

Local mass media operations in disasters in the USA

E.L. Quarantelli

The author

E.L. Quarantelli is Research Professor at the Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA.

Abstract

Summarizes, under 12 general propositions, the findings from a series of field studies by the Disaster Research Center about the operations of the local mass media in disasters in the USA. The topics covered range from the disaster planning undertaken by mass media organizations, to the content of the news reported, and about differences among the electronic and print media involved, to the input of citizens into stories about disasters. Additionally, raises questions about the extent to which the findings can be extrapolated to other than US society.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the major findings from about 15 years of systematic research on local mass media operations during the emergency time period of both natural and technological disasters. Much of the early work in the USA on this topic was carried out at the Disaster Research Center (DRC), although increasingly work by others has appeared in the last decade [1-5].

While the observations reported below are drawn from all the relevant DRC studies (for listing of earlier work by the Center see [6], later work is represented by [7-9]), the greatest attention is paid to the conclusions from the most recent research undertaken. Most of the statistics provided are from the latest field studies (especially [9]).

General findings

Disaster preparedness

Disaster preparedness planning among local mass media organizations is very limited and generally of poor quality. Little attention is paid to emergency and disaster planning in most mass media organizations. The majority have no disaster plans whatsoever, giving no consideration to problems they would have if their facilities were affected or to the difficulties of co-ordinating coverage of a major story in an altered and turbulent social environment.

In one DRC field study which focused mostly on disaster-prone cities, only 33 per cent of the radio stations 54 per cent of television stations (15 out of 28), and three of the five papers studied had any disaster plans of any kind.

Even where there is planning, it is of inadequate quality. Usually plans consist only of brief documents that specify systems of notifying and mobilizing personnel, and lists of phone numbers of relevant emergency organizations.

Yet even such material often cannot be located at disaster times, and the information is frequently outdated or no longer accurate. Furthermore, one DRC study found that only 37 per cent of mass media organizations actually used their planning in their community disaster response.

Disaster coverage

In localities with multiple mass media outlets, there is considerable variation in providing disaster coverage. The mass media system as a whole very seldom responds across-the-board to a disaster. Not all media outlets cover the disaster. There is also variation in the pattern and depth of those who present news coverage of the occasion.

Radio particularly gets differentially involved, with only a minority providing special disaster coverage. One DRC study found that 19 per cent of all stations did not cover the disaster in their own community (going off the air or continuing with normal programming). Another 30 per cent never pre-empted local programming, and 28 per cent did not increase their normal time allocated for news.

In contrast, newspapers tend to add open pages and often publish special issues on community disasters. Television coverage is not quite as extensive; some stations go off the air or do not operate (e.g. public education stations). One DRC study found that 83 per cent of stations pre-empted regular programming and 96 per cent increased their news time during the disaster period.

Information

Those organizations that provide information about disasters in their communities provide very extensive coverage. Disaster coverage is massive for all media. In one DRC study, local newspapers examined in nine communities struck by disasters found the range of coverage was 44-160 stories, with an average of almost 90 stories in each newspaper concerning the occasion. Of these stories, 33 per cent appeared on the front page and 55 per cent appeared within the first three pages. In addition, a total of almost 700 photographs accompanied the 904 stories.

In another DRC study which did not include all outlets, the electronic coverage of two disaster-stricken communities was examined. The local television stations produced a total of 175 reports during the first two days, or about 44 reports each day. In both cases normal programming was pre-empted, and news coverage was extended to cover the disaster. Radio coverage during the first two days totalled 134 reports, or about 34 reports each.

New services

News stories on disasters are almost exclusively provided by local personnel who have a strong proprietary sense about the news of the disaster. In several DRC field studies it was found that not only was the disaster a local story, but it was produced by coverage within the local mass media organizations. Over 95 per cent of all the stories were put together by the local staff of the media outlets. The few stories that were not written or produced by local staff were from state, regional and national bureaus. News services, wire services and outside sources amounted to less than 1 per cent of the coverage, although they were producing copy and tape in many cases and this material was available to the local outlets.

In a psychological sense, it is clear that local mass media systems consider disasters in their own community as "their" disasters; this is sometimes manifested in tension, if not open clashes, between local mass media personnel and national network staff members. In the print media there is also considerable concern evidenced over copyrighting material to ensure "their disaster" and "their coverage" is acknowledged.

Field reports

Field reporters have even more autonomy than usual in covering disaster-related stories.

Reporters in US society tend to view themselves and are viewed by the mass media organizations for which they work as exercising work autonomy. In fact, autonomy is a prized characteristic of the job.

.....
'...In a psychological sense, it is clear that local mass media systems consider disasters in their own community as "their" disasters; this is sometimes manifested in tension, if not open clashes, between local mass media personnel and national network staff members...'
.....

In disasters, field reporters have even more independence than usual. Given normal autonomy, this represents only an alteration of degree not of kind. Furthermore, the degree to which this pattern emerges is directly related to the magnitude of the disaster, the scope of impact, and the degree of disruption of normal communications. In general, the bigger and greater the disaster, the more autonomy field reporters have.

and the more difficulties reporters have in office communication, the more independence they have.

However, what occurs is not unique to the mass media area. There is a decentralization of decision making and much initiative on the part of "field" workers in almost any group involved in a disaster response. The nature of a disaster, where initially what has occurred and what is needed is unknown to anyone, facilitates and encourages independence of actions without much checking with normally and formally hierarchical superiors.

Selective reporting

There is a rather selective reporting of important emergency time related activities, with some receiving extensive treatment and others little, if any at all. One consequence of a reliance on traditional sources is that the activities of non-traditional sources "slip through the news net". The activities of volunteers, emergent groups and organizations that are not a part of the normal "beat" system or regularly courted for news tend to be ignored in mass media accounts. A somewhat distorted image of the disaster can be created by this practice. The activities of emergent groups and volunteers are often not depicted because they are not part of the traditional news net, so the image that is created in media content is that emergency response is primarily an activity of formal organizations. For example, search and rescue is overwhelmingly carried out immediately after impact by the immediate survivors, whereas mass media accounts focus heavily on formal search and rescue efforts that are relatively insignificant in the carrying out of the task.

.....
'...The activities of emergent groups and volunteers are often not depicted because they are not part of the traditional news net, so the image that is created in media content is that emergency response is primarily an activity of formal organizations...'
.....

Thus, while thousands may be informally rescued, news stories may primarily discuss dog teams from the outside who may or may not find anyone. In one DRC study, it was found that only 8 per cent of the radio, televi-

and rescue, making the task imperceptible in most coverages.

Mass media organizations

Mass media organizations change their formal structures or division of labour in attempting to report on disasters, with the middle size groups changing the most. Except in the case of minuscule, semi-automated radio stations, mass media organizations typically have a rather specialized division of labour even in groups with a relatively small number of personnel. Thus, in the electronic media typically there are engineering, sales, traffic, business and programming departments who normally do not perform duties in other areas (and within the newsroom there is a further division of labour between the news director, producer, assignment editor, editors, writers, reporters, photographers and anchors, etc.)

At times of disasters there are typically alterations in the normal division of labour, with workers participating in the processing of news stories in ways they do not usually undertake on an everyday basis. In smaller radio stations and newspapers, workers often perform a variety of different tasks and this pattern is continued during a disaster, although if the disaster is of enough magnitude, there is even more blurring of normal tasks and an alteration of the division of labour. Similarly, the larger an organization, the more likely it will be that it will have personnel for specialized tasks and this will continue during disasters except, if the disaster is large enough, the division of labour will break down. Thus, the most drastic alterations in the division of labour will occur in moderate-sized news organizations.

That is, the relationship between size and alterations in structure during disasters is curvilinear. Statistics support this conclusion. For example, in one study, out of 32 small stations, only 58 per cent pre-empted programming, as compared to 83 per cent of the seven large stations and 100 per cent of the 12 medium-sized stations. Furthermore, only 45 per cent of the small outlets and 50 per cent of the large stations increased their news staff in order to cover the disaster, while 91 per cent of the medium stations had an increase in personnel. Finally, only 41 per cent of the small stations and 50 per cent of the large ones actually sent reporters into the field to report the disaster occasion, while 91 per cent of the medium stations actually did so.

Intermedia differences

There are some intermedia differences in responding to disasters, ranging from the gatekeeping process being mostly truncated in the electronic media, to the print media providing relatively more "soft" news. One of the key concepts developed in the sociology of the mass communication area has been that of "gatekeeping". During normal times, the gatekeeping process in all media involves a number of stages or steps in which incumbents in various mass media organizations mould and modify the content of a news story so that eventually it is a collective product. An earlier DRC study on radio stations suggested that gatekeeping is truncated during disasters with the news processing being simplified and skipping some of the normal editing steps and stages.

The more recent research indicates that the previous finding of a truncated gatekeeping process is primarily true for the electronic media. In both radio and television stations there is a considerable increase in the amount of live coverage during disaster occasions, with news stories not going through the everyday filtering process. In contrast, in newspapers the gatekeeping process often becomes more elaborate or more complex during disasters than during routine times. Because the print media do not have a technological capability for immediacy of coverage, they tend to elaborate gatekeeping whereas the electronic media with such a capability truncate the process.

In addition, newspapers, compared with radio and television stations, adopt different roles and cover different aspects of disasters. Generally, the electronic media are the primary distributors of hard news items during the early emergency time period. Where there is not a loss of electrical power, television plays the prime role, otherwise it is radio. Furthermore, there is a definite tendency for these "mass media" to become "personal media". In many radio stations, personal messages are transmitted from listeners concerning their safety, the well being of others, and additional personal information. In contrast, newspapers become more dominant in the post-impact period. During this phase they provide background material and analytical coverage of the disaster and seldom do they become involved in transmitting personal messages to their readers.

Traditional sources of information

Mass media organizations primarily use traditional sources of information even at times of disasters. There is a heavy reliance on traditional, which usually means official, sources for news by all media organizations (although certain traditional sources such as wire services, press releases and syndicated services are ignored since their content is usually not relevant to local coverage of a disaster in the community). Many reporters first turn to their normal news sources, usually working their beats. For those who are able to maintain contact, the story is often composed from the perspective of these sources.

.....
'...a reliance on local, as opposed to other officials, is not only consistent with traditional news gathering patterns but is also compatible with the "proprietary" orientation that is developed by many mass media personnel towards their local disaster...'
.....

One DRC study found that local governmental officials were cited in 14 per cent of radio, 19 per cent of television and 24 per cent of newspaper stories; police, fire and relief agencies were also frequently cited. In contrast, local emergency management officials were infrequently cited, being mentioned in only 8 per cent of radio, 2 per cent of television and 3 per cent of newspaper stories. These patterns indicate the influence of traditional "beats" in the coverage of disasters. Those sources that are ignored are generally unattended during normal day-to-day coverage. In addition, a reliance on local, as opposed to other officials, is not only consistent with traditional news gathering patterns but is also compatible with the "proprietary" orientation that is developed by many mass media personnel towards their local disaster.

Command post

A "command post" perspective is generally assumed, particularly in the electronic media. Some earlier DRC studies suggest the local mass media in disasters obtain information primarily from community officials generally located at the command post or emergency operations centre [10]. A consequence is a tendency to present almost exclusively a "command post view" of the disaster.

Thus, it is argued that there is a bias in the reporting towards the perception of "reality" as seen by only one set of actors in the situation, mostly emergency-oriented governmental officials.

The more recent DRC research indicates that a command post perspective is especially assumed in the electronic media. A study found that within radio 62 per cent of the reports used some command post sources; for television the figure was 54 per cent of all stories. In contrast, only 21 per cent of the newspaper stories relied solely on these types of sources. More generally, it has been found that while reporters, especially from radio stations, use more than official sources to gather information, stories that are produced heavily cite and quote command post officials. Thus, on balance the general point of view presented is from a command post perspective, although there is some citizen-generated content.

Citizen sources

Citizen sources employed more than usual are used in different ways by the electronic and the print media. Relative to normal times, citizens are heavily used as sources of news during disasters. However, different conditions create different usages by the media. The size of the mass media organization involved, the nature of the media, and the scope of the disaster affects such use of citizens.

.....
'...in localities where the nature of the destruction and disruption makes travel and/or contact with officials difficult, individual residents of the community are relied on for "news" stories...'
.....

Smaller organizations, lacking certain resources, rely more heavily on citizens. Likewise, in localities where the nature of the destruction and disruption makes travel and/or contact with officials difficult, individual residents of the community are relied on for "news" stories. Finally, radio stations are much more likely to utilize local private citizens than the other media, for example, statements and information from residents tend to be aired immediately and/or callers to the station are put on the air. Newspapers and television stations are less likely to use citizen

sources. Furthermore, these media outlets are more likely to use citizens as sources for human interest and feature stories rather than for breaking hard-news items.

Disaster myths

Mass media reports, especially in television, tend to present content that perpetuates certain disaster "myths". A quantitative analysis by DRC of media news accounts indicates only a small minority of them refer to such disaster myths as the prevalence of panic, looting, martial law imposition, disaster shock, increasing crime, mass shelter utilization, mass evacuation and victim helplessness. Generally, less than 10 per cent of the stories in all media present these images.

However, the qualitative analysis shows a different aspect. Television in particular is prone to perpetuating disaster myths. For example, although reference to panic and looting constitutes only a small proportion of the total television content, their presentation is very dramatic and consistent with the mythologies.

Future research

A definitive answer to the question as to whether the above observations can be extrapolated to social systems other than the USA awaits systematic cross-societal studies. However, some preliminary research of this nature, including a specific Japan-USA comparative study[9], suggests that many of our general observations probably can be extrapolated at least to highly industrialized and urbanized societies. However, a stronger test would be research on mass media operations in developing countries.

Another question which needs to be addressed is whether the computer-based communication/information revolution that is occurring will alter the operation of the local mass media in disasters. Along some lines, one would hypothesize that there could be substantial differences in future operations, for example, as a result of the interactive potential inherent in the new media technology. On the other hand, much of what we have reported seemingly stems from social factors rather than the technology *per se*. As such, less differences might appear than might be thought of at first glance.

References

- 1 Bourque, L., Krauss, G. and Riopelle, D., *Resident Response to Loma Prieta Earthquake: A Summary Report*, Governors Office of Emergency Services, Sacramento, CA, 1994.
- 2 Burkhardt, F., *Media, Emergency Warnings, and Citizen Response*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1991.
- 3 Ploughman, P., "The American print news media 'construction' of six natural disasters", unpublished paper, 1995.
- 4 Smith, C., *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdes Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1992.
- 5 Wilkins, L., *Shared Vulnerability: The Mass Media and American Perception of the Bhopal Disaster*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1987.
- 6 Quarantelli, E.L., "The social science study of disasters and mass communication", in Walters, L., Wilkins, L. and Walters, T. (Eds), *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1989, pp. 1-19.
- 7 Wenger, D. and Quarantelli, E.L., *Local Mass Media Operations, Problems and Products in Disasters*, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, 1989.
- 8 Quarantelli, E.L. and Wenger, D., "A cross-societal comparison of disaster news: Reporting in Japan and the United States", in Wilkins, L. and Patterson, P. (Eds), *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*, Greenwood Press, New York, NY, 1991, pp. 97-111.
- 9 Quarantelli, E.L., Wenger, D., Mikami, S. and Hiroi, O., *The Reporting of News in Disasters: A Comparative Study of Japanese and American Communities*, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware, Newark, DE, 1993.
- 10 Quarantelli, E.L., "The command post point of view in local mass communication systems", *Communications: International Journal of Mass Communication Research*, Vol. 7, 1981, pp. 57-73.