

Media as a Form of Aid in Humanitarian Crises

BY JEFFREY GHANNAM

As the humanitarian crises following the Arab spring enter their sixth year, the media coverage of war, displacement, and migration in the Middle East and North Africa tragically have become all too familiar. For mainstream media, the millions of people whose lives have been upended are mostly data points, illustrations of the misery and upheaval that have swept across Syria, Yemen, Gaza, Iraq, and many places between.



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Yet for those who are caught in the crises, and plagued not only by insecurity and uncertainty but a lack of information, relatively little is available to help them make informed decisions for their own survival. It's a need that is increasingly being recognized and served through humanitarian communications initiatives.

The scope of the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East is staggering. The UNHCR in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt has registered 2.1 million refugees from Syria; Turkey registered 2.7 million of the nearly 5 million Syria refugees as of April 2016, according to the [UNHCR and government of Turkey](#).

Humanitarian communications initiatives in the Middle East region are among scores of similar efforts aimed at helping populations caught in war, conflict, medical emergencies, or natural disasters globally. These initiatives are recognized as an urgent humanitarian priority along with the needs for food, shelter, and medical relief. And as channels and tools to exchange instantaneous information multiply, affected communities are increasingly developing their own information ecosystems to provide reliable news and information amid war, conflict, or natural disasters.

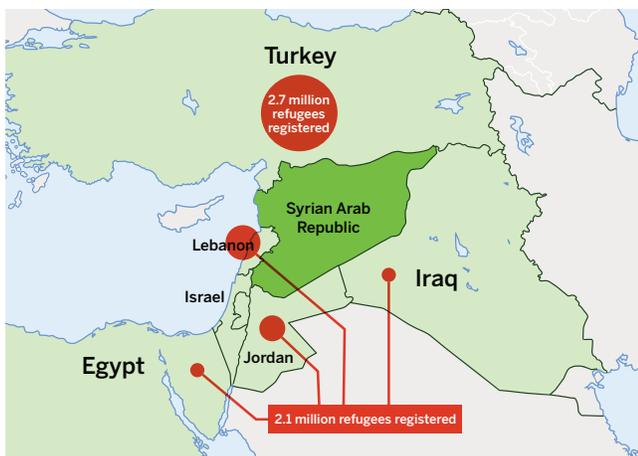
Humanitarian crises around the world have led to a major change in the priorities and approaches in media development efforts. Traditional efforts aimed at building sustainable media systems and institutions have had to give way to the more pressing needs of the ever-shifting crises. While this can mean using well-known tools such as radio and social media, it has also forced practitioners to come up with innovative ways to connect to affected communities. Creating humanitarian information systems requires a focus on the interplay of technology, word-of-mouth, and offline information using platforms such as Facebook, the mobile real time message application WhatsApp, or even printed banners with directions for migrants crossing into Europe.

Several media development implementers have taken on the needs of the evolving humanitarian information ecosystem including Internews, the European Journalism Centre (EJC), and several other members of the [Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network](#) (CDAC) such as First Response Radio. Many implementers belong to the CDAC, as do the International Committee of the Red Cross, WHO, and UN agencies

ABOUT CIMA



The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world.



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including UNHCR, UNOCHA, UNFPA, and UNESCO, which have their own media channels for humanitarian communications outreach.

The Rise of Communication as Aid

“It’s only within the last few years that it was realized that communication is a form of aid,” says Jacqueline Dalton, a BBC Media Action senior producer, who works with national broadcasters, recently in Indonesia, on simulation exercises for emergency crisis communications. She said the Ebola crisis helped elevate humanitarian communications to a development priority. When trusted religious figures began to communicate positive solutions in messages, behaviors such as allowing dry washing of deceased victims and making it okay not to place hands on the body, while reassuring survivors that it was religiously acceptable, it helped lead to better health outcomes in communities.

People turn to the sources they trust, whether religious figures or local news providers, says Dalton. As a trainer in humanitarian programming, she must seek out local partner media outlets that are not allied politically, which can be a challenge in humanitarian crisis environments. For affected communities and individuals whose lives hang in the balance, it’s the hyper-local news and information they need to make it through another day.

“Communications for people in crisis are focused on helping them survive, cope and recover,” says Dalton. “We need to think of their state of mind and what we can do to help that.”

Global Headlines but Little Attention

In the digital age, global audiences witness the tragic and harrowing experiences of refugees forced from their homelands as they resettle in camps, of those who make a treacherous crossing in crowded rafts to the rocky shores of Greece, or migrate on foot across Europe. Collectively, humanitarian relief agencies have documented the crises in a wide variety of online videos and journalistic narratives along with social media updates. The campaigns are noteworthy in their documentation and amplification of urgent needs confronting affected communities and directed to donor audiences.

Add to the mix of multichannel communications the Arab Gulf region transnational satellite networks, among other news providers, that devote significant resources to covering the crises 24/7, and what emerges often seems like a looping news cycle of human suffering.

But for all the attention to the scale of the tragedy, the kinds of information needed by the victims is often lost. To listen to Nabil Al Khatib, executive editor of Saudi-owned Al Arabiya, based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, the human stories in the conflicts are buried under the daily tallies of those killed. “This is a lost story,” he says.

“You will find that most reporters are reporting in a general way. It leads to boring reporting and it leads to people being detached from news,” Al Khatib says. “This is one of the biggest challenges, and it can only be resolved by training. I started my TV reporting career covering Palestine, Israel, and Jordan and my biggest issue was how to continue reporting from a humanitarian point of view and focus on individuals. Individual stories are always unique and people would like to hear them.”

He says reporters covering the migrant crisis for the network in Europe were senior correspondents based in the region. While not all were trained in covering crises from a humanitarian point of view, the network devoted significant resources for special reports from Europe, tracking the migrant crisis with live reports, which Al Khatib points to with great pride as a journalistic, logistic, and operational success. Still, he says, training and raising awareness among the rank and file are needed to produce stories about the wars’ impact on humanity.

“If you try to check how many humanitarian stories there are about Syrians stuck in Syria, you will see very few reports,” Al Khatib says. “The [civilians] are not being covered, the fighters are being covered. This is what the news agencies are looking for, they buy this footage from fixers who just learned how to use a video camera. A rocket was shot from here, a child got killed from here,

they would show the bodies ... but we never see the families of those killed. It has mainly to do with experience, but it also has to do with security.”

In the years leading up to and just after the Arab spring, social and digital media enabled an unprecedented expansion of freedom of expression in the Arab region. The satellite networks also were central to the expanded freedoms, amplifying digital media content to far corners of the region and the world where the Internet may not have been available but satellite dishes proliferated. Freedom of the press has declined after briefly improving in 2011 following the start of the Arab spring, according to Freedom House’s annual Freedom of the Press Index for the Middle East and North Africa region. Journalists, activists, bloggers and many others continue to confront severe personal and physical harm across the region; hundreds of citizens are believed to have disappeared in Egypt alone in recent years. Commemorations in early 2016 of the fifth anniversary of the start of the uprisings and revolutions pointed to security crackdowns as effectively putting free expression in a deep freeze. The region’s once vibrant cyberspace of rapid-fire hashtags and zingers that protested or expressed the political currents of the day have, by comparison, turned to a slow trickle—perhaps from fatigue and fear of severe repercussions meted out for even the most benign posts.

Humanitarian coverage is no exception. Adding to security strictures are the moral considerations for the safety of journalists when they are deployed to war zones. Reporting from regional war environments often requires agreements with ruling sides in the conflicts, Al Khatib says, and even then, regimes, opposition, and extremists aren’t always cooperative.

“We are a major station, and we don’t have a reporter in Yemen,” Al Khatib says. When he did send in reporters, he says, they confronted security threats and were pulled, leading the network to rely on fixers. In Iraq, the network has eight correspondents on salary but they cannot appear on camera for security reasons. “We lost 18 colleagues in Iraq during the first 10 years of the war and that created a complex in the management mindset and my mindset. When I send someone to cover the story, I recall those tragedies.”

Even as the Arab transnational satellite networks reach vast audiences globally, the interplay between the networks and humanitarian responders can be fraught, in no small part because of security, network ownership, and divergent agendas. The affiliations of satellite networks, many owned by governments or political movements at war or taking sides in the regional conflicts, can come across in real or perceived points of view in news programming. Gulf national

print media however, regularly feature the humanitarian aid provided by their respective governments. Regional media can also veer toward casting the refugee crisis as a burden, with plenty of blame heaped on it for every problem—electricity shortages, the rubbish crisis in Lebanon, or increased water consumption in Jordan.

Meanwhile, news providers view collaborating with humanitarian work as losing their critical role as impartial observers. Non-governmental organizations and multilateral institutions are perceived as having their own agendas, be it humanitarian, fundraising, or furthering donors’ objectives, while they, as journalists, strive for neutrality in the conflicts.

“In the Arab world, the media is manipulated by the power of money and the power of politics,” says Montaser Marai, head of the Al Jazeera Media Training and Development Center in Doha, Qatar. “Most of the satellite networks are owned by regimes and businessmen, they have their own agendas, and the human being is not the priority.”

Marai acknowledges that refugees and migrants are often unable to tune in to Al Jazeera for lack of electricity, let alone televisions and satellite dishes. But he points to the network’s coverage, which he says looks at the human dimension, and special packages such as Al Jazeera’s interactive documentary *Life on Hold*. The documentary highlights the struggles of 10 Syrian refugees, with a focus on young people, and their lives in Lebanon’s camps. It also allows viewers to send the story subjects viewable online messages.

“If there’s no news about those people then no one will care,” Marai said in an interview from Doha. “We try to make the story more human, we have so many reports, about their dreams, tracking their lives in their new communities.”



Al Jazeera’s interactive documentary *Life on Hold*.



© BBC Media Action

Scenes from BBC Media Action's video series "Syria Lifeline" and "Assem & Gassem–The Series."

Reaching Those in Affected Communities

Humanitarian communications initiatives using high-, low-, or no-tech multimedia approaches, are providing hyper-local and urgent news and information to refugee and migrant communities who widely use mobile devices. The outreach efforts are striving to meet evolving needs as communities settle into new patterns of life.

These initiatives seek to address some of the most essential challenges refugees and others confront, such as how they get to where they need to go. Once they have arrived, how do they provide for themselves or their families, and obtain food, shelter, and medical care? How do they register as refugees, enroll children in schools, and possibly find work? These are just some of the issues many affected populations confront. By engaging online or via radio within their own communities, they are able to get some answers without fear of drawing undue attention to themselves from authorities.

Maaly Hazzaz, a UNESCO media development project officer, worked on community radio initiatives in northern Jordan for young people, refugees, and the host communities to help build greater dialogue and understanding about their concerns. Even after the programs ended when funding ran out, the dialogue continued for a while on Facebook, along with requests to bring the programs back on the air. Hazzaz, who is from Jordan and worked as a radio, TV, and print journalist before joining UNESCO, explains that radio allows affected communities to hear their concerns voiced in safe and anonymous ways while providing psychosocial support and guidance, including dispelling abundant misinformation and rumors. "We would have Q and A's from listeners, and we would announce it beforehand, and some would send questions on the Facebook page or SMS," says Hazzaz. "They also provide psychosocial support experts, whether it is children in trauma or related to family issues or early marriages. People would feel more secure on the radio rather than on TV or appearing at a center."

This is news and information often produced and delivered by engaging affected communities to provide input about the information they seek. It serves as a bridge between humanitarian relief providers and available services while providing greater audience engagement than in the past with the help of digital media. It's more micro than the macro news and information of traditional media, using platforms including community radio, public service clips, online videos, and bits or streams of information crowd-sourced on Facebook or WhatsApp groups.

In Lebanon, BBC Media Action recognized it could reach large numbers of refugees with important messages at UNHCR registration centers, says Maha Taki, a BBC Media Action project director for Syria and the Middle East. It enlisted a Syrian creative team to develop a series of video messages with Syrian actors providing information in a sensitive manner to traumatized audiences in Lebanon and Jordan about access to essential services. The series aired on big screens during the long wait times at UNHCR registration centers in Lebanon and Jordan.

Now that refugees are mostly registered, BBC Media Action's efforts are turning to developing eight media hubs, known as *Dawaween*, and three mobile media centers that will travel to camps to provide access to WiFi, charging stations for mobile devices, and tablets with applications that provide information such as phone numbers for schools, hospitals, legal support, and a variety of other essential services and information.

In Lebanon, the numbers of refugees give rise to concerns and tensions over the country's sectarian balance and services provided to refugees in camps in under-served areas of Lebanon that do not receive the same assistance. The refugees' feedback helped shape the content of [Syria Lifeline videos](#), available in BBC Media Action's video library, which provide guidance on subjects including pregnancy, birth registrations, water purification, residency, and legal rights, told through public service announcements, animations, and mini-dramas.

Also of concern to refugees were social cohesion issues that were brought to life through two characters by the same name, though pronounced differently depending on the Syrian or Lebanese Arabic accents. In the videos, characters Assem and Gassem send a message of cooperation and neighborliness. In [the second episode](#), the Syrian character Gassem learns from Assem that he could call an information line to learn about residency requirements; the video's takeaway was both the availability of the information by telephone and that it can be acquired anonymously.

In 2014, Internews published [Reporting on Humanitarian Crises](#) to serve as an education tool to prepare journalists to cover disasters in an informed and balanced manner and show how a utilitarian approach to information can help save lives. Mark Frohardt, executive director of the Internews Center for Innovation and Learning, says donors tend to retreat to a response-driven approach. Broadcasting to affected communities with information about the humanitarian services is a one-way communication that's outmoded. "We have moved from the broadcast model to the information ecosystem model," Frohardt says. "It should be to ensure those who are in need are part of the response."

Emergency preparedness collaborations also develop plans for national broadcasters along with journalist training. In Asia, BBC Media Action has worked in Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Indonesia to help government and broadcast partners in the development of contingency plans for natural disasters. Lifeline programming also has trained journalists and humanitarian responders in anticipation of natural disasters—such as hurricanes or earthquakes—in environments where they are prone to occur.

"We've trained journalists and humanitarian responders beforehand, to handpick what is useful to communities in crisis," such as its work with government and broadcast partners in Nepal, who were prepared well in advance for the 2015 quake, Dalton says. "It was quite surreal, it was like being in the simulation again; everything comes into play. You remember what to say. Preparedness training made all the difference."

The programs, made possible by the UK Department for International Development, were unique, Dalton says, because funding for preparedness isn't always high on the list of competing donor priorities.

Today, a blend of technologies is being used from Gaza to the refugee and migrant crises elsewhere in the region, says Julia Pitner, Internews' Middle East and North Africa regional director. "They're using WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, to get and share



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On 4 May 2015, BBC Media Action launched Milijuli Nepali (Together Nepal), a special radio program for the people affected by the earthquake in Nepal. Here, BBC Media Action interviews some of the earthquake-affected families living together under a shelter.

information. It's also morphing along the way in terms of what's happening in those digital spaces, and so they shift from one platform to another. There are incredible amounts of information: how to emigrate, how to get forged documents. Those who want to emigrate know how to move forward, and they communicate with their families on how they are managing. You have a lot of information and a lot of noise. The key is verified information."

Rising above the noise and endless streams of user-generated content requires close scrutiny to ensure the information is accurate and actionable. In the humanitarian and emergency contexts, misinformation and hoaxes by so-called immigration brokers and many others out to exploit refugees and migrants are rampant.

"There is no single platform for true and accurate information," says Rina Tsubaki, project manager of the EJC's [Emergency Journalism](#) initiative in Maastricht, the Netherlands. She points out some the basic steps anyone can take to authenticate videos and photos by dragging and dropping the image into a search engine, such as Google.

Verification of user-generated news, video and photos is an area of robust collaboration led by the EJC and mass media houses in Europe, with Arab journalists, and Al Jazeera's Media Training and Development Center.

Tsubaki says journalism practitioners are the first line of defense against misinformation circulating online. "Those are the skills that we're trying to train journalists in around the world. It's not limited to social networks, but that's where the fake information circulates. It's a challenge of media houses today, for lack of resources," Tsubaki says, echoing Al Khatib of Al Arabiya and pointing to the dearth of seasoned network correspondents in many news hot spots.

She recently led journalism training missions to Jordan's Za'atari refugee camp for European and Arab journalists to introduce practitioners to the realities on the ground along with data-driven journalism, including geo-location and source identification of online content. The capacity building seeks to help journalists report on the crisis with immediacy even when reporting remotely by using social networks.

The EJC is working on the second edition of its [Verification Handbook](#), available online and in several languages including Arabic. Tsubaki worked with Marai of Al Jazeera to have the book translated for use in journalist training programs. Marai says the network is among the few in the Arab region with a social media hub inside the newsroom verifying online information. He also envisions training courses in humanitarian reporting and is developing a book on truth in wartime coverage in the region based on experiences of veteran Arab journalists.

Humanitarian communications strategies may also serve as a guide for mainstream media outlets during a nation's transition toward stabilization, such as in Syria. Professional journalists, citizen journalists, and media outlets in Syria have worked against great odds to deliver reliable and accurate news and information to help Syrians during the crisis. The country ranks as the most dangerous in the world for journalists, according to a 2015 White Paper published by the Global Forum for Media Development. The report drew from the insights of Syrian media professionals and journalists and a wide range of international media development practitioners in its recommendations. The report, *A Call for Effective Support to Syrian Independent Media*, recommends donor support

that is flexible and long term to enable access to reliable and accurate news and information—crucial components to enabling a media ecosystem that is equipped to monitor political developments and to inform and to engage citizens' voices in finding solutions to local, regional, and national problems.

In the age of instantaneous sharing, reliable information can be a lifeline while misinformation can be an existential threat. Better informed decisions are enabled when the information system and its infrastructure are fully engaged to help affected populations gain greater access and control over information that affects their lives. And when the day comes that these crises end, media developers will once again need to turn their attention to the difficult work of supporting independent media systems in this region.

Yet with no end in sight to the humanitarian crises in the region, media development efforts will need to continue to adapt to be responsive to the needs of displaced populations and build on readily accessible media platforms that can engage affected communities. Evolving needs require a shift to more nimble and citizen-oriented methodologies and capacity building for preparedness in environments where natural and humanitarian disasters can be anticipated. Evidenced by the initiatives underway around the world, donors have recognized the urgency of supporting humanitarian communications and journalistic efforts to deliver reliable and actionable news and information. But more support is required, including training of mainstream journalists in humanitarian coverage, as news executives acknowledge, to meet the demands as crises evolve, lives hang in the balance, and channels for fast-paced information sharing continue to multiply.



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[Arab World One Year After the Revolutions](#). A veteran journalist, he was on staff at the *Detroit Free Press*, the *New York Times*, *American Bar Association Journal*, *UPI*, and has contributed to a variety of other media including the *Washington Post*, *The Economist* online debates, the *Boston Globe*, and *Time* magazine. He also instructed on law and journalism and war reporting as the Howard R. Marsh visiting professor of journalism at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He can be found on Twitter [@Jeffghannam](#).

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