Aid workers, intelligence gathering and media self-censorship

Nigel McCarthy

The relationship between aid workers and intelligence gathering in conflict zones and the media response has been highlighted by several recent events in Kosovo, Somalia and East Timor. The over-riding issue is a critical one for journalists; in times of conflict do the principles of balanced reporting suffer to support the “home” side?

Over the past 14 months, the Australian media reported three cases that linked Australian aid workers to intelligence gathering. There was a claim that CARE Australia worker Steve Pratt, who during 1999 had been jailed in Yugoslavia for espionage, despite Australian protestations of his innocence, had helped set up an intelligence gathering operation for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). There were reports of cooperation between an Australian aid operation and US agents in Somalia in 1992; links that had not been reported previously. And an Australian aid worker claimed to have filed intelligence reports for the Australian government from East Timor ahead of the pro-Indonesian militia violence and destruction surrounding the vote for independence in August 1999.

In the Kosovo and Somalia situations, it is clear that journalists and/or news organisations exercised self-censorship in not reporting what they knew. These actions will have their supporters and critics. Those who delayed the report about the intelligence role of the aid worker in Kosovo argue they feared jeopardizing international efforts to free the worker and his two colleagues. But by not reporting the links, Australian readers and viewers were denied relevant facts in
judging the Yugoslav action. The detention, trial and sentencing of three apparently innocent men became a symbol to many Australians of the excessive regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Had the reports of aid links to intelligence gathering been aired when they were obtained, some of this criticism may have been muted. Likewise, in the Somalia incident, the public was left with incomplete reporting to shape their views of an organisation that promotes itself as independent and seeks contributions from well-meaning supporters. In the East Timor example the media is less of a player, but this case is included as another current illustration of the links between aid workers and intelligence gathering.

Those supporters of delaying reporting the links between CARE’s humanitarian and peace monitoring projects in Kosovo argue that there was a clear potential cost to the lives or well-being of the three detained workers. In Somalia, the journalist feared that reporting the CARE cooperation with the military would disrupt the humanitarian work aimed at saving hundreds of thousands of people from starvation. In East Timor, the aid worker who was collecting intelligence material for the Australian government argues that earlier intervention could have prevented the massacres of an unknown number of people.

**Yugoslavia**

CARE Australia workers Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace were detained in Yugoslavia in March 1999 and Serb Branko Jelen in April. They were later convicted of passing intelligence to foreign organisations. During his imprisonment Steve Pratt made a televised confession of spying against Yugoslavia. Pratt was sentenced to 12 years in prison, and Wallace and Jelen to four years each.

The plight of the aid workers attracted considerable attention in the Australian media. For example, a survey of the nationally-distributed broadsheet newspaper, the *Australian*, shows that from 10 April, when the story broke, Pratt and Wallace, and the efforts to gain their release, were the front-page lead stories in six of the 18 days the paper appeared and the subject of editorials on three of those
days (McCarthy 1999). The tone of the reporting of the story in Australia is indicated by this editorial on 13 April shortly after the pair were detained:

Aid workers pawns in a cynical play . . . The plight of two men who only sought to help others . . . has made the fear and emotion triggered by the conflict and dictatorship all too accessible for their fellow Australians . . . Milosevic can make a start in the rehabilitation of his regime in the eyes of the world by quickly ordering the release of Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace (Australian 13 April).

The three men became a focus for Australian perceptions of the lack of respect for law or human rights by the Milosevic regime, as sample headlines from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sun-Herald* illustrate. On 13 April “Trumped up spying charges”. 17 April “Hounded for the crime of caring. Branded Serbia’s enemies . . .”. 18 April “The spy game; in Serbia’s eyes CARE workers are guilty until proven innocent . . .”. 16 May “Serb demand is blackmail . . .”. 27 May “Fury over secret spy trial . . .”. 2 June “Injustice in Yugoslavia . . .”. 28 May “On trial on Belgrade . . .”. 4 July “Aid duo pawns in Yugoslav struggle . . .”. Following the release of Pratt and Wallace in September, one headline on 2 September, summed up the Australian sense of frustration “About bloody time, CARE pair on the way home . . .”.

Australia mounted vigorous international efforts to free the trio including visits to Yugoslavia by Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer and CARE Australia chairman and former Australian prime minister Malcolm Fraser. The Australian government supported the trio at all times. Pratt and Wallace were released in September and Jelen several months later. Following his release Pratt, a former major in the Australian Army, said his confession followed “five days of intensive interrogation, with psychological torture, sleep deprivation, questioning through the early hours of the morning with other extreme measures applied” (Stevens 2000).

The level of Australian interest in the plight of the three men can be seen in the response to their release. There were press conferences and public appearances and a reception at Government House hosted by the governor-general Sir William Deane. Yellow ribbons previously
hung from the balcony of Government House were cut. Steve Pratt has written and released a book of his experiences (Pratt 2000). Peter Wallace is writing his own account.

In the Australian media, the December-January period is often a quiet news period. The federal and state parliaments go into recess, parts of industry shut down for maintenance and many people take Christmas holidays, seeking lazy sunny days on the beach. The newspapers have holiday specials, such as collections of new fiction. Television stations are traditionally “out of ratings” a time when viewing audiences are low and repeats can be the order of the day. But in February the pace changes, Australia goes back to work and the television stations launch their programming for the year, determined to hold existing audiences and win new ones.

A major indication in the interest in the Pratt, Wallace and Jelen story is that both the two publicly-owned television networks launched their flagship current affairs programs for the year with stories about the trio. However the approach of the two networks was very different. SBS Television, the smaller of the pair and with a multi-cultural charter, revealed an alleged link to intelligence gathering. The ABC, the larger of the two, looked at the hardships the men endured and rebutted the SBS claims.

The SBS report

The Dateline current affairs program on SBS television returned for the year on 2 February 2000 with a story that made headlines in Australia’s leading papers the following day. The reporter was Graham Davis, a journalist with 27 years’ experience and the winner of Australia’s foremost journalism award, a Walkley. In the introduction, Dateline presenter Jana Wendt said:

Last June SBS uncovered extraordinary information in the story of Steve Pratt, Peter Wallace and Branko Jelen. At the time CARE Australia Chairman Malcolm Fraser asked that we keep that information quiet so as not to jeopardise the release of the jailed aid workers. Tonight we can at last tell the story.
Unbeknown to many CARE Canada had a contract to recruit monitors on behalf of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the OSCE. They were to gather political, social and military intelligence in Kosovo.

The contract has raised disturbing questions about the role that CARE Canada and its Australian counterpart played in the Balkans. And it has placed aid agencies and their operations under suspicion.

Later we’ll discuss those questions in a studio debate which includes CARE Australia’s chief executive officer Charles Tapp. But first this report by Dateline’s Graham Davis in collaboration with SBS World News reporters Don Lange and Dennis Grant.

The report, that made up the bulk of the hour-long program, said that Steve Pratt had a role in setting up a program for CARE Canada, under contract to the Canadian government, to recruit monitors — many of them former military people — in Kosovo for the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Steve Pratt travelled for a week in Kosovo with CARE Canada executive director, John Watson.

What the program also said was that in June 1999 SBS had learned of the connection between Pratt and the CARE Canada monitoring operation and put this to Malcolm Fraser:

Davis — When SBS put a Canada connection to you last year, you asked us not to mention this. Were you concerned that it would complicate your efforts to gain the release of these people?

Fraser — Of course. It was a question of perception not of reality. I didn’t know what anyone knew. I didn’t know what was going to be introduced into the court and if you’ve got a state of war, a state of siege, Serbs against the world, what could people make of something however innocent?

Fraser did not know what the Serbs knew. In the SBS program Yugoslav Deputy Information Minister, Miodrag Popovic, says Belgrade did know about Pratt’s role with the monitoring operation.

Popovic — Actually I was happy to see Australia or the Australian media discovered (sic) this story. On the other hand I knew about this but you have to understand my stand because it is a minor problem for this
country. (A) much bigger problem was the intelligence activities not only of the people from CARE but from the OSCE mission itself. The much bigger problem is the plight of the people in Serbia today.

Davis (voice over) — Popovic is still convinced the three CARE workers were spies, but says they were freed in the national interest.

Popovic — All along we were just trying to say we are defending our country and that we are not villains and murderers and those three people were pardoned in that cause . . . .

In the debate after the program Charles Tapp, CARE Australia’s chief executive officer, defended peace monitoring and stressed that the CARE contract was public knowledge.

The ABC report

Dateline aired on Wednesday 2 February, Four Corners went to air on Monday 7 February. The report, by Liz Jackson, a qualified lawyer, a journalist for 14 years and a two-times Walkley award winner, had this introduction:

Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace speak for the first time about their arrest and imprisonment in Belgrade. Until now the Australian aid workers have been unable to tell their stories, fearing the consequences for colleague Branko Jelen. Liz Jackson’s report reveals some of the enormous pressure of their captivity, as well as Pratt’s account of the spying confession.

Branded an exclusive, the Four Corners team had five days to respond to the SBS report. Immediately after the introduction came these comments:

Wallace — A lot of people would love to think that we were spies. People love — some people love conspiracies and some people think it very glamorous and exciting.

Pratt — I think it’s natural that there will be people out there in the community who will always think that sort of thing about people who have been in my predicament, and there’s nothing that I can do about it.

The bulk of the report (Four Corners typically runs one story for
the program’s full forty-five minute duration) covered the trio’s arrest, trial and detention. But at the end of the report, Jackson returned to the SBS report. Pratt’s response was a strong rejection:

Pratt — This is their allegation — that I was knowingly involved in a CARE International support activity of the OSCE as if the OSCE was a spy organisation. Which I reject anyway — the OSCE is a very honorable organisation. That’s essentially the SBS allegation. And also they allege that that therefore put me and my colleagues in jeopardy and that caused us to be arrested. I mean, this is just a load of bloody rubbish.

The SBS perspective

The SBS story is the more dramatic because the allegations of the links with intelligence gathering went further than the ABC’s detailing of the experiences of the three men. SBS also knew of the story without broadcasting it for some seven months.

In an interview for this paper, the SBS director of news and current affairs, Phil Martin, said the network came across the story when a reporter overheard it mentioned in a conversation and “followed it up, chased it and nailed it down”. Malcolm Fraser was approached but “pleaded” with the SBS reporter not to run the story. The agreement was that Fraser would give SBS the full story when the men were released. Just 24 hours later, coincidentally, in Martin’s words, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, put out a press release urging media organisations not to publish any information that would jeopardise the release of the aid workers.

Martin said SBS executives to the highest level, including managing director Nigel Milan were kept aware of the story the network was sitting on. And there was division over whether the story should be run or held. Martin says:

I certainly am aware of two senior editorial executives who took the view that we should publish the story no matter what the consequences. And others of us took the view that if the publication of the story resulted in harmful action against any of the protagonists, then that was not something we should do.
Martin does not believe that SBS should be seen as supporting the NATO side by not running the story:

The story was indirectly related to that campaign. But principally it was a story about Australian aid workers in another country and it was made very clear to us that had we run the story we may have endangered their lives. And so there is another question there and that is the responsibility of media to ensure that by its actions it doesn’t endanger physical life.

The NATO campaign would have continued no matter what we had reported. I mean what we had wasn’t of such earth-shattering importance that the NATO bombers would have turned back and not bombed.

For seven months SBS remained ready to publish if another news organisation reported the story. Martin calls it the “best story we have done all year”. He adds that with their exclusive access to Pratt and Wallace, the ABC was restricted to running the “official biography” and unable to ask “hard questions” about their role.

**Somalia**

The allegations of aid worker involvement in intelligence gathering in Kosovo sparked claims of NGO involvement in Somalia in 1992. Then, United States forces led a United Nations sanctioned humanitarian intervention aimed at ending fighting between warring factions and bringing food to the starving population. Australian journalist Sue Neales was there as the correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Melbourne *Age*, two major Australian papers owned by the Fairfax group. On 9 February, 2000, eight years later, Neales and Andrew Clennell reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

The aid agency CARE Australia directly assisted United States operatives during the United Nations-sanctioned military and humanitarian intervention in war-torn Somalia. On December 15, 1992, two days before a UN force marched into the starving and besieged town of Baidoa, CARE Australia sheltered, housed, transported and advised four US men who identified themselves to journalists as officers of the US State Department.
The article went on to say the men parachuted into Baidoa, stored their “sophisticated communications equipment” in a CARE building, slept in the CARE compound, travelled in a white, clearly marked CARE vehicle and used the roof of a CARE Australia building as a command post, displaying fluorescent marker lights to guide incoming forces. The head of the CARE Australia mission, Lockton Morrisey, identified as a “former Australian Army worker” in the report, briefed the agents.

CARE Australia executive director, Charles Tapp, was quoted in the report:

Management of CARE Australia at the time and today had — and have — no knowledge of any of the allegations put forward by Fairfax newspapers regarding CARE’s operations in Somalia in 1992. The activity simply would not be tolerated by CARE Australia’s management or board. An aid worker found to be involved in any covert activity would be immediately dismissed.

The allegations of CARE involvement were supported by a former US special envoy to Somalia, Robert Oakley, who, in a follow-up report, told the Herald “operatives” from a joint CIA and Defence Intelligence team were in Somalia at the time and posed as State Department officials ahead of the arrival of the US force (Riley 2000). The Herald was unable to speak to Lockton Morrisey, who left CARE in late 1999, but quoted his lawyer as saying he had helped US officials “concerning the security position the ground” in Somalia in 1992 but added “…none of the work done by (Morrisey) or for that matter CARE Australia or CARE US, while he was in charge of the relevant operations, was relevant to any military operations undertaken by either the United States or the United Nations” (Clennell 2000).

The day the Herald reported the association between CARE and the US “operatives” was a Wednesday, the night Dateline goes to air. Dateline followed up the newspaper report in an interview between presenter Jana Wendt and journalist Sue Neale:

Wendt — Why, Sue, have you chosen to write this story now? It is eight years ago?
Neales — Well obviously there is a current controversy concerning CARE Australia and the possible blurring of their lines, where they do sometimes seem to get involved with military and political issues. At the time, I felt compromised and was ethically concerned about what CARE was doing, but at the time I took the decision, made the judgement, that the story the world needed to know about at that time was that there were hundreds of thousands of people around Baidoa starving for lack of food, and that that was the key issue to write about ... you are very aware as a journalist, that if you write negative articles about aid agencies, particularly in a crisis like this, it does affect public donations.

Wendt — As I said, CARE Australia refutes your story comprehensively, but is it possible that under those circumstances, where people were starving, that CARE might not have had another option if we accept your story?

Neales — I think that is obviously the decision that the head of mission took, that the aid agency ... couldn’t operate until the UN came to town. And that's the situation I accept fully now and then. The issue is though, should an aid agency remain independent and neutral and separate from military and government involvement? And that is where I thought, in this instance, CARE Australia probably crossed the line.

**East Timor ... and other places**

Almost 12 months before the reports of CARE Australia’s involvement in intelligence gathering in Kosovo and Somalia, another Australian aid worker said he had made intelligence reports to the Australian Government. Lansell Taudevin, a former Methodist minister, went to East Timor in 1996 for the French-owned Egis Consulting. Egis had a contract for an AusAID (the Australian government aid organisation) water program. Over the next three years, and as the brutal Indonesian hold on East Timor began to attract world attention ahead of the August 1999 vote for independence, Taudevin travelled extensively through East Timor, engaged in aid work but also collecting intelligence.

Taudevin (2000) writes:

I had been asked to provide information and commentary by AusAID and embassy officials in Canberra and Jakarta. This I had done in a
situation in which I had a specific contract (with a managing company — not AusAID) that forbade me to become involved in politics.

Taudevin sent back hundreds of reports that included warnings “. . . about the arming and training of militias. I provided concrete evidence but both my reports and my presence were dismissed as ‘extremist’ and ‘alarmist’.” He left East Timor in April 1999 after his life was threatened by pro-Indonesian militia groups and after he was also accused of spying and ordered to go by the Indonesia Army. Taudevin first went public with his story in April 1999 on the ABC current affairs radio program AM. In September, ahead of the ballot for independence, “the militia went on a rampage, killing an unknown number of civilians, destroying most of the islands infrastructure and forcing hundreds of thousands from their homes” (Williams 1999) in a campaign predicted by Taudevin.

Not only did Taudevin claim his intelligence assessments were rejected but also that both his employer and the Australian government tried to stop him talking to the media. He was dismissed as a “fruitloop” (Taudevin 2000, p. 8) by an assistant to Alexander Downer, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs. However, the Australian Opposition spokesman on Foreign Affairs, Laurie Brereton, said he placed considerable value on Taudevin’s reports (Dateline 2000b). In January 2000 Taudevin took legal action against his employer and the Australian government claiming payment for his intelligence work.

Several other reports covered aid agencies gathering, or being approached to gather, intelligence information.¹ The Australian, on 4 February 2000, followed SBS World News in reporting comments from the chief executive of the Fred Hollows Foundation, Mike Lynskey, that the aid agency had been approached to gather information for unidentified government agencies. Lynskey said the agency had been approached to “. . . provide information and to give people access to the people that we’ve found and to help fill in the picture between the cracks in some of the places that we work”. He added the approach had been rejected because “It’s not our role. Our role is to do a particular job. We’re not beholden to the Australian government or any other government” (Gilchrist 2000).
The *Age* reported that approaches to gather information were not restricted to Australian aid workers. On 13 February it reported “International humanitarian aid agencies face increasing pressure from Western governments to cooperate in gathering military intelligence, according to European Union sources.” Two unnamed EU diplomats were quoted:

It is a fact of life for aid workers in the field that Western government, Western militaries, want to use them to glean information for them. And when they need the cooperation of the military — be they warring factions or allied peacekeepers — to deliver humanitarian aid, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to avoid the overt and subtle pressure to comply.

And:

It is a well-known fact in some circles that aid agencies have been a cover for gatherers of military intelligence. But anywhere there is a conflict spooks will seek a cover — maybe you should also point out that military intelligence operatives also pose as journalists in conflict situations.

**Reaction**

CARE Australia chair Malcolm Fraser anticipated the division and the debate that would follow the report on CARE’s role in the OSCE monitoring operation in the *Dateline* program on 2 February:

I think it was unfortunate. I wish it hadn’t happened … a humanitarian organisation in an emergency area as the Balkans plainly was, should not also be involved in monitoring, now that’s very clear.

Fraser added that he didn’t know about the Australian involvement in the monitoring program until after Pratt, Wallace and Jelen had been arrested:

I believe I should have known and if I had known, I think the program might have ended … Let’s put it this way, with the wisdom of hindsight, in my view, CARE Australia’s view is that a monitoring operation should not be attached in any way to a humanitarian operation.

The *Dateline* program also reported the reaction of another aid
organisation. The Australian president of Medecins Sans Frontieres, Fiona Terry, said:

I’m very surprised that (CARE) would engage in such a blatantly ambiguous position . . . I think most people would be shocked and disappointed about it . . . I do think there could be bad repercussions and, yes, it could compromise very much our ability to work in conflict areas.

That was the theme in the editorial, features and letters pages in the days immediately after the Dateline program went to air.

On 4 February, the editorial in the Australian commented:

Spying endangers relief efforts . . . Revelations that CARE Australia’s Steve Pratt played a part in helping Canadian colleagues set up an information-gathering system to monitor peacekeeping efforts in Kosovo raises questions about the role of humanitarian bodies . . . the issue is the burden of perception that such monitoring activities by aid organisations create. Should they be involved with anything but delivering humanitarian assistance? . . . The controversy surrounding Pratt demonstrates that a vigorous debate is needed urgently to define the role of aid bodies and at what point that role becomes compromised.

Opposite the editorial, a feature piece by a former Australian intelligence officer, Warren Read, said:

Stark line divides aid workers and the military. The furore over the apparent involvement of an Australian aid worker in the peace monitoring activities of (OSCE) highlights the crucial need for international aid groups to stay squeaky-clean . . . Not only was tension high in Kosovo but the suspicion among Serbian counterintelligence officers (those charged with the task of catching foreign spies on their soil) that OSCE might be riddled with spies was even higher . . . How then, CARE Canada could have actively involved itself in peace-monitoring operation defies all logic and common sense.

Among the views in the Australian’s letters section:

Humanitarian organisations must avoid confusion between humanitarian tasks and intelligence tasks. CARE Canada’s negotiation with Steve Pratt lends weight to the case put by the Serbian government that Steve Pratt as country coordinator contravened Serbian laws by undertaking
intelligence activities. NGO staff often forget that local laws do apply to
them. (Andrew MacLeod, Albert Part, Vic.).

Steve Pratt, say it isn’t so. We trusted you. We supported you. We believed
you. We prayed for you. (A. Higgins, Adelaide).

All is lost for CARE. How can they expect anyone to give them money
for humanitarian work, and claim to be a humanitarian organisation,
when their sister organisations get involved in such activities as described
in the Australian yesterday . . . CARE Australian executive director Mr
Charles Tapp should resign — or be forced from his position. (Jane
Turner, Redfern, NSW).

The issue was still attracting editorial comment several days later
with the Sydney Morning Herald writing on 9 February:

Reports from a war zone . . . it is also clear now that the CARE
organisation was much more seriously compromised, much more
seriously than previously thought, by information gathering operations
. . . . What might seem quite separate to CARE would not necessarily
look that way to the Yugoslav authorities, especially once the NATO
bombardment of Belgrade got under way . . . their (Pratt, Wallace
and Jelen) experience is a sobering warning not only to CARE but to
other humanitarian agencies as well of the extreme need, in times of
conflict, to keep the distinction between humanitarian aid work and
‘peace monitoring’ absolutely clear.

World Vision Australia, another major aid agency, commented on
13 February. Chief executive Lynn Arnold wrote that aid agencies
often needed to seek the protection of military forces in the delivery
of aid. This posed ethical issues, Arnold added, because the goals
of the aid groups and the military are quite different. However he
observed some of the tools of modern aid work, vehicles, radios
and satellite phones could be interpreted as the tools of potential
espionage. Arnold wrote “It is clear that the time has come for
humanitarian groups to take stock of themselves and establish
internationally accepted guidelines for working in zones of conflict.”

On 17 February, a two-sentence report in the Sydney Morning
Herald read “CARE chief resigns. CARE Australia’s chief executive,
Mr Charles Tapp, has quit. He will become deputy director-general
of AusAID, the federal government’s agency in charge of foreign aid”.

**NGOs**

Governments around the world are increasingly turning to non-government organisations (NGOs) for the delivery of services. This is because aid can be delivered more cheaply, efficiently and at a distance from government via NGOs than through government channels. The number of NGOs is growing rapidly with about 29,000 international groups in 1995; and dozens of new organisations are being created daily. In a feature article on NGOs on 2 February 2000 *The Economist* reported: “By being ‘close to the action’ some NGOs, perhaps unwittingly, provide good cover for spies . . . .”

The Kosovo crisis in particular and the nature of the NGO response poses questions about the role of aid agencies. In Kosovo, NATO constructed the refugee camps and provided security, with the UNHCR losing its traditional position as the controller of the humanitarian effort. In the eyes of one commentator (Rieff 1999), the Kosovo crisis reached the limits of “independent humanitarianism” with “the NGOs and UNHCR . . . reduced to the status of implementing partner, or subcontractor, or even helpless onlooker”.

The major NGOs themselves are trying to maintain their standards and reputation. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, supported by other big NGOs, has issued a code of conduct for workers in disaster relief. Its goal is to “maintain the high standards of independence, effectiveness and impact to which disaster response NGOs . . . aspire”. Point four of the code is the most important for this paper and states “We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government foreign policy,” then adds:

We will never knowingly — or through negligence — allow ourselves, or our employees, to be used to gather information of a political, military or economically sensitive nature for governments or other bodies that may serve purposes other than those which are strictly humanitarian, nor will we act as instruments of foreign policy of donor governments.
NGOs offer promise but not without problems. They can respond more quickly to crisis than governments and, in part because of new information and communication technologies, they can marshal extensive international support. Most big NGOs also maintain sophisticated media and public relations divisions. In her highly-regarded *Foreign Affairs* article in 1997 Jessica T. Matthews wrote:

For all their strengths, NGOs are special interests . . . . The best of them, the ablest and most passionate, often suffer most from tunnel vision, judging every public act by how it affects their particular interest … the need to sustain growing budgets can compromise the independence of mind and approach that is their greatest asset.

During the research for this paper, a document revealing CARE’s attitude to public relations was obtained from an NGO source. There is no reason to doubt its authenticity. Dated 10 February 2000 it is titled “Communication strategy for CARE USA regarding allegations about CARE’s independence”. The document was written to guide staff in the face of any questions arising from the incidents reported in the Australian media. The two-page document provides a “set of talking points should questions be asked” and warns the “range of possible questions is enormous”.

Staff are urged to stress CARE’s commitment as an non-partisan, independent humanitarian organisation. If Somalia is raised, the documents urges delaying tactics with the suggestion “reply that we are talking of events that happened eight years previously and would need time to get the additional information”. On Pratt and Wallace:

CARE has always maintained — and still maintains — that their trial was a travesty of justice and that the charges were without foundation. The men have suffered enough in prison without the further anguish of a “trial” by media. Further publicity about such allegations also endangers other aid workers in the field.

The CARE suggestions, including delaying tactics and emotive terms such as “trial” by media echo the government or big business response that is an anathema to many supporters of NGOs.
Information gathering

Few people would disagree that NGOs need to gather information as part of their role in managing projects in places such as Kosovo. When the three CARE workers were convicted 11 Australian aid organisations (Wilson et al 1999) expressed their distress and opposition. On information gathering they said:

We emphasize that the gathering of information relating to humanitarian needs and the security of field staff from UNHCR, other UN bodies, local bodies and other NGOs is part of the normal duties of aid workers in such settings. It is also normal for such information to be shared with head offices so that together field and head office staff can plan future assistance in a difficult context or take evacuation decisions.

From the media reports it is difficult to establish the information flow, if any, between CARE’s humanitarian operation and the monitoring operation. However, the model information flow described in the statement by the aid agencies suggests there are few checks on its distribution.

CARE Canada’s national director, John Watson, who travelled for a week with Steve Pratt in Kosovo, told Dateline:

It was quite clear to us that on the traditional humanitarian side it was getting very difficult. They were blowing up more houses than we could repair, we didn’t have land-mine proof vehicles . . . you had to know where the land mines were or where the conflict was. So there was a definite advantage to having a peace monitoring program going on to CARE’s traditional humanitarian work. We decided the two could be quite separate and therefore we went ahead with it.

This poses the question of what, and to whom, was the advantage?

On the ABC’s Four Corners program Liz Jackson reported:

Jackson — All aid agencies in Yugoslavia were by this time receiving daily security briefings from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe who had a high profile role monitoring the cease-fire in Kosovo.
Wallace — So that we were aware of where the security risks were, what areas we should avoid in terms of where the conflicts were, demonstrations, mines, that sort of thing.

Jackson — You didn't give information back to them?

Wallace — Absolutely not.

Jackson — Steve Pratt was sending much of this security information back to CARE in his situation reports, parts of which real like this: “Significant government forces, back about 12 VJ (army) heavy tanks and armoured cars, launched operations against known KLA strong points recently established closer to Podujevo.”

The reports were seized by the Yugoslav authorities when the aid workers were detained. The military tone of some of the reports fuelled Yugoslav concerns about spying. Pratt (Saunders 2000) would acknowledge that some of the reports were “. . . indiscreet and were offensive to the (Milosevic) regime”.

**Conclusion**

The different reports of the events considered in this paper are all from journalists and news organisations of good reputation in a country that prides itself on press freedom and quality. Yet self-censorship by journalists and/or news organisations is clear and readers and viewers have been presented with incomplete or dramatically different accounts of the various events. They can choose to believe one version or another, or to remain sceptical of the individuals and organisations, including the media and governments, involved.

NGOs continue to grow in size and influence. Their supporters are often critical of the lack of accountability of government and business. But NGOs too must be questioned and held to account. Their values and goals, however laudable, can become distorted and confused like those of any organisation. The entire NGO community needs to continually examine its values and practices in the knowledge that bad practices by one organisation can tarnish the image of all. In the environment in which NGOs often function, there is no room for hair-splitting or rationalisation. In that environment, a tarnished
image can threaten the work of organisations and the safety of its workers. A reputation — good or bad — gained in one region will spread quickly to other regions with little room for fine distinctions.

The media need to be cautious in their dealings with NGOs. Because journalists might share the apparently non-political and humanitarian goals of NGOs, their scrutiny should not be relaxed. Full and frank reporting of the activities of NGOs should be pursued with the vigor consistent with the ideals of good journalism. The ability and willingness — dictated by NGOs need for continuing public support — to take journalists to, or to help them in, difficult locations and operations should not be allowed to color the opinion and approach of journalists and news organisations. This is particularly true where journalists are frustrated by budget constraints and new technologies change news gathering and presentation.

The three men who were arrested in Kosovo are now free and Slobodan Milosevic remains in power. The military and humanitarian projects in Somalia went ahead. However, the United Nations troops were forced to leave in 1995 and, at best, the result of Western intervention is mixed. Australia and the world would finally respond to the plight of the East Timorese. Different responses at different times would have resulted in different outcomes that are, of course, impossible to gauge.

Fundamental to this paper is the question of when journalists and news organisations should report, or not report, what they know. In part, this goes back to what is one of the most fundamental issues in journalism; news values, and how these conflict with other values. One tenet of journalism is transparency. The Age journalist in Somalia decided public support for a CARE humanitarian mission was more important than the disclosure of that mission’s links with the military. SBS Television decided on a course of action that it calculated was least threatening to three aid workers, but a course that denied the public information that was relevant to shaping public sentiment, and perhaps through that government action. If the CARE action in Somalia had been reported when it was observed then, perhaps, the ensuing debate would have, years later, prevented CARE from
pursuing the path it took in Kosovo. Then SBS would not have had to delay its reporting with whatever implications that carried.

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Notes


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