarian disaster for local media development will improve information within affected populations, the relief community and international media, and must be a priority. This will contribute enormously to more effective and accountable local and international humanitarian responses.

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