



Disasters compared across media

Media coverage on humanitarian catastrophes influence willingness to help

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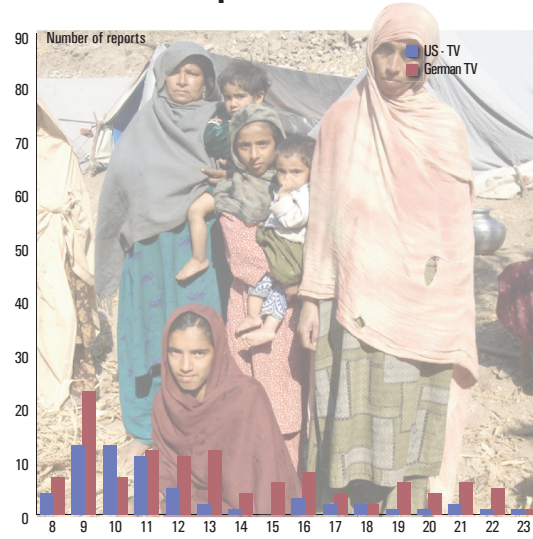
On Christmas 2004, a Tsunami devastated parts of Southeast Asia and brought a surge of news coverage in its wake. A torrent of donations greeted the survivors in the aftermath. Compared to this, other victims of disaster had to make do with dwindling support, both in terms of absolute numbers and per capita-donations. Among others, this affected the victims of the most recent earthquake in Pakistan.

summer of 2002. The Tsunami hit the highest point of 83 news reports on December 30th, while the Elbe River floods maxed out on August 16th with “just” 80 reports.

The 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, which the media covered primarily between October 8th and 23rd, was far behind in intensity of coverage. It peaked on October 9th with 23 reports in German television news. The media primarily focused on the hurricanes “Katrina” and “Rita” – which devastated New Orleans among other places – between August 28th and September 2nd, as well as between September 21st and 26th. “Katrina” coverage was most intense

Standard progression of a disaster: To start out with an earthquake...

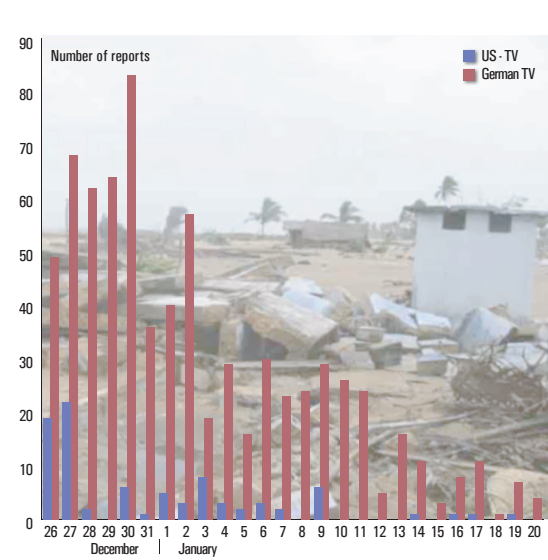
1 ... the earthquake in Pakistan



Source: Media Tenor
10/08/2005 – 10/23/2005

Basis: 62/118 reports in 3/7 US-/
German TV news shows

2 ...the Tsunami in Southeast Asia



Source: Media Tenor
26/12/2004 – 20/01/2005

Basis: 87/752 reports in 3/7
US- / German TV news shows

The drama of natural disasters and their sensational value differ. The nature of the catastrophe, the level of distress as well as coincidental circumstances shape its progression and influence people's readiness to donate.

Rising and abating

The earthquake in Pakistan hit the people more strongly than the Tsunami did in Southeast Asia. But the money donated for the earthquake victims was only a little more than one hundredth of that provided by the US or Germany for the Tsunami relief efforts. This discrepancy in the readiness to donate can also be explained by the different behavior of the media: Coverage of the earthquake in Pakistan was only a fraction of that on the Tsunami. German TV news reported ten times more on the deluge and British TV news five times more. US print and television media covered the Tsunami four times more often.

Media Tenor data show that the German TV news coverage on the Tsunami peaked at even higher levels than that on the Central European floods in the

in the US television news programs of ABC, CBS and NBC with 31 news stories on August 30th. In German TV news it reached 31 news stories. It only peaked a few days later, however, on September 2nd with 34 news stories, when the US news coverage had already dropped to 13 stories.

The courses of natural disasters differ from one another: Earthquakes are usually followed by aftershocks, but only occur intermittently. Hurricanes and storm surges normally travel overland for a while, leaving the often invoked “trail of destruction” behind. A look at media coverage shows a different image. All told, the media attention span is limited to about one week after the first sensation, no matter if there is a short quake or a long-raging flood. After



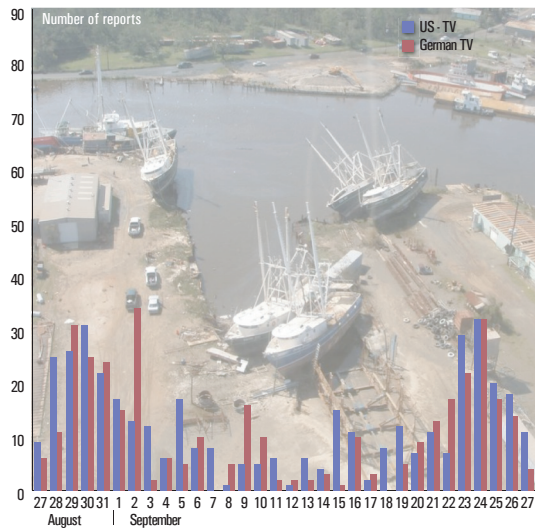
the initial sensation, the second day marks the climax of media commotion: Camera teams have had the time to fly in and put their cameras into position. In subsequent days, the interest abates step by step. Images repeat themselves and no longer raise the same attention. Coverage on the earthquake in Pakistan or US reporting on the Central European floods in 2002 correspond to this typical pattern. Unusual disasters are more likely to follow the rule that Samuel Goldwyn once gave to a script writer: "We want a story that starts out with an earthquake and works its way up to a climax." Such mega-disasters often have a double or even triple peak in their coverage. The German coverage on the Tsunami surpassed the

percussions on the political and societal debate, and in turn the debate itself becomes a focus of coverage. Political measures (freeing of the oil reserves, criticism of the crisis management), calls for solidarity by celebrities or the amount of donations and resulting relief efforts.

Attention span

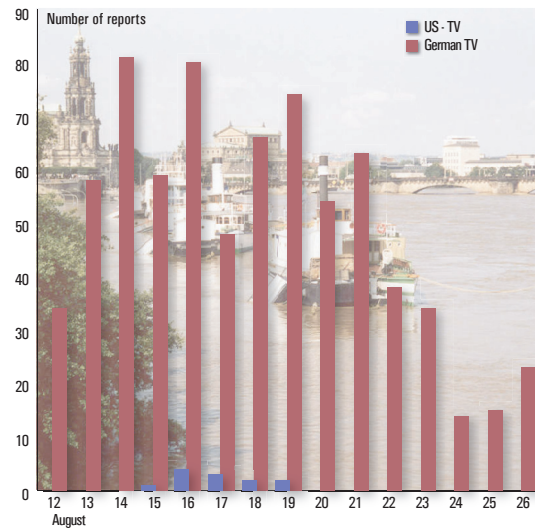
The span of the greatest attention is therefore about one week, starting with the day before the first peak. This period of seven days is a good basis for comparing the intensity of disaster coverage in the German and US television news analyzed. Using the number of stories per day and news program as a

**③ ...and work its way up to a climax
"Katrina" and "Rita" in America**



Source: Media Tenor 08/27/2005 – 09/27/2005 Basis: 405/356 reports in 3/7 US-/ German TV news shows

**④ Permanent agitation on a high level
– the Elbe River floods in Germany**



Source: Media Tenor 08/12/2002 – 08/26/2002 Basis: 12/741 reports in 3/7 US-/ German TV news shows

peak of the second day on the fifth. The German coverage on the Elbe River floods shocked viewers on the second days with 58 news stories. On the third and fifth day, the news stations worked their way up to the climax with almost 80 stories respectively. In the US, coverage on "Katrina" reached this double climax on the third and fourth day. Its intensity increased fast, only to abate quickly soon thereafter.

measure, the German TV news, on average, appear more excitable than the American. In the case of the Elbe River floods it reached a record 8.7 news stories per day and program, and 8.2 for the Tsunami coverage. The **BBC**, in the news programs **BBC Six O'Clock** and **BBC Ten O'Clock**, covered the tidal wave with 8.4 stories each. The coverage of the US news stations **NBC**, **CBS** and **ABC** on the hurricane "Katrina", with an average 6.8 stories per day and channel, also attained a high but slightly less frenzied level.

Meanwhile, the German coverage on "Katrina" reacted with a strange delay. The first of the double peak only came on the third day, and the highest point of news coverage was reached on the seventh day. The reason for this was second grade reporting: Mega-disasters, which pass a certain attention threshold of around 30 news stories per day, have re-

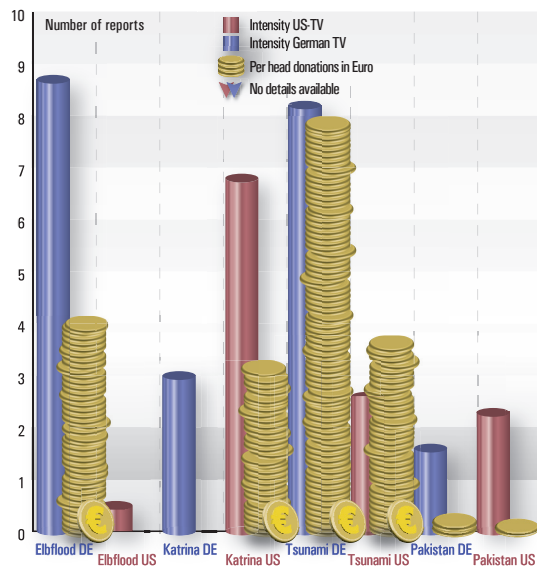
The Elbe River floods and "Katrina" are in the same league, both with regard to media attention, and media-enhanced willingness to donate: For the Elbe River floods, the per capita donation was

€ 4.22 in Germany. It is likely to be surpassed by “Katrina”, since the donations to the American Red Cross alone amount to \$ 3.75 per capita, going by the total of \$ 1.1 billion collected.

The German media showed a relatively strong interest in “Katrina”, with an average of 3 news stories per day and program. On the other side, American TV news were relatively uninterested in the Elbe River floods. But with 1.3 stories per day and program, it did reach a tangible attention on the other side of the Atlantic.

The Tsunami, which created so much sensation

5 News stories per capita and program vs. per capita donations



Number of reports per day/broadcst, per capita donations in Euro
 Source: Media Tenor, Rotes Kreuz, UNO, nationmaster.com, Focus, BBC, Spiegel Online
 Basis: 1.325 reports in 3/7 US/German TV news shows

in Germany and the UK (8.2 in German news, 8.4 in **BBC news**), seemed to leave the American news editors comparatively unfazed: Only 2.5 news stories per day and program dealt with the inundation in Southeast Asia. Yet it still seemed to be twice as interesting to US editors than the Elbe River floods with 1.3 stories. The varying intensity in media coverage presumably also influenced the willingness to donate. US citizens donated approximately \$ 4.44 per capita for the Tsunami victims, British about € 6.50 and German even € 8.07.

The situation looks very different in the case of the earthquake in Pakistan. US television news reported on it with 2.3 stories per day and program,

that is to a similar extent as on the Tsunami. Yet the Tsunami generated 26 times more donation money: The victims of the earthquake in Pakistan received only 5 US cents per capita from the American population. It seems that intensity of coverage is not the only factor that influences fundraising for disasters: The Tsunami was carried on a surge of Christmas sentimentality. A tidal wave caused by a seaquake may have appeared much more curious and melodramatic to most people. Finally, it was easier to gather footage in Southeast Asia than in the remote mountains of Kashmir.

In German television news, with 1.6 stories, coverage on the earthquake was significantly weaker than in the US. With 10 US cents per capita, German donations for the relief efforts reached only a somewhat higher level than in the US.

Different circumstances and levels of media coverage result in a situation where donations only trickle to where they would relieve most of the suffering. The millions, particularly children, who die from starvation every year, or the disastrous consequences of Aids in some parts of the world are too commonplace to raise the media interest more than just sporadically or to satisfy our need for topical news and diversion. Such structural problems are therefore the domain of responsible policy-making: Unfortunately, the state is our insurance against the capriciousness of our hearts and media.

Open questions:
 Is it possible to direct media attention in such a way that the effects of disaster coverage on, for example, the people's willingness to donate is more akin to the rationally desirable than the emotionally desired?

Baser:
 Media: Tagesschau, Tagesthemen, heute, heute Journal, RTL aktuell, SAT.1 18:30, ProSieben Nachrichten
 ABC, CBS, NBC
Time and Number of reports:
 Elbeflut: 08/12 – 08/26/2002: 741/7 reports (german/american TV-news shows)
 Tsunami: 12/26/2004 – 01/26/2005: 752/87 reports
 Katrina/Rita: 08/27 – 09/27/2005: 356/405 reports
 Pakistan: 10/08 – 10/23/2005: 118/62 reports

Coverage on the Tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan was of a comparable intensity. But the willingness to donate differed quite strongly. Not only the dramatic value decides, but also circumstances such as the Christmassy mood during the Tsunami.