



Lifeline – working with broadcasters in humanitarian crises

Tips for aid workers on working with media to save lives



BBC
MEDIA ACTION

TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH MEDIA
AROUND THE WORLD

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Local Lifeline producer
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a Red Cross worker about
practical ways people can
cope after the 2010 Haiti
earthquake.

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Introduction

This guide aims to help humanitarian responders work with broadcasters to help save lives and reduce suffering as part of an emergency response.

Local and national broadcasters can play a critical role in helping populations in humanitarian emergencies. They can:

- Reach thousands, if not millions, of people very quickly
- Reach areas that are remote or difficult to access and where literacy rates are low
- Provide life-saving information to help people help themselves
- Restore calm
- Inspire hope and give people the space to express themselves, sharing their solutions to the new problems they face, asking questions
- Help hold relief providers to account

Immediately after a crisis, often before physical aid can get there, broadcast media can provide life-saving information. To do this, broadcasters need accurate information from aid agencies on risks and on what communities can do to help themselves. As the situation evolves, broadcasters can play a key role in providing two-way communication with the affected

**“Lifeline programming”
– broadcasting to help
people in humanitarian
crises survive, stay safe
and recover.**

communities; for example, through call-in shows, interviews, mobile or via online platforms.

By working with broadcast media, aid agencies can reach more people more quickly and localise their response based on direct feedback.

BBC Media Action has more than 15 years' experience of working closely with local and national broadcasters during times of crisis to produce "Lifeline programming" – dedicated broadcasting to help audiences survive, stay safe and recover. This document contains tips and guidance from these experiences.

The guide is not about how to use media for public relations or fund-raising purposes; it focuses on working with media to share useful and actionable information with communities affected by crisis.

Humanitarians call this kind of communication different things: "community engagement", "communication with communities", "beneficiary communication" or "humanitarian communication".

They all mean the same thing: harnessing the power of communication to save lives.

The focus is on local and national media because, if you want to reach local communities you need to go through local channels, which can provide specific, localised information and are in close proximity to their audiences.

For more on how broadcasting can help in emergencies, see BBC Media Action's research report: *Humanitarian broadcasting in emergencies*:

A synthesis of evaluation findings, by Theodora Hannides

<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/research/humanitarian-broadcasting-in-emergencies-2015-report.pdf>

Lifeline broadcasting – what will help audiences during crises?

When people directly affected by a crisis turn to the media, much of what they tend to see and hear will be of limited practical use to them. Information such as statistics on the death toll, how much money is needed for the response or individuals' stories of suffering is not the kind of information they can use to stay alive.

Affected people need information that is for them, not about them. This includes practical information that they can immediately act upon to make their situation better, and media programming that helps them feel reassured, inspired and connected to others.

Journalists have a tendency to focus on problems, not on solutions. But you can help change this. Let's look at what is useful for audiences affected by crises.

- Information that helps people understand what is happening around them.
Examples: “There has been an earthquake, and there may be strong aftershocks in the coming hours and days”; “There are two confirmed cases of Ebola in the village.”
- Information on further risks and safety measures.
Examples: “Stay out of damaged buildings as they may collapse during aftershocks”; “Floodwaters are expected to rise further in the coming hours, so people living within 1 kilometre of the river banks should head to higher ground.”
- Self-help advice – simple practical measures people can take to stay safe and healthy.
Examples: how to make your water safe to drink; how to recognise and deal with signs of trauma in your children; simple good hygiene practices to help prevent the spread of disease; how to stay safe from landmines or unexploded ordnance.

For more guidance on Lifeline programme content, see: <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/lifeline-production-manual.pdf>

You can also find topic-by-topic guides to communicating on humanitarian issues in emergencies here:

<https://www.bbcmiaactionilearn.com/lifelinetopicguides>

- Information on relief services and how to use them.

Examples: which agencies are providing what services to whom; where and how to access them.

- Information on where to get further information.

Examples: details of hotline numbers, websites, volunteers on the ground.

- Expectation management regarding what help is or is not available.

Examples: why aid has not arrived yet and what people can do in the meantime; what relief providers can do and what they can't do to help, etc.

- Logistical and infrastructure information.

Examples: which roads are open; which mobile networks are functioning; whether public transport is operating as normal.

- Correction of rumours.

Rumours and false information (for example, “Eating onions will cure Ebola”) can cost lives. They need to be countered with the correct information.

- Reassurance.

If people are traumatised and fearful, they are less likely to be able to take control of their situation. Reassurance will not only help them feel better, but also better enable them to take action.

- Giving people voice.

Often people have the best solutions to everyday problems; they also need the chance to ask questions, share their needs and hold relief providers to account.

In a moment, we will look at how you can work with broadcasters to do these things, but one of your first steps should be to get to know the media environment.

Research into interventions for mass trauma identified five principles for how best to help individuals and communities cope and recover after disasters. Communication can help to achieve this by promoting the same principles:

- a sense of safety
- calming
- a sense of self- and community efficacy
- connectedness
- hope

To find out more, see

http://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence

Understanding the media context

In order to be able to make the right decisions about which media to work with and how to work with them, you need to gain an understanding of issues such as: how people consume media; which stations people listen to at what times; which stations have the biggest audiences and where; what the most trusted channels are, and what their audience demographic is (remember that different ages, ethnicities, genders may have different consumption habits); peak listening times and so on. This is called the “media landscape”.

While it is possible to gather this kind of data during an emergency, ideally some kind of media mapping and analysis of the media landscape should be done before a crisis hits, as part of emergency preparedness. Such research could also explore access to and use of other communication forms, such as, mobiles, social media, face-to-face, etc., in order to inform your wider communication with communities strategy.

However, when a crisis hits, the communications landscape can change significantly, so you will need to reassess the situation. For example, there might be power outages that limit people’s access to television, radio and the internet, or broadcast transmitters may have been damaged.

Examples of detailed media and communications landscape reports

Communication in Sierra Leone: An analysis of media and mobile audiences (BBC Media Action)
<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhhttp/mediaaction/pdf/research/mobile-media-landscape-sierra-leone-report.pdf>

Infoasaid Media Landscape Guides
<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/media-landscape-guides/>

We’re Still Listening: A Survey of the Media Landscape in the Accessible Areas of South Sudan in 2015 (Internews)
http://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/Internews_SouthSudan_StillListening_2015.pdf

As an aid provider, you may have certain information that you want to share with affected communities, but you also need to ask them what information they *want* – **do not assume you know**. Their information priorities may be very different from yours, so you need to find out what they are and address them where possible. Needs will vary between different demographic groups and in different geographic areas. As with all humanitarian needs these information needs will change over time so they will need to be reassessed regularly. This can be done as part of your organisations monitoring/assessment visits, via journalists visiting the area, or through dedicated assessments.

You can find a comprehensive guide on how to do needs assessments here:

Assessing Information and Communication Needs: A Quick and Easy Guide for Those Working in Humanitarian Response

<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/tools-and-resources/i/20140721173332-ihw5g>

There are many different ways of working with broadcasters, from establishing formal partnerships to achieve humanitarian goals, to simply having them on your contacts list for sharing Lifeline information. In the next sections we will explore both of these.

Priority communication questions

If you have only space to include a couple of communication-related questions on needs assessment surveys, use these:

- What are the main sources of information for your community?
- What is the most important information for your community?

Formal partnerships with broadcasters

A formal partnership would normally imply that you and a broadcaster are working together on a specific output to achieve mutually agreed goals. This arrangement brings the opportunity to do in-depth projects with high impact. It might entail, for example, creating a weekly or daily magazine show that explores solutions to some of the most pressing humanitarian issues. Some agencies work with broadcasters to create short public service announcements, or “spots”. In longer-term crises they might produce a drama in order to address some of the more complex and sensitive issues, such as trauma or gender-based violence.

Choosing a partner

Once you have information on the media landscape, you can start making decisions about which media agencies you want to engage. You could be working with community, commercial or state-funded media at local, regional or national levels. Whatever the case, you want to prioritise those media organisations that are best placed to meet the needs of their audiences and trusted by communities.

See BBC Media Action’s Lifeline Production manual

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/lifeline-production-manual.pdf>

for more guidance on different format options for Lifeline broadcasting.

Different kinds of broadcasters

Community stations

Usually small in terms of geographical reach, serving a specific local audience, and owned by the communities they serve.

Advantages:

- Enthusiastic amateur staff who are open and motivated to progress
- A way to reach audiences who don't speak the country's official language
- Community-focused content is supported, valued and trusted by the audience
- Strong sense of ownership among staff
- Can engage with hard-to-reach communities, including “media-dark” communities which don't have access to any other media

Challenges:

- Financially precarious, they can see partnership in terms of financial benefit
- Money is often given to them as loans and sponsorship, which means that the station is often in debt
- Unpaid, volunteer staff have to prioritise paid work and family obligations over work at the station, so staff turnover can be high
- Community leaders can try to influence editorial decisions
- Producers and managers can lack essential skills

State

Publicly owned, usually non-profit and supported by government funds.

Advantages:

- Good audience reach
- Often monopolises market, so they offer the opportunity to reach a large audience
- State funds make it economically viable and sustainable (although they are often under-resourced)
- Production standards can be good, with skilled staff
- Often dependable as a partner

Challenges:

- Can sometimes be poorly resourced
- May be hierarchical and un-meritocratic, with stale management and output, and hence low morale and motivation among staff
- Negative perception among audience
- Editorial independence can be difficult to achieve as they may be influenced or censored by the ruling party
- Little interest in listening figures, with no incentive to change

(Box continues over page)

Commercial

For profit, usually privately owned and reliant on advertising to survive.

Advantages:

- May have full-time, paid, professional radio journalists on their staff
- Often a viable business with an established advertising income stream
- Won't usually have any conflicting policies or development objectives
- May have experience partnering with other NGOs and charities
- Good reach among certain audiences such as young people and a strong social media following

Challenges:

- If the business fails then the station fails
- Often owned by private individuals who may not be interested in the development and well-being of their staff
- May compromise editorial integrity
- Focused on entertainment and commercials, they are unused to covering political debate and dialogue and not always ready to create development-based programmes
- Usually limited to urban areas

Some factors to consider when choosing your partner broadcaster(s)

- Audience reach and market profile, including regional and urban/rural balance.
- Level of trust among the population (note that a big audience does not automatically mean a station is considered trustworthy in terms of information content)
- Organisational impartiality and neutrality. If you become involved with a broadcaster that has a particular political agenda or affiliation, you might be at risk of inadvertently taking sides (or being seen as taking sides), especially in a conflict
- Ability to deliver quality output
- Organisational stability – for example, sound income and management structures
- Level of commitment to meeting public needs, as evidenced in content and audience feedback.
- Track record – have they successfully partnered with humanitarian or development organisations in the past?
- Gender balance among audiences and staff.
- The partner's ability to absorb and take ownership of the work, including full commitment from the decision-makers

Tips on making a success of partnerships

Get to know your partner. Make sure you have a good understanding of your chosen station(s) and its audience before you approach your would-be partner. Listen to the station(s) and ensure you are able to describe what you like about the existing programmes. Staff will be much more open to working with you if you can display an appreciation of their work. You also need to understand what kind of programming could fit in with the broadcaster’s existing style; for example, an hour-long expert-led discussion show might not go down well with a fast-paced, music-focused FM channel targeting young people.

Prepare the conversation. Be prepared to explain clearly what you are proposing and why – media professionals tend to be busy people with deadlines to hit. Use plain language, steering clear of humanitarian acronyms, and jargon such as “beneficiaries” (say “audiences” or “people”) or “project deliverables” (say “what we want to do/achieve”). Be clear on what the possible benefits to them might be, for example: increased listenership, respect from their peers, being seen as a humanitarian leader. You may wish to appeal to their humanitarian nature by presenting this as an opportunity to work together to help reduce suffering and to save lives.

Agreements with your partner should include:

- The goal of the project
- The project’s outputs
- The financial arrangements and any other support that is being supplied to the broadcaster (e.g. equipment, fuel for the generator, etc.)
- Who will produce the content
- Who will have sign-off on content
- How you will ensure the right humanitarian information is being included and that the content will “do no harm”
- Who has copyright
- Any donor requirements that might need to be met
- How both sides can be sure that the humanitarian goals are being met

Design projects together. Even though you will probably want to have some sort of a plan or ideas on what you could do with the broadcaster, avoid promising donors what stations will “achieve” before consulting the station. Your ideas may not be workable, or they may have even better ones! Also don’t promise stations that donors will fund something unless you know for sure – a broken promise will seriously harm your relationship.

Support them. Media organisations need resources in order to survive. Some stations, especially community radio stations, have a strong public service ethos and they will be happy to broadcast content to help audiences with humanitarian and development issues. Others may need more convincing and will only agree if you offer them lots of money for airtime. Whatever the case, it is unlikely (except with some state broadcasters) that you will be able to work with a broadcaster without supporting them in some way. Consider different ways of bringing value that might help a station survive and contribute to its long-term sustainability. You could offer, for example, new broadcasting equipment, or, if your office is getting new computers can you donate the old ones, fuel for the generator, training for staff?

Ensure senior-level commitment. Make sure that the decision-makers have full buy-in to the project and be sure to explain the humanitarian nature of the programming. Ensure budget-holders/decision-makers are committed to allocating all the necessary staffing and resources to make it a success.

Create a formal agreement. Formal partnerships should, of course, be rooted in organisational agreements between both parties. These should set out goals and parameters

for the partnership and clarify expectations on both sides. Financial, reporting and legal arrangements should also be specified.

Review progress. Carry out project and programme reviews with station staff throughout the duration of the partnership and build in ways for the station to give you feedback on how things are going.

Be flexible and humble. Don't tell station staff how to do their job; listen to their advice and concerns, and show respect for their priorities.

Examples of common roles in broadcast organisations

Station manager: Responsible for the day-to-day running of the station. Leads the management team.

Programme controller: Leads the programming side of commercial stations, ensuring content on the airwaves is in line with creative and commercial priorities of the station.

Editor: Oversees information and content that is broadcast, usually organises the editorial team and assigns them stories.

Presenter: Presents the programmes.

Reporter: Identifies and researches stories and makes them into reports for broadcast.

Producer: Works with the production team to gather and create content, is usually not heard or seen on air.

Digital/social media producer: Creates content for online and mobile platforms, and monitors activity and reactions on social media sites.

Researcher: Helps gather information to inform the production team's stories.

Studio manager: Looks after the technology side of broadcasting.

Marketing executive (commercial stations): Looks after sales of advertising space, and marketing of the station to potential clients and audiences.

Collaborating with broadcasters beyond partnerships

Other ways of getting humanitarian information on the airwaves

Creating formal partnerships with broadcasters is not the only way of getting Lifeline content out to audiences. There is also a lot you can do more generally and more broadly to help local and national media to include Lifeline information on their airwaves. Here are some suggestions:

Media releases with Lifeline content.

Often humanitarian agencies issue media/press releases with situation updates, information about their activities and appeals for funding, which usually target international media. You could also issue Lifeline releases for local media, containing useful, actionable Lifeline information in local languages which the media can pass on to affected communities.

Local media briefings with Lifeline information.

Media/press conferences and briefings are traditionally used to give general contextual information on the humanitarian situation and the work of aid providers. You can also use briefings to share Lifeline information that local media can pass on to the population. Explain to journalists that you are sharing this kind of information with them

because they can play an important role in helping their audiences through the crisis, and appeal to them to do so. Be clear on what journalists can expect from such briefings.

Resource hub. Create an online space amalgamating Lifeline information for the media. Include local-language, regularly updated Lifeline information as well as contacts of experts who are able to do local-language interviews on Lifeline topics. Make sure that you promote the hub so that journalists are aware of it, and that your local-language experts are well briefed on Lifeline information and programming.

Proactively contact broadcasters.

Call up local broadcasters to offer Lifeline information to them, reminding them that this content might really help their audiences and, in some cases, save lives.

Inject Lifeline content into interviews.

Being interviewed by local media can be a good opportunity to pass on Lifeline information to the population. Remember that, even if a journalist comes to you requesting an interview with their own particular angle on a crisis, you can still use the opportunity to bring in the key Lifeline information you want to convey (see the ABC box for tips on how to take control!).

The ABC technique

ABC is a technique used by politicians and public relations specialists around the world for taking control of media interviews. First, before you even start the interview, you should have an idea in your head about the main information you want to get across, regardless of what angle the journalist is taking. During the interview, you find ways to weave that information in, using the ABC approach:

A = Acknowledge/answer Of course, if you are asked a question and want to remain credible you need to answer it, or (if you can't answer the question) at the very least, acknowledge it.

B = Bridge This is the point where you take control of the interview and make a “bridge” – a linking phrase – to bring in the main point you really want to make. A “bridge” might sound like: “But what people really need to know is ...” or: “What I must emphasise is that ...”

C = Communicate This is where you get across your main message.

Examples of using ABC to get across Lifeline information:

Question: What is the impact from this earthquake- and do you have any updates on the death toll?

Acknowledge/answer: Latest figures suggest about 5,000 confirmed dead and we believe some 20,000 people are currently without shelter ...

Bridge: But the most critical thing for people to know right now is ...

Communicate (with Lifeline information): ... that there is a real risk of aftershocks in the coming days, so stay out of damaged buildings because they could still collapse. There are open spaces with temporary shelters that have been set up. Families can find them at XYZ location, etc.

Question: Your agency has been accused of corruption, with some staff selling food aid. How do you respond to that?

Acknowledge/answer: We are aware of those allegations, which we are taking very seriously and currently investigating, so I will be able to respond fully only once that investigation is complete ...

Bridge: ... but what I absolutely want to stress for those in need of aid is that ...

Communicate (with Lifeline information): ... all aid is free. No aid worker should be trying to sell you aid or asking for anything in return. If you see this happening, you should report it immediately to ... etc.

Four common complaints from journalists about dealing with aid workers in emergencies (and how to avoid them!)

They don't make information easily available. All over the world, journalists complain that they struggle to get information (Lifeline or otherwise) from humanitarian actors and there is no simple process for accessing it. This is why you need to have useful information prepared and well-established contact points and information resources (such as websites), which journalists can be referred to.

They are too slow. Journalists usually work fast to tight deadlines. If they request information and you can't give it to them immediately, find out what their deadline is and try to work with it. If you can't meet it, tell them.

It's in the wrong language. A lot of information issued by humanitarian agencies tends to be in English. If you want content to be picked up by local media for non-English-speaking audiences, your first step should be to put it in the right language. This will also help ensure that key information is not lost in translation. Make sure you also have trained experts able to speak the local language who can answer follow-up questions and handle interviews.

It doesn't make sense. Strip out the jargon, use clear, everyday language. Terms like "NFI", "WASH" and so on will not make sense to people who are not experts from the sector (nor to audiences). The more accessible and understandable your content is, the more likely it is to make it to the airwaves.

Do no harm

Media can do harm, as well as good in crises, where being a provider of mass information brings great power and great responsibilities. While you can't control everything that broadcasters are putting out on the airwaves, you can take steps to ensure that the information that **you** are providing, or the partnership you are in, is carefully managed to minimise the risk of harming communities. For example:

- Think through the risks of sharing certain information on a mass scale. For example, if you are providing information on the time and location of a food distribution, is there a risk the trucks may get hijacked or that more people will show up than the food distributors had planned for?
- Leave no room for misunderstandings. Pre-test content with audiences to ensure the intended message is being fully understood.
- Work with partners whom you know to be reliable and unlikely to distort humanitarian information to serve their own political – or other – interests.
- Co-ordinate with other agencies that are providing information to communities to ensure consistency.
- When setting up a partnership, if you are giving financial support to the station, try to do it in a way that will avoid distorting market rates.

Co-ordination

Co-ordination between agencies is a critical part of ensuring the effectiveness of all areas of a humanitarian response, and communication is no exception.

Co-ordination is the responsibility of all humanitarian actors.

Conflicting or confusing information can kill. Within the humanitarian coordination structures there might be a mechanism for the co-ordination of “community engagement” or “communications with communities”.

Co-ordination ensures the information and advice being shared with communities is consistent, to avoid confusing people.

Where there is no formal co-ordination of communication efforts, ensure that in the technical cluster or sector meetings your communication efforts are discussed. Make sure you reach out to other people working on communication, such as media development agencies, and informally find ways to share your activities.

10 steps for organisational preparedness

Some actions you can take to better prepare your organisation to work with broadcasters in emergencies:

1. Decide where responsibility for communicating with disaster-affected communities lies within your organisation and appoint an appropriate individual as the communicating with communities media focal point.
2. Write a provision for working with local/national media into the communicating with communities section of your organisation's disaster preparedness plans – and if you don't have such a section in your preparedness plans, create one! Communicating with communities should be seen as a key tool for your programmes to be able to achieve their goals – make sure it is not seen as an add-on but as an integral part of the way your organisation works.
3. Ensure that an adequate budget for working with media/communications with affected communities is included within each project proposal for emergency response.
4. Ensure that you have trained staff able to provide expert interviews on Lifeline topics in the local language.
5. Find out how the communities that are most vulnerable to humanitarian disaster normally receive news and information, and what channels they use to communicate with the outside world. Keep abreast of changes in the media landscape.

6. Select the communications channels and organisations that are most likely to be used in an emergency. Establish key contacts in these organisations and keep in touch with them.
7. Find out who would be responsible for co-ordinating communications efforts in an emergency. Is there an existing group of agencies working on the issue? With whom should you be co-ordinating? Will it be formally co-ordinated or is it more of a network? Will the government be producing any information and broadcasting it? If so, what will they be saying and can you support their efforts rather than setting up your own system?
8. Prepare and test key messages likely to be useful in the early stages of a breaking emergency. Adapt them for use in different channels.
9. Pre-position any communications platforms that you are likely to need for communications. Train people to operate them. Identify suppliers who can deliver equipment and IT services rapidly in an emergency.
10. Organise regular refresher training and practice sessions with key staff and partners. Regularly revisit and update preparedness plans and contact databases.

Resources

BBC Media Action Lifeline production manual

<https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/lifeline-production-manual.pdf>

Topic-by-topic guides for media on core humanitarian issues

<https://www.bbcmmediaactionilearn.com/lifelinetopicguides>

BBC Media Action research report: *Humanitarian broadcasting in emergencies: a synthesis of evaluation findings* (Theodora Hannides, 2015)

<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/research/humanitarian-broadcasting-in-emergencies-2015-report.pdf>

BBC Media Action Lifeline resources platform

<https://www.bbcmmediaactionilearn.com/lifelineprogramming>

CDAC (Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities) Network

<http://www.cdacnetwork.org/>

Behaviour Change Communication in Emergencies: A Toolkit (UNICEF, 2006)

http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/BCC_full_pdf.pdf

Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: empirical evidence (Steven Hobfoll et al., 2007)

http://www.researchgate.net/publication/5668133_Five_Essential_Elements_of_Immediate_and_Mid-Term_Mass_Trauma_Intervention_Empirical_Evidence

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