

Coping With the Media in Disasters: Some Predictable Problems

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After Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin, Australia, one of the first relief flights carried what might, at first, seem like an unusual priority cargo—2,000 transistor radios. They had been ordered by the head of Australia's Natural Disasters Organization (NDO), the man responsible for Darwin's relief.¹ The reason for the order was simple. The NDO wanted to communicate with the people of Darwin and it could not easily do so.

There were no surviving local broadcasting systems (even armed forces communications were down).² Moreover, all power was out and most battery-powered radio receivers were damaged or destroyed. New batteries and radios were necessary for any communitywide form of public communication.

Public administrators sometimes decry the mass media. They see a more relaxed working atmosphere if the media were not there to record their actions, question their decisions, and air the remarks of their critics. But in time of disaster the media, on balance, are anything but a problem. Rather, their absence can create enormous difficulties.

The media can assist in pre-disaster education. They may be crucial to an effective warning process. They can provide information and advice to victims and others in the wake of disasters. They can help activate the local disaster response. They can assist in stimulating effective disaster relief.

In addition, media can be a way in which individuals or organizations can ask for information. While the media cannot usually answer these queries directly, though they may try to do so, they can be a link between the public and the emergency manager.³ Officials can also monitor the kind of inquiry that comes in from the public and, if they sense a problem, use the media to tell the public generally what they are doing about it.⁴

Sometimes the media will inform officials that an emergency exists. In Terrance, British Columbia, for

example, the media identified that there was a disaster. The community's emergency agencies were unaware of the extent of problems created by flash flooding until the media—by talking to a number of agencies—put the story together:

The various disaster response agencies tended to work on their own and not share information. Thus they learned the overall situation only by listening to radio and/or watching television.⁵

On another occasion, this time in the United States, a radio station helped mobilize relief; in Warner Robins, Georgia, in 1953, the media were the key agency for mobilizing effective response to a tornado:

WMAZ aided in the mobilization. . . . The National Guard asked WMAZ to announce mobilization of three companies. . . . Upon hearing the many bulletins, medical personnel and electricians went to the disaster scene to volunteer their help. Macon Hospital requested a bulletin stating that blood donors were needed. One bulletin over WMAZ brought 150 donors within an hour, and the hospital called to say it had enough blood.⁶

Sometimes such assistance is arranged in advance. In North Bay, Ontario, for example, the ambulance service can call in off-duty personnel by asking local radio to broadcast a special "Code B." The media have agreed

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that when such a request is made they will cooperate in two ways: they will broadcast the code, and will not attempt to ask the ambulance dispatcher for further information because they accept that means he is completely occupied with responding to an emergency.⁷

All this is not to say the media do not, on occasion, cause problems. They can help increase convergence to the scene both by the curious and by those with genuine concerns. By their own convergence, both in person and by telephone, they can create pressures on managers for information to the point where media demands interfere with effective response.⁸ They can spread rumors,⁹ and so alter the reality of disaster, at least to those well away from it, that they can bias the nature of the response.¹⁰ They can and do create myths about disasters, myths which will persist even among those with contrary disaster experience.¹¹

The press often reports whole communities fleeing in panic on hearing of the approach of a flood or a hurricane. Systematic studies reveal that the opposite behavior is more likely.¹²

Finally, the media can even affect the credibility of an emergency response organization. Following the Miramichi earthquakes in New Brunswick in 1982, for example, the provincial Emergency Measures Organization (EMO) had difficulty getting information from federal scientists in Ottawa. The media did not. The result was that instead of finding itself a center of information, EMO was forced to turn to the media to learn what was going on. This inevitably damaged EMO's credibility. The situation worsened when a local scientist in touch with Ottawa started giving out information to the media. EMO once again found itself forced to go to the media for information. The scientist had, in a sense, supplanted EMO as the center of communications. A disaster organization which is not a center of information will find it difficult to remain a center of control.¹³

Media Are Predictable

All of these problems, however, can be managed and controlled because of two key facts. One is the media behave much the same way in disasters as at other times. The other is that media behavior at all times is highly predictable. This means it may be demanding, but planning for media in disaster can be relatively efficient because it is possible to predict from long experience precisely what the media will do.

As Scanlon and Alldred¹⁴ have demonstrated, the media will inevitably hear of a disaster event, will report that news, and will search for more information both by telephone and by sending reporters to the scene. If the event is judged newsworthy enough the media may descend on the scene *en masse* often using expensive equipment, such as chartered jets, sometimes tying up local transportation and communication facilities. Once on site, the media will make extensive demands on local disaster managers, often using pack pressure (media tend to operate in groups) to force the holding of news

conferences and to demand answers to specific questions, questions to which there are seldom satisfactory answers in the immediate post-impact period.

If information is not available from official sources or the story tends to lag, the media will find something to report. The various media—radio, television and print—will shape the story to their perception of what should happen. At Three Mile Island (TMI), for example, they advised people to get off the streets because they felt deserted streets were appropriate for such a situation.¹⁵ Despite this, the media will cooperate with officials by holding back information when asked to do so. Even when there is no official request to withhold information, they will do so on their own initiative because they think it might alarm the public, an action which may prevent the public from getting needed information. In Harrisburg at the time of Three Mile Island, for example, the local newspaper, the *Patriot-News*, acting solely on its own judgment:

spiked a reporter's account of what would happen to bank records in the event of a disaster because it didn't want to provoke a run on the banks. . . . It rejected thousands of dollars in ads for evacuation sales and radiation detectors.¹⁶

Finally the media will have problems with technical stories, often finding it extremely difficult to assess the competence of alternative news sources. At Three Mile Island, reporters discovered:

The nuclear industry has developed its own language, and this was a handicap for the many journalists who did not speak it. A seemingly simple question of whether the core of the reactor had been uncovered and damaged elicited responses couched in terms of "ruptured fuel pins," "pinholes in the cladding," "fuel damage." . . . The distinctions are real, but for reporters not speaking the language, it was like suffering from color blindness at a watercolor exhibition.¹⁷

Given all these potential media roles, and all of the potential problems, it is not surprising that the Peel Regional Police Force, widely praised for its handling of the evacuation of the Canadian city of Mississauga, placed media relations second only to on-site command and control in its plan for response to a major incident.¹⁸ Others would be wise to do the same.

Developing a Plan

How does one develop an effective plan for media relations in disaster?

First, establish what media exist and what they can do. Second, establish their potential in disaster. Third, develop a plan for dealing with them and do that planning with media cooperation. Fourth, identify those persons capable of putting the plan into effect. Fifth, test the plan with the media playing an active role in the test. Sixth, evaluate and revise the plan in light of test experience, ensuring media criticisms are taken into account. Seventh, make sure the plan becomes known to all those involved in the disaster response including the public. Eighth, make sure the plan is constantly revised

in light of changing conditions, regular tests, and actual experience.

Identify the Media. Thus, the first problem in dealing with the media in a disaster is that the media may not exist. When Port Alice, British Columbia (population 1,600), got hit by mudslides, all communications had to be by word-of-mouth.¹⁹ Port Alice has no local weekly newspaper (though it gets some coverage in a paper published elsewhere), no television, and no radio. Although most communities have some local media, usually a weekly newspaper or a small radio station, some do not.

The same sort of problems—absence of media—can also occur when the media are knocked out in the wake of a disaster. Darwin, Australia, has already been mentioned: all public communications were out.²⁰ But the same thing happened in the Canadian city of Woodstock, Ontario, not far from metropolitan Toronto, when it was hit by a summer tornado. The city's only broadcast outlet, a radio station, went off the air because power was out and it had no emergency generator.²¹ When the local medical officer of health wished to warn the public about disaster-related health dangers, he could not do so. In Sydney, Nova Scotia, after a devastating windstorm, all TV stations were out for days; just one radio station survived.²²

Power outages, incidentally, will not shut down just radio and television; they can also affect the printing of newspapers. Severe transportation problems can also knock out newspapers. In a number of communities, newspapers were forced to cancel an edition, sometimes for the first time in almost 100 years, when a snow emergency made delivery impossible.

The first step toward adequate media planning is, therefore, to establish what media exist and whether they have the capacity to survive a disaster. Do they have access to emergency power? Are they aware, for example, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (formerly the Defense Civil Preparedness Agency) under its Broadcast Station Protection Program provides key stations with emergency generators and other equipment to maintain their service during a disaster?²³ Are they located in an area likely to be threatened early in a disaster situation? (One radio station had all the staff and power it needed, but it was knocked off the air very quickly when floods hit its community.)²⁴ Can they operate their transmitter from another building or the transmitter site should their main facilities be damaged or evacuated? Are they at least connected to outside media so they can relay information and have it rebroadcast back into the affected area?²⁵

Sometimes, in Canada anyway, it is possible to create local media in the wake of disaster when none normally exist. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has the capacity to turn repeater radio towers (towers which normally just relay signals from elsewhere) into low-powered local stations using inexpensive, portable equipment. In the United States, media services can also be provided at times when these are not normally available. Many U.S. stations go on and off the air at sunrise and sunset. Even if they do not, they may alter their

range and power at those times. Areas served in the daytime may not be served at night. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allows stations, without prior permission, to alter their customs during a disaster. They may stay on the air or, if off, go back on the air at times they would normally be barred from broadcasting. And they can maintain daytime range and power if this is useful for an effective disaster response.²⁶ The usefulness of this was demonstrated in Prince Edward County, Ontario, during a major snow emergency. The station at Belleville was able to serve the isolated area by maintaining its daytime range and power. Normally its sunset adjustments would have left the southern part of the county without adequate local radio service.²⁷

Getting a station back on the air, of course, involves more than just the knowledge the FCC will allow it to happen. The local disaster plan must include—in its fan-out or call-in mechanism—adequate information about where local media staff can be found and what, technically, needs to be done to restore service. Finally, local media personnel must know the regulations so they will not be reluctant to respond to emergency needs.

There is more. In the United States, as elsewhere, agencies such as A. C. Nielsen and Arbitron do regular surveys of audience viewing and listening habits. These ratings tell what sort of people watch and listen to media at what times. They also tell by inference who is not watching and/or listening when. This can be used to provide a clear view of what media will reach what audience at what times. It can then be used, to give just one example, to ask one portion of an audience (perhaps the young) to notify another portion of an audience (perhaps the old) that a disaster is imminent.²⁸ Different media also reach different audiences at different times and in different locations. For example, TV is largely a home medium with a large daytime female audience. Radio is more widely dispersed—in the home, the car, and the workplace—and is received by a much more heterogeneous audience during the daylight hours.²⁹

Awareness of audience can also enable disaster planners to design an education package that will be effective in reaching all the people it is designed to serve. It is not effective, for example, to design the same educational material with the same thrust for all media outlets in a community. Each outlet will have its own market, its own audience profile, its own way of communicating. Effective educational material must be fitted into that profile.

Market information is also essential in determining what stations cover what areas given a widespread disaster situation. Without such information some persons may be completely overlooked. And in areas where more than one language group exists, market information can be used to determine how certain language and/or cultural groups can be reached or if they can be reached at all. A study in Canada after the Miramichi earthquakes of 1982 showed that English-language radio was highly effective in informing English-speaking persons about what had happened, but it was

far less effective in reaching the bilingual or French-speaking audience.³⁰ Presumably this would be equally true in areas where there is a substantial black or Chicano population.

Sometimes in depressed areas, parts of the population are completely cut off from media. In a study of the lower St. Lawrence region in Canada, a region probably comparable to some of the isolated depressed areas in the United States, researchers found:

16% of the persons interviewed had no television set, 19% did not listen to radio, 31% did not read magazines, 37% did not read newspapers, 71% did not see motion pictures, and 74% did not read books.³¹

Plugging Media into a Disaster Plan. Once disaster planners have acquired the information they need about local media, especially their capacity to survive in a disaster, they can begin to fit the media into their local plan. How should media be plugged into a public education system? How should media tie into a local warning process? How should media be treated in a post-impact situation? How are media to be dealt with when they carry reports which are inaccurate or inadequate? How are outside media to be dealt with?

To answer all of these questions requires not a media plan but an overall disaster plan. As discussed elsewhere, this involves a careful hazard evaluation, decisions as to what response would be appropriate should any of these hazards materialize, creation of plans to deal with such events, dissemination of information about the plans to those likely to be involved in implementing them, testing of the plans, and reworking of the plans in light of the test experience. Finally, it requires widespread education about the possible hazards, the correct response to them, and the plans for dealing with them. And, most important, it requires plugging the media into all stages of this planning process.

In establishing contact with the media, probably the best place to start is at the top. In print, this means the publisher or editor; in broadcasting, the owner or station manager. These persons will usually suggest whom emergency planners should deal with. An alternative to going to the top is to go directly to those responsible for day-to-day news coverage. In print, this means the managing editor or city editor; in television or radio, the news director or someone with a similar title. TV stations sometimes have an assignment editor responsible for news coverage. In making contact, the emergency planner should stress that the community is anxious to have the media involved in disaster planning so they will be a part of disaster response. The approach to the media should not be all that difficult. Organizations, such as the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), have taken an active interest in crisis coverage. The NAB even has a manual on disasters.³²

Once the appropriate contact has been established, the next logical step would be to make the media executives aware that their own organizations need to have a disaster plan. Do they have stockpiles of food so they

can operate in an emergency? Do they have access to emergency transportation—snowmobiles for a snow emergency, boats for a flood emergency, helicopters if nothing else works? Do they have emergency power? Do they have alternative facilities in case they are forced to evacuate? Is there a way to call in staff should an incident occur during the night, a time when many facilities, especially television and radio, are often closed down? Do they have plans to rotate staff in shifts should a disaster continue? Are they familiar with FCC regulations that allow them to perform special services during a disaster? In the United States, radio stations can even carry point-to-point service messages if alternative carriers are not available.³³

EOC Is Central. Once the media's own concerns are covered, they must be integrated into the community plan. Usually, a good community plan calls for coordination and control through one central emergency operations center (EOC) and specifies that all information about the disaster must flow as quickly and correctly as possible to that center. If that is in place, the next step is to make sure that information can be given out to the media, and through the media to the public. It must be understood by all emergency agencies that quick and accurate information is essential to ensure adequate disaster response, and this can only be done if everyone cooperates in that task.

An efficient EOC briefing operation is an instrument of media control, especially if it is located inside a perimeter through which emergency and media personnel but not others can pass. Because all media will want to be part of those briefings, they are likely to be willing to accept some discipline in order to gain access. It is well-known that as much as reporters like a rare scoop, they prefer on balance not to be scooped. If the disaster organizer is the fastest and most reliable organization with information, it is likely to be the one which commands overall media attention and respect. The perils of the absence of such a center were demonstrated at Three Mile Island.³⁴

If all information is given initially to those reporters present at the briefing area, and only to them, it is possible to maintain quite an effective control of the flow of information. Since all media are being treated equally, all will have, to some extent, a similar reaction to requests for cooperation. That does not mean that radio, television, and print reporters will not treat a story differently or that local and national media will not have their own slant. It does mean that the basic relationship between the EOC and the media is likely to be fairly comfortable.

The task of making information available to the media is more complicated than it sounds. It requires skilled personnel. On occasion these may be trained public relations personnel who can handle the pressure of a disaster situation and convey information accurately on radio and television. It may also require the presence of experts who have some sense of media needs. Quite often some aspects of disasters are complicated, best explained through direct contact between knowledgeable officials and the media. It has rarely been

noted that media have difficulty with technical matters. In its plan for dealing with the highly dangerous hoof-and-mouth disease, for example, Agriculture Canada, the federal agriculture agency, plans to use veterinarians and not public relations persons to talk to the media.

No matter who acts as spokesperson for the EOC—a public relations person or an expert—trained public relations personnel have a number of other roles to play. One may be assisting the expert to deal with the media. Another is looking after media needs, seeing that telephones and power outlets are available and seeing that media concerns are reported to the EOC so they can be dealt with before they cause problems. Still another is keeping track of what is actually being reported. This function can be critical, because if errors or rumors are reported, it is essential that they be spotted and corrected or stopped as quickly as possible.³⁵ Another is dealing with the media not present, the ones who persist in calling for information by telephone. Some of these media can be temporarily ignored or left low on the priority list, others cannot. If media being seen or heard in the affected area are not present at briefings at the EOC, it is essential they be kept up-to-date with accurate information. The spokesperson will not have time to do this; it must be done by someone else.

In small communities it may not be possible to find enough skilled persons to perform these functions. One solution is to ask outside agencies to send persons to assist. They can be of use, for example, when the national media descend on a small community. Another strategy, used effectively in a number of Canadian communities, is to invite the local media to take over media relations. They can be plugged directly into the disaster response and can serve as the link between the EOC and the outside media.³⁶

Incidentally, even if the local media are not plugged into the disaster response, it is essential that local officials remember their long-term importance to the community. This was done with highly effective results in Mississauga where local media were given special help. It was not done at Three Mile Island.³⁷

The White House Press got all the front seats and we were crowded in the back, nobody from [the local paper] was even allowed to go into the plant with [then President] Carter's tour. It was two weeks after the accident started before a local reporter even got to set foot on the island.³⁸

often, local broadcasters felt themselves pushed aside as NRC and state officials gave preference to the networks and major newspapers.³⁹

There are, of course, a few ground rules for actually talking to the media. Spokespersons should never repeat media suggestions if these are inaccurate, but should reply in their own more moderate words. They should not talk about panic or looting, since these things rarely occur,⁴⁰ but rather should discuss the calmness of the public and the self-control being demonstrated. If the spokesperson does not know something, he or she should say so immediately and promise to get the information as soon as possible. If something comes up

which the spokesperson considers dangerous, it is not unreasonable to ask the media to hold on briefly so the material can be checked out. If an error has been committed, it is best to admit it at once. Errors which are concealed will leak out and cause far more difficulty than if they are immediately disclosed.⁴¹ Finally it is advisable never to say "no comment" when talking to a reporter. This usually is taken to imply there is something to hide. If information cannot be made available then a reason should be given.

Different Media Have Different Needs. It seems reasonable to suggest that the various media—local, regional, national, and international—may all have their various needs and that, to some extent, it might be wise to consider these needs. The local media, for example, will be anxious to provide specific information to local residents—such things as where is help available and how does one get it, how long will power be off or water be out. The regional media will be concerned about these things as well but will start to focus on the involvement of regional agencies including regional and/or state government. The national media may care more about the overall picture, focusing on number of injured and dead, extent of the damage, how it compares to the last disaster, and federal government involvement in disaster assistance. By contrast, the international media, when it is involved, may have its own unique perspective. For example, when there was flooding in Florence, the Italian and British journalists saw the event in different ways.

In Italy, the artistic losses took second place to the human and environmental effect; but they are paramount among the British reporting, which may perhaps have been addressing a public that thinks of Florence primarily as a museum of the Renaissance.⁴²

Local officials need to be concerned about these various interpretations of the event. Outside relief may depend not on what is needed but on what appears to be needed, and this may be determined by outsiders reacting to media reports. Regional, state, and national officials will have some firsthand sources about what has happened. They also will rely on the mass media to set the agenda for them. This may well lead to distortions as to the nature of the event and the appropriate response to it. A sophisticated local public information system will identify key responding media and make sure they are given the information necessary to portray the disaster in accurate but appropriate terms.⁴³

The fact that information is published outside the country does not mean it cannot have a local effect. Carleton University's Emergency Communications Research Unit (ECRU) has turned up three occasions when information reaching U.S. media affected response in Canada. In one of these, a U.S. law enforcement agency provided Canadian media with data the Royal Canadian Mounted Police considered as confidential.⁴⁴ The cross-border information flows indicate, by the way, how difficult it is to keep information quiet. While media, as suggested earlier, may cooperate in a request for confidentiality, it is unlikely information can be kept from

them if this is not done. This is true for several reasons.

In the first place, reporters have shown they can use all sorts of ingenuity in acquiring information. At Three Mile Island, for example, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* went directly to the workers to get the story:

Reporters took down license plate numbers at each shift at the plant, got the names and addresses from the State Motor Vehicle Department, then sent each a mailgram. . . . many employees were belligerent, most were exhausted, but 50 agreed to interviews."

A second reason why withholding information may be ineffective is that the media often have unofficial access to official sources by monitoring various government radio frequencies and by maintaining a well-developed network of "professional" tipsters.

But far more significantly, the most important reason why withholding information is a futile tactic is that the major source of crisis news is the general public itself. Studies of interpersonal information show that information by word of mouth can flow at incredibly high speed.⁴⁶ Even when there are media blackouts as was the case during the Detroit riots word got around by word of mouth what was going on."

When the Edmonton millionaire, Peter Pocklington was taken hostage, for example, one radio station which had missed the original police radio bulletin nonetheless got onto the story quickly. It received 50 calls from Pocklington's neighbors reporting the incident. Waxman, after studying a number of disasters, concluded:

The "hard" news was secured not by the newsmen but from the general public. The medium, of course, was the public telephoning the radio station."

Emergency planners not only have to worry about where the media come from, but whether they are radio, television, or print. Radio, for example, wants quick, fast information. It wants to be first. TV wants visuals; a telephone conversation will not suffice. Print, which lacks the speed of radio or the emotion of color TV, wants depth and graphics. Print photographers may also be more aggressive because their pictures need to be exclusive to counter the emotional impact of TV. Sometimes the skill of one medium allows it to get access to information that might otherwise not become available. After the eruption at Mt. St. Helens, NBC took a helicopter into the crater and filmed the interior. It then showed that film to a geologist:

The geologist was reluctant to help [NBC] at first but when they started showing the tape he couldn't stop talking with excitement. . . ."

Regardless of type, all media in a crisis become voracious consumers of information. Usually news items on radio are held to less than a minute, news items on television to a minute or two. During disasters, however, local media, and sometimes even national media, will devote hours of nonstop programming to disaster coverage. This will create a demand for enormous amounts of information. The endless coverage of the

U.S. hostages in Iran illustrates how far the media can go in paying attention to one story even in the absence of new developments for prolonged periods of time. If a story is considered significant, it must be reported even if there is nothing which can be really called news. This situation often causes problems at slow-moving crises where there are few day-to-day developments. Unless emergency officials come up with something to satisfy media appetites, the media will find things to report. These may be offbeat feature stories or items that amount to made-up or created news.

Concerns about radio, TV, and print coverage will also arise when media access to a damaged area must be controlled because of continuing danger or because a crime is involved and evidence must be protected. One way of dealing with such a problem is controlled access by a limited group of journalists known as a pool. Usually it is best to inform all journalists present that pool coverage is being arranged and ask them to decide who should take part, making clear there must be representatives of the three media. It is, of course, understood that all information gathered by the pool reporter, the pool photographer, and the pool camera crew will be shared with others. If the media decline to make a choice the emergency officials should usually turn to the senior national journalists present. If asked, any group of journalists can usually identify the most senior person among them. It is always wise to include the two major wire services, AP and UPI, since they provide information to virtually every other news outlet in the United States. It is also wise to include local media. Unfortunately, no solution has been found to a problem which is increasing—the problem created by the ability of many TV stations to scramble helicopters to a disaster site so quickly that they tend to jam the air space above the site to the point they interfere with equipment from emergency agencies. After the Morgan Hill-Halls Valley earthquake in California in 1984, for example, TV stations from San Francisco, Sacramento, and San Jose had helicopters over the site in well less than an hour.

All the above arrangements assume an operational EOC. Obviously, this will not be the case in the early stages of a disaster. But an EOC must be established as quickly as possible and the media should be aware where it will be and how they will fit into it. To avoid problems before an EOC is established it is essential that the media know what agencies and what personnel will be able to provide effective warning information. It is also essential that the media be connected to these agencies in ways which will not break down should the telephone or other communications systems fail. And it is essential that some carefully developed checks are established to make sure that warning messages, especially those prepared on tape and videotape, are not broadcast by accident.

Although media are an important way to reach the public, they are far from the only way. It is important for emergency planners to have alternatives should media systems fail or be nonexistent. In Darwin,

Australia, and Sarnia, Ontario, officials used loudspeakers at evacuation centers to keep the public informed. In Port Hardy, British Columbia, after the evacuation of Port Alice, officials used a notice board at the main feeding area to keep evacuees up-to-date. In St. Bonaventure, Quebec, the mayor simply typed out messages, mimeographed them by hand, and stuck them up so the public could read them. In Corner Brook, Newfoundland, use of the media was combined with direct contact. Deciding that it would be wise to meet personally with evacuees, the mayor asked the media to announce such a meeting, then held it.³⁰

Good Planning Educates the Media About Disasters. In developing all these plans for media relations, it is essential to keep local media informed and involved. If the community is small enough, perhaps representatives of all local outlets can take part. If not, perhaps a working committee can be formed, comprised of a representative of the local RTNDA and someone from the editors' association. The process, incidentally, may not only lead to effective planning, but may also educate the participants about the nature of the disaster, enormously reducing the probability of inaccurate reporting should a disaster actually occur.

The media should be told, for example, that panic rarely occurs in disaster, and that warnings are effective only if they are not countermanded by other, contradictory material. It makes no sense, for example, to run an evacuation warning over a situation comedy then stop it while the amusement continues. They should be told that bulletin interruption can be overdone. People may keep listening instead of acting because they are waiting for the latest information.³¹ They should be cautioned that rumors can easily develop in a disaster and that it is essential to keep in touch with official and reliable sources of information. They should be told that they will be asked to correct rumors and errors as quickly as possible so that the public will not be confused.

They should also be told rumors can be stopped very quickly if they are identified and corrected over the air. They should not be ignored. In Sydney, Nova Scotia, after a devastating storm, rumors spread that the ferry to Newfoundland had been sunk. The rumors stopped when the surviving radio station interviewed the captain. He, of course, reported the weather had been rough but all was well. A different rumor—that a child had been killed—persisted when the media never reported it and, therefore, never said that it was incorrect.³²

The media should also be told that they should report all the facts possible. The evidence suggests the public can deal with facts. There is no need to hold back disturbing information because it is feared it might cause panic.³³ The real danger lies in not informing people of dangers and what they should do about them.

Finally, all media should be made aware that reports of disasters will lead many, including the media, to descend on the scene or to call for information. This reaction can cause enormous problems in crowd control or jam communications systems such as the telephone.

By requesting persons to stay away from the scene and not to call unless there is a genuine emergency, the media can assist in reducing the problem of convergence. It is also possible for the media to reduce the number of nonemergency calls by shifting to a comprehensive news policy. For instance, by reporting those areas not hit by a disaster, the media can provide reassurance to many who would otherwise call to see if their homes, their friends, their families have been affected. Normally it makes no sense to report what has not happened. In time of disaster, however, such reports may reduce the problems of local disaster response.³⁴

Media should also be warned that even slight adjustments to carefully worded announcements can cause problems. Usually extreme care is taken to have disaster-related announcements worded precisely. Media should be asked to broadcast such statements exactly as written. If they find them confusing they should point this out to officials and not change them to make them confirm what they think was intended.³⁵

It appears that the most effective disaster reporting occurs when one well-known and credible person does most of the disaster broadcasting and that person is not changed during the regular broadcast period. If a person of lesser stature is put on the air, his or her reports are perceived as less credible. If changes are made constantly, authority tends to slip away significantly from what is being said.³⁶

One point may be critical in pre-disaster media and official education. Disaster research makes clear that in the initial stages of a disaster there is bound to be a certain amount of confusion. Precise information will not be available about who has been injured or killed, or what has been damaged or destroyed. It will simply not be possible to provide precise details about what has happened. The media, however, are taught that all stories, about disasters or anything else, must have specifics including who, what, where, when, why, how, how much, how many.

One of the most respected authors of a reporting text, Curtis MacDougall, in discussing coverage of accidents and disasters, says that no reporter can possibly overlook the following angles: casualties (dead and injured); property damage; cause of disaster; rescue and relief work including the numbers involved; and legal action as a result. It is precisely this sort of specific information that is hard to come by in the initial confusion that surrounds most disaster response.³⁷ Officials may well feel pressed to provide such information—even to the point where they start guessing—and may feel inadequate when they cannot provide it. An educated media will understand that such information will not be readily available.

In normal times officials often do not care if the media actually receives available information. In a disaster, officials must ensure information is not only available but gets to the media. Do the media have hot lines connecting them to key emergency agencies? Do they have backup systems which will guarantee they will

get information in a warning situation? Do they understand that telephones may go down in a crisis, that radio systems will sometimes fail, that transportation may be difficult? Are all officials who are likely to be involved in passing out warnings equally well informed about ways to reach the media? A tornado warning failed to reach Woodstock, Ontario, because the phone system—the only system used—was out. Canada's weather service, Environment Canada, did not use easily available alternatives, such as the Ontario Provincial Police radio net or the facilities of the main Canadian broadcast wire service, Broadcast News.⁵⁹

Many media are linked to various print and voice services. They also receive regular messages from public relations firms which specialize in putting out packaged information often from agencies that give priority to emergency messages. Sometimes media are even tied into state information systems.⁶⁰ It is essential emergency planners know of these systems, know how to contact them, and know which outlets they reach.

Test the Plan. The information about media has been acquired; a plan has been developed; the media have been consulted. It is time for a test or simulation. Usually that means officials will pretend there is a disaster and the media will be invited to watch. Because the media are not participants, post-simulation reports will tend to focus on what went wrong rather than what was learned. It makes more sense to convince some local media to act in a simulation the way they would in a real event. They should be asked to cover not the exercise but the simulated event: to try to press for information from already harassed officials; to try to crash official lines.

In short, they should make the planners aware that the media will be very much a part of what is going on. Once the exercise is over they should be invited to sit in as full partners in the post-mortem providing their views about what went wrong and what went right. They would then be in a position to report what happened not as outside critics but as participants.

If the media themselves cannot play this role, it may be useful to recruit other persons to do it. Most communities have at least a small coterie of persons with media backgrounds who are capable of carrying out such a task. Perhaps a local journalism program would be pleased to allow its students to gain some experience and provide a service by taking part in such an exercise.

Once the simulation has been held and critiqued, the next step is, of course, to revise the plan, taking into account the experience with the media or pseudo-media, trying to eliminate the problems raised. It is essential that this revised plan be communicated to all involved in the planning process including the media.

Public Education. This revision must then be followed by a carefully developed campaign of public education to inform the public about hazards which face the community and what to do about them. It has already been suggested that warnings are far more effective if they point out not only the dangers, but also the proper response. Public education ideally should wait until plans have been developed and the public can be

told of these plans and their part in them. This does not mean dangers should be concealed because there are no plans to deal with these hazards. It means that when danger exists, it is absolutely imperative to have adequate and up-to-date disaster planning.

Incidentally, before putting forward a plan for public education, it is appropriate to ask the media how they feel the plan—which includes appropriate public response—should be made known to the community. Most media are more than prepared to take part in public service work, especially if they feel others are going to be doing the same thing. It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that seasonal threats—the annual hurricane season, the annual flood season, the annual tornado season—should be greeted with appropriate educational programs and material prepared by the community's disaster planners but distributed with the assistance of the media. There can be brief public service announcements on radio and television including a message that the carrying station has developed an emergency plan to make sure its services will be available during a crisis. There can be notification via the electronic media that handouts (to be kept) will be published in the local paper. These handouts can include lists of specific hazards, precise information about how warnings will work, and specific instructions about what to do.

It is quite possible that a local television station, perhaps with some community assistance, will be prepared to develop some material on local hazards which can both be run on the station and used as educational material in local schools. A local newspaper may be prepared to print an advisory section which can also be reprinted and distributed as support material at local schools. Making the media an active partner in disaster planning is by far the best way to educate them about the disaster process. One highly effective program developed by the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) showed preschoolers how to deal with fires. It included Oscar the Grouch singing, "Stop, Drop, and Roll." It drew 30,000 letters after it was televised on "Good Morning America." The response was so good that CTW is now moving into disaster education.

During this education process, it is essential that the public be made aware of the role the media will play before, during, and after the disaster. The public should understand precisely how warnings will be issued, what form they will take, what the proper responses are, and they should be assured that the warnings will be issued precisely as suggested. They should be told that the media have made arrangements to continue broadcasting during an emergency and that battery-powered transistor radios may be essential in the post-disaster situation. Ideally the public should be made aware who will broadcast disaster messages so that the credibility of warnings and other messages are reinforced by the fact the public has gotten used to seeing the various personalities talking about disaster readiness. It was demonstrated at Mt. St. Helens that a public not sensitized may be slow to react to media warnings.⁶⁰

It is not hard to convince most media they should be

involved in disaster planning. There is every reason to believe that good performance before, during, and after a disaster can enhance the status of a medium in a community, and perhaps even improve its economic situation if the incident occurs during a period when station audiences are being rated. And it is extremely likely no station wishes to find itself shut down during what could easily be the best news story in years. For those reasons most media managers are more than willing to listen to suggestions about emergency plans and to ensure their operations are plugged into the community emergency response.

The community has an interest in media survival as well. If local media do not have an emergency power generator to maintain a broadcasting signal during an emergency, the community emergency agency may wish to consider sharing costs of such a facility. Perhaps, in addition, both the media and the community emergency planners may wish to get together to draft and pre-tape messages which can be used in certain types of disasters. Such pretaped messages may also be obtained from such agencies as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) which has a wide range of audio and visual material ready.⁶¹ Though there is some doubt about the effectiveness of such material when transmitted over radio, it appears such announcements are extremely effective when used on TV.⁶² It may also be useful for the community and the media to discuss whether the existence of specific cultural groups, especially those with a different language, justify making plans to have emergency announcements made in more than one language. The emergency planners may be able to assist the media in finding appropriate persons to do this. This could also be true for educational material prepared for print: as a community service, a newspaper may agree to print material in a language it does not normally use.

Planning Is Never Complete. It would be pleasant to report that with adequate planning all problems go away when a real disaster occurs. This of course is not the case. Disasters inevitably cause injuries, death and destruction. Communication and transportation systems are disrupted. Things do not happen the way they are supposed to. Inevitably most disasters turn up their share of media problems as well as other difficulties. For example, in January 1984, emergency officials in Princeton, British Columbia, notified the media of an evacuation because of the threat of an ice jam, but they failed to tell the media when the threat had passed. Persons in the affected area kept evacuating because media reports continued to tell them they must do so. Similarly, in Medicine Hat, Alberta (also in January 1984), the media were not told that police planned to expand an evacuation started because of a toxic spill after a train derailment. Persons in the affected area began to phone the police department to ask why the police were asking them to leave, when the media were reporting all was well.

One Very Predictable Conclusion

The real problems of media disaster relations are not, however, the difficulty of gathering accurate information, the difficulty in reaching the media with it, and the different approaches taken by various media. Rather, it has to do with the fact that disasters bring to the scene, immediately, an enormous number of reporters, many of whom are well-equipped with expensive and elaborate communications systems, including direct access to satellite transmitters. Local emergency planners, especially those used to dealing with weekly newspapers and small radio stations are likely to be overwhelmed by this media invasion. It is quite normal for more than 100 national media to be on the site of any incident within a few hours.

To some extent it would appear that local disaster managers can deal with local agencies and the local public. After all, these are the same people they deal with every day. It seems worth suggesting that handling the outside media may require more than local expertise. Since the majority of the media problems may come from sophisticated major media personnel and not from locals, local emergency planners should perhaps seek state and national help at the time of crisis. They should arrange to fly in, at the same time as the media are arriving, personnel who have experience in dealing with these outsiders.

The authors have already suggested to those concerned about the California earthquake threat that it might be wise to have a contingency plan to bring in experienced communications specialists to deal with the flood of journalists who will inevitably arrive after a major earthquake. Perhaps all local planners should consider this in developing their major disaster plan.

One reason this flood of media personnel presents a problem is that, to some extent, journalists operate as a co-op. Each individual will share with others what he or she gets, meaning that the officials will suddenly be forced to cope with a whole team of information gatherers. Tom Wicker, recounting his experience at Dallas when Kennedy was assassinated, wrote:

Every reporter on the scene seemed to me to do his best to help everyone else. Information came only in bits and pieces. Each man who picked up a bit or a piece passed it on. I know no one who held anything out. Nobody thought about an exclusive; it didn't seem important.⁶³

Even if this cooperation did not exist, information obtained by one medium would soon be reported by another. The media throughout the United States and, for that matter, throughout the world are connected by major international agencies such as Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Press, and United Press International, as well as news film agencies such as Visnews and UPITN. Most individual media outlets are connected with at least one of these agencies. In addition, both individual media outlets and the major news serv-

ices constantly monitor each other. Any story started by one and considered significant by the others will soon be duplicated.

Even when the disaster is over, and the major media have gone, media relations must not stop. The material

gathered by the media before, during, and after the disaster should be collected for official review, training, and for future public education. And, the local media should be asked once again to assess what happened and to write a new and better disaster plan.

Notes

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