Good afternoon.

I am very happy to be here, although I am sorry that I could not join for the discussion earlier, at least I come to the closing. Media’s influence on humanitarian donors is an incredibly important topic and I look forward to hearing the findings from your discussion.

For humanitarians, the mainstream media is a vital and powerful player in catalysing international humanitarian attention and response. It provides important information on crises to the broader public that we cannot reach. It sheds light on and tells the stories of people affected by conflict and natural disasters, which otherwise wouldn’t be heard. And it helps to hold the humanitarian community accountable.

At the same time, we sometimes worry that humanitarian issues are not covered enough, that coverage is skewed towards some crises to the neglect of others. The space for more analytical, detailed and nuanced news coverage seems sometimes to be shrinking, meaning that audiences do not always understand the complex causes of crises, and how difficult it can be to deliver humanitarian aid effectively.

We realise of course that our colleagues in journalism have serious challenges of their own. The news industry is facing an economic crisis, and reporting on humanitarian issues is very expensive. It is not profitable, and probably never will be. And on top of this, there is fatigue among people, hearing about crisis upon crisis.

Even if journalists’ hearts are with us, when they pitch ideas for humanitarian stories, their editors often tell them: “It costs too much to travel there” or “We don’t have time for you to research that” or “This issue is not a priority for our audience”. Those obstacles make it much harder for journalists, particularly when they are struggling with framing long-running conflicts and chronic crises as ‘news’ in the age of 24/7, 280 character tweets and what seems to be a shorter-than-ever attention span from consumers of news.
So, getting coverage of humanitarian issues into the news is challenging for all of us. The reason we keep trying is because it matters.

Why?

Making the public aware that a crisis is happening, and explaining why it is happening, is worthwhile in and of itself. In countries where public support for humanitarian aid is weak or in decline, educating the public about the reality on the ground is of vital importance.

But news about humanitarian crises is also important because it influences the decisions of major donors. There are potential problems with this. The most serious crises don’t necessarily receive the most media coverage. So, when donors are prompted to provide financial resources as a result of media coverage, this risks distorting their allocation of aid: diverting money away from those who may need it most.

This dynamic contributes to the huge variations that we see in humanitarian funding country by country. For example, last year, appeals for Haiti, Cameroon and Burkina Faso received less than 50 per cent of the funding that was required to help those in urgent need. It is not a coincidence that these three crises received relatively low media coverage in 2019.

In this imbalanced funding scenario, financing tools that are truly independent, impartial and driven by need are more necessary than ever. This was the impetus for setting up the UN Secretary-General’s Central Emergency Response Fund 15 years ago, or CERF, which channels funding to rapid onset crises, but also to under-funded emergencies that are not getting the attention and support they need. The CERF, and other tools like it, can help rebalance the funding landscape.

Working to shape a humanitarian financing system that is more needs-driven also requires humanitarians to have a better understanding about how media influences donors. Until now, there was no systematic research into the influence of media coverage on major donor countries.

The research you heard about and discussed today aims to change that. Specifically, the authors try to give us a better understanding of which kinds of media influence major donors, when these donors are most likely to be influenced in their funding allocations and decisions, and how this influence works.

This research suggests that there are significant differences between major donor countries. Those donors which take into account public opinion are – perhaps not surprisingly – much more likely to be influenced by the media. And for almost all donors, rapid-onset crises covered by media create a pressure to be seen to be doing something – and this can be hard to resist.
As you have heard, the research also demonstrates that policymakers tend to be most influenced by mainstream domestic news. Nightly television news bulletins and national newspaper headlines are still seen as a strong indicator of public interest. Indeed, this coverage still has more influence on decision-making over social media platforms such as Twitter, and reports from international news sources. But also, international news sources may also be picked by national news outlets.

These findings are not only interesting – they are instrumental to inform how we approach the media moving forward. And I think we can all agree that by better understanding the role of the media, we can help make humanitarian funding more principled, efficient, effective and transparent. Now, we have seen how media influences donors, but we should also think about how to spark the interest of competitive media organizations. I look forward to hearing your ideas on this.

Thank you.