The expert view: Messaging around disasters

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Ana: Thank you for making the time to talk with us about your work. Can we begin this interview with an overview of your background and experience, especially as it relates to reporting on disasters and related topics around the world?

***Anita**: I'm a writer, editor and producer, and split my time between journalism and editorial consulting. So in both cases, I specialize in global development and science in society and that tends to mean environmental issues, health issues, and human rights mostly but occasionally other topics too. So, I've pursued this for the past ten years as freelance. On the journalism side, I've written for publications like the Guardian, Nature, National Geographic and Undark magazine; and as a consultant, I've worked with selected organizations on story production, coaching and training and advising them on improving the impact of their media engagement.*

A highlight has been a multi-year package I worked on for the Swiss Research for Development Program, but I've also worked on smaller projects with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations and educational institutions. Before I started to work independently about a decade ago, I was a senior editor for a few years at Scidev.net which is a news service specific to the Global South. In that position I worked with a wide range of experts and journalists. It was also a learning experience, and I got to cover a diverse set of topics, such as the Ebola epidemic in West Africa and the 2015 Nepal earthquake. As a final note, before that I had worked as an editor in other publications and academic journals, so my work at SciDev.Net was a change in my career track, since I had started out as a research scientist working on risk and vulnerability analysis of environmental health issues.

Ana: Thanks for this overview, Anita. Together with Ilan Kelman, we are part of the Disasters Avoided Project. Our aim is to share stories or case studies about disaster prevention and collect a body of knowledge on actions taken around the world. We have a particular interest in messaging around disasters, and to that end we have been talking to journalists such as yourself. We are always looking for ways to improve our messaging and to do a better job ourselves in working with the media to convey these positive stories

Anita: *There is no real recipe for how best to engage with the media, but there are actions that can be taken to increase the chances of messaging getting picked up. First, to a certain extent you need to go with the flow of the media, which means plugging into the timing and the focus of the media cycle and crafting your messaging that way. This also means targeting the messaging when a topic is trending. So, in the case of disasters, it can be easier than with other topics because there's usually a clearly identifiable event to piggyback on.*

It is also important to speak in a language that the media are familiar with; start with where they are and find a compelling way to present the message with a story or commentary. It will be harder to persuade editors on policy and long-term trends and topics that aren't already on the media radar, but that's the real work of communication, to find a way in by making the messaging appealing enough for a wider audience. So, it helps to understand a little how the media system works or to work with someone who does.

Gareth: We are always looking for positive examples of avoiding disasters. I wonder whether these might be opportunities to contribute examples for the media, by building upon a good piece that one or more media organizations has published. I appreciate your point about narratives, a topic we also covered during our interview with Andy Revkin in April 2025.

Anita: *Yes, that's one way to approach it - take a story that is already out there and add to it, whether with commentary or other examples, and try to build some momentum. That is probably one of the easier approaches, because someone else has already done the work of persuading the media to publish a story. But there is always a cost or trade off in terms of how widely your message will spread. If you manage to get a story out in a mainstream media outlet you are guaranteed a wide leadership. But if you publish on your own platforms, the readership will be a much smaller pool and primarily people who already think like you. So, there is certainly a reward to getting a story published through the mainstream publications, but it takes investment and energy, and it is not easy to achieve.*

Ana: We appreciate this feedback, Anita. How could we (the Disasters Avoided team and professionals including scientists) do a better job at working with the media to convey that disasters are not about the hazard or climate change, they are more about human decisions that can lead to or avoid disasters? For example, while we saw some good reporting during the California fires of January 2025, many of the news articles were centred around the severity and characteristics of the fires and the contribution of climate change to them, instead of how policies and decisions over decades caused wildfire disasters.

Anita: *I think there a reason historically as to why this is the case. It has taken so long for the climate change narrative to be accepted, and I think societally, we are still riding that wave, and I think what you are saying is the next step in the evolution into a more holistic conversation.*

To go back to the media, I think what tends to get picked up on a regular basis are consensus messaging, what most scientists agree on. In that context, if you want to put forward an alternative or a minority position or interpretation, it helps to have a strong piece of evidence that gives that position credence, like a study or a quote from a prominent figure, to help break into the mainstream. Messaging that will make the editors' head turn and take it seriously, otherwise it risks being seen as a fringe position and the chances of it getting picked up are much lower. There is also another obstacle in the alternative message that you are trying to put forward - it places the responsibility on people and institutions, which they may see as inconvenient.

Gareth: Indeed, saying that disasters are caused in part because of choices people make, or because people's choices have been made by others in a way that puts them in vulnerable positions, means that the disaster is not natural, and therefore the concept of a natural disaster does not make sense. Calling and earthquake, tsunami, a storm, a wildfire, or something else a natural disaster is a way of saying that we couldn't do anything about it, whereas this often isn't the case. Our project is aligned with the "No Natural Disasters" campaign, which is supported by UNDRR. How do you think we can get this message across in an appropriate way?

Anita: *In my view, it's a combination of the two. It's a matter of probabilities rather than one or the other. It depends on the severity of the event and how prepared people are. It might help to find a way of toning down the responsibility side of it and make it a little bit more nuanced and focused on the interaction between the natural forces and policies by institutions to prepare (or not) and what people can do as individual agents – because I think the two are different and people are often quite limited in what they can do. That would avoid the perception that you're placing responsibility on individuals.*

Ana: Our main approach has been, instead of pointing fingers, to say that these governments or NGOS have done it right, they have taken these actions to avoid disasters, and here are some examples. Without blaming anyone in particular for not taking appropriate action to avoid a disaster.

Anita: *Yes, I think that is a good framing*

Ana*:* What has been your experience with disaster reporting?

Anita: *Yes, I can provide some examples. When the Ebola emergency happened, and swine flu, and even before that, in the publications that I was a part of, we weren't handling breaking news, which meant that we were able to step back to get more expert commentary on issues that the emergencies would touch on.*

A clear point I remember in the case of the Ebola outbreak was the resistance that people had to the kind of prevention measures that the World Health Organization was putting forward. Because it was a West African country, it was framed [by some] as a naive take by the population or a "primitive way" of dealing with it. So, we spoke to anthropologists to get a more informed and knowledge-based view about those reactions and to learn about how people could be approached in a more positive way. We saw this repeated a little bit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's not easy to pick up on positives or solutions while an emergency is happening and when most people are understandably focused on how to stop what's happening or improve people's situation. Instead, you could look out for cases or occasions when response measures have worked and then try to put that forward at a later time, when there's a space for it in the media cycle. You need to frame it in a compelling way for them, but timing is everything. Even as media professionals we often pitch stories and get no responses.

Gareth: Thanks for this advice, Anita. We have some association with some of the UN agencies and sometimes we get asked to publish positive case studies in their outlets. For example, last year we contributed to the UNDRR 2024 Global Assessment Report (GAR) Special Report. Do you work with these types of multilateral agencies, and if so, do you have any thoughts on how their communications could help?

Anita: *A little bit, and at a minimum I try to stay in the loop. The UN process and procedures are similar to the academic world in that they operate in their own space. Major media outlets like The Guardian will cover many of the UN reports, even if they don't have a super-fresh message. Sometimes they will reiterate the message of urgency, but beyond those flagship reports, or major events like UN Summits, it's hard to turn the UN process into a story. The UN does important work, but to turn that material into a piece that a media outlet will be interested in, a freelancer has to find something very new or very striking.*

Ana and Gareth: Thank you for your time, Anita, we appreciate it.