CHAPTER 24

Unwelcome Irritant or Useful Ally? The Mass Media in Emergencies

Joseph Scanlon

When the crew of a derailed Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) freight train at Minot, North Dakota spotted anhydrous ammonia leaking from damaged tank cars, they immediately dialed 9-1-1. As a result of that call, the Minot fire department:

- Called the local TV stations;
- Called the local radio stations; and
- Put a warning message on cable television.

None of these actions alerted residents of Tierracita Vallejo, the area closest to the wreck. The leaking ammonia led to one death, 11 serious injuries, and 322 other injuries.

Because the incident occurred at night, neither of the local TV stations was broadcasting and two of the three radio stations were carrying remote programming. Though a staff member was at the third radio station, he did not answer the phone. The messages on cable did not reach those at risk because the derailment cut power to the area closest to the wreck. In any case, many viewers get television reception via satellite. Even sirens did not help: the ones in Minot could not be heard in the area affected (Operations Group Factual Report, U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, June 11, 2002).

In contrast, when Eastern Canada was hit by a severe ice storm in January, 1998, a radio station in Canada's capital, Ottawa, devoted its entire broadcast schedule to that storm. Not only did it provide live coverage of all news conferences by regional officials, but it also accepted and broadcast calls from local residents about what was going well and what was not. The general running the military response assigned soldiers to monitor that station, and ensured that any concerns were dealt with. After the emergency was over, he visited the station to thank it for its public service (Scanlon, 1998a, 1998b).

Although the media can play an effective role in disasters, as in the Canadian ice storm, Minot indicates that they are not always available when needed. The media may be critical for effective warning. They can act as a link between the public and officials and be the single most important source of public information. They can provide an outlet for the aggrieved and, on some occasions, become the glue that binds society. But there are limits: if officials are to make effective use of the media in a disaster they must understand how media function, and it is increasingly important to recognize that radio and television are not the sole means of

high-speed mass communications. Cell phones and the World Wide Web have augmented the way information is transmitted.

This chapter examines the role of the media before, during, and after emergency incidents. It shows that the media can perform an extremely valuable function during a disaster and that media participation is crucial to effective warning. But it also shows that there are concerns about the way the media may distort what is happening, partly because they focus on official sources and ignore the role of individuals. In addition, it looks at the role of some of the newer media which may not be as new as they appear, but emphasize that there will be high-speed communication in the wake of a dramatic event, whether via the older mass media—radio, television, and daily newspapers—or by the newer media—cell phones and Web sites—or by the longest surviving form of mass communication, interpersonal communication by word of mouth. Finally, it suggests that research is needed to compare what happened to what the media report; in short, why the media select what they do for their stories.

MEDIA RESPONSE TO DISASTERS

Media find crises and disasters engrossing, especially—in the case of television—if there are dramatic visuals, which carry more impact than the simple factual statements. It was the visuals that led to the extensive coverage of the initial assault and stand-off at Waco. It was the visual of a plane hitting the World Trade Center and the images of both towers collapsing that intensified 9/11 as a media event. The availability of personal videos made television broadcasts about the December 26, 2004, tsunami even more compelling.. But even before television, some word pictures such as the end of the Hindenburg held audience attention, and disasters have been media themes ever since there were newspapers.

When disaster strikes, the media learn about it, report what they hear, try to obtain more information, use their files to add background to their stories, and dispatch news crews. Often—as happened in Ottawa during the ice storm—media outlets will devote all of their air time or most space available to that single story (Scanlon & Alldred, 1982), and draft anyone at hand to gather material to fill in information. When two teenagers killed 13 fellow students, wounded 13 others, and then shot themselves at Columbine High School in Colorado, KCNC-TV in Denver used every staff member available for 13 hours of nonstop coverage: "Well over 150 newsroom regulars and extras pitched in to make the extensive coverage possible. Off-duty employees came . . . without being summoned and took up posts . . . " (Rotbart, 1999, p. 24).

The media also use technical resources and ingenuity to gather information. When Mount St. Helen's erupted, NBC took a helicopter into the crater and persuaded a geologist to view and comment on the resulting tape. At Three Mile Island, staff from the Philadelphia *Inquirer* copied the license plates of all vehicles in the parking lot, traced the owners, and started phoning them. Many were hostile but 50 agreed to interviews (Sandman & Paden, 1979, p. 48).

Most U.S. daily newspapers belong to the cooperative agency, the Associated Press (AP), and share all their news with AP. The electronic media have similar arrangements. For this reason, visuals filmed by one media outlet soon appear around the world. When major stories break, there is also widespread cooperation among reporters. In the wake of Three Miles Island journalists shared everything they had: "We got drawings and pierced together events. . . . We went out and got books on nuclear energy and compared them and discussed how a reactor works" (Sandman & Paden, 1979, p. 16). It was the same in Dallas on the day John Kennedy was assassinated: "Every one who picked up a bit or piece passed it on. I know no one who held anything out. Nobody thought about an exclusive. It didn't seem important" (Wicker, 1996, p. 28).

Even when formal or informal cooperation does not exist, the media monitor each other and take what they hear and see and read from their rivals and report it. Any single report—true or false—is soon copied and published everywhere, and as the Barseback incident in Sweden illustrates, false reports may be circulated. A single inaccurate report by one journalist led to worldwide coverage of "panic" after a radio drama about a nuclear reactor (Rosengren, Arvidson, & Struesson, 1974, p. 6).

CONVERGENCE

The media not only cover dramatic events, but they do so in a large-scale way. After a 1985 air crash involving the 101st Airborne in the isolated Newfoundland community of Gander, 325 media personnel arrived within 24 hours. Within 48 hours there were several thousand media in Lockerbie, Scotland after the 1988 crash of Pam Am 103. There were media-created helicopter traffic jams over Coalinga, California after the 1983 earthquake and a media city with its own mayor and Saturday entertainment in 1993 near the Branch Davidian compound at Waco. John Hansen handled media relations after the bombing at Oklahoma City: ". . . we . . . nicknamed the media area "satellite city" as there was almost a two square block area of nothing but satellite trucks and live trucks lined up side by side . . . " (Hansen, 1998, pp. 56–57).

This massive response and incessant demand for information creates enormous pressures on officials.

Officials in smaller communities are usually on first-name terms with the reporters for local radio and television and the local newspaper. They believe—usually correctly—that they can count on their cooperation when incidents occur. On several occasions, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) kept a local reporter briefed on a local incident and let that reporter deal with outside media. However, in a major incident, local officials are overwhelmed. There will be reporters not just from major U.S. television stations such as NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, but also from major newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times, The New York Times,* and the *Washington Post.* There will be reporters from the major news magazines—*Time, Newsweek, US News and World Report.* And there will be foreign journalists from broadcasters such as the BBC and magazines such as *Paris Match.* Many of these journalists are likely to be much more experienced with disasters than are the officials. All have their own deadlines and their own priorities. When Florence was hit by severe flooding, the Italian journalists were concerned about the impact of the flood on local residents, and the British about the impact on Florence's art (Alexander, p. 24).

In 1957, Charles Fritz and J.H. Mathewson labeled the massive response to incidents as "convergence" and identified three types: personal—the physical movement of persons on foot, by automobile or other vehicles; materiel—the physical movement of supplies and equipment; and informational—the movement or transmission of messages (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957). They stated that convergence causes problems: "[In Lockerbie] massive congestion to the public telephone network . . . brought normal telecommunications almost to a standstill" (McIntosh, 1989).

Fritz and Mathewson blamed convergence on the media, arguing early reports are not specific enough to satisfy the needs and curiosity of those hearing them. They suggest a temporary media blackout would reduce convergence (Fritz & Mathewson, 1957, p. 75).

This conclusion was largely accepted for nearly 40 years; but it is flawed. In a study of a tire fire in Southern Ontario in February, 1990, 14 million used rubber tires burned for 18 days. There were hundreds of responders: 12 police detachments and three police forces,

26 fire departments, 27 federal government agencies, and 60 voluntary agencies. None came as a result of news reports. In fact, initial media reports were quite limited (Scanlon & Prawzick, 1991). Similarly, in 1975, when a downtown office building filled with gas and exploded in North Bay, Ontario, there was no news coverage until 19 minutes after the explosion. In those 19 minutes, news spread by word of mouth so quickly that 80% of those interviewed by students belonging to Carleton University's Emergency Communications Research Unit (ECRU) reported they had first learned by word of mouth. Only 20% first learned through radio or television: "... somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 persons were at the site within the first hour ... 45 per cent said they went from simple curiosity.... Only a small percentage—eight per cent—said they went because their jobs took them there" (Scanlon & Taylor, 1975).

MEDIA MYTHS

Nevertheless, the massive coverage of untoward events does have a major impact. As E.L. Quarantelli has pointed out, practically everyone is willing to express opinions about what will happen in disasters, yet most in Western society have limited experience with such events.

> ... we think a strong case can be made that what average citizens and officials expect about disasters, what they come to know on ongoing disasters, and what they learned from disasters that have occurred, are primarily if not exclusively learned from mass media accounts. (Quarantelli, 1991c, p. 2)

What are those images? They are that officials must be careful about issuing warnings because of the danger of panic. They are that victims of disasters will be dazed and confused, perhaps in shock, and must be cared for by others. They are that in the wake of disaster, antisocial behavior is to be expected and there must be precautions against looting. They are that public accommodation will be required for those forced from their homes in case of an evacuation. They are in short a view that victims of disaster on the whole will not cope but that efficient emergency organizations will take care of their needs and protect them.

In fact, panic is rarely an issue in emergencies; it is so rare it is difficult to study. Instead of being dazed, confused, and shocked, the injured and uninjured survivors of widespread destructive incidents usually do most if not all of the initial search and rescue. They, not emergency services personnel, take victims to medical centers. Looting in the wake of disasters is not only rare, but crime rates also normally fall because people—even criminals—are preoccupied with other things. And though there may be some need for public shelter, usually about 95% of evacuees find their own accommodation.

The fact that so many individuals act on their own makes coverage of disasters difficult to impossible. The media do not have the time or space to focus on all these individual acts—and for the most part are unaware of them and their importance—so they portray the event as one that is being managed by emergency agencies such as the police, the fire department, and the medical agencies. This leads to what Quarantelli calls the "command post" view of disaster, meaning that since journalists do not know the important role of survivors and are unaware how of how limited a role emergency personnel play in early response, they will assume that emergency officials know what is going on. Their reports will reflect the official view of what has happened and is happening at the moment.

Because of this, the media tend to ignore nontraditional activities such as search and rescue, conducted mainly by volunteers working in emergent groups. Wenger and Quarantelli found, for example, that only 8.6% of newspaper articles and 8.4% of electronic media reports

on disaster mention search and rescue. When it *was* mentioned, those stories inevitably relied to some extent on nontraditional sources. In other words, to cover search and rescue activity, reporters would have been forced to use nontraditional sources. Because such sources were often missed, an important activity was given slight attention (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989, p. 62).

One problem caused by journalists is that in the early stages of a disaster—when no one knows what is happening—they will demand specific information about damage and destruction and casualties. This is what their editors want and what they are taught to get by journalism instructors and in studying journalism texts. One of the most respected journalism educators, Curtis MacDougall, said no reporter covering a disaster can overlook casualties (dead and injured), property damage, cause of the disaster, and rescue and relief work (including the numbers involved) (MacDougall, 1982, pp. 320–321). Even if they accept that detailed information may not be available immediately, most journalism texts assume that eventually there *will* be specific information. Scholars disagree. Janet Kitz, author of *Shattered City*, a book on the catastrophic 1917 Halifax explosion, wrote:

> I am frequently asked how many people died in the explosion. I have come across so many different figures; for example, 1,635 or 1,963. No list I have seen has ever included all the people I know to have died. I believe the figure was higher than 2000. (Kitz, 1989, p. 15)

The December 26, 2004 Sumatra tsunami illustrates the accuracy of her comment. The figures for the total number who died were at first far too low overall but far too high for the European dead. It is now evident that there will never be close to an accurate count of the dead. Even if the death toll could be calculated with precision, it would be hard to calculate the injury toll because many victims decline to go for medical help for what they see as minor injuries. Even those who do are often not recorded accurately. In disasters, record keeping is one of the first casualties (Scanlon, 1996).

EFFECT OF NEW REPORTS

News reports that portray the dazed and confused victims and express fears about looting lead to public misunderstanding about disasters. As Wenger, James, and Faupel (1980) found, people tend to believe the myths about individual behavior in disaster because these myths are so frequently reported by the mass media. Fortunately, whatever people think about disaster, they behave differently. They may think people panic but they don't panic. They may think victims will be dazed, confused, and in shock but they act very rationally. They may think looting will be a problem but much looting doesn't occur.

However, although individuals are not apparently swayed by the myths, that is less true of emergency agencies. Unlike individuals, organizations sometimes act as if the myths were correct. There is a tendency to hold back warnings for fear of panic and to order evacuations even after danger has passed because officials think victims can't cope. There is a tendency to use resources to prevent looting that might be better used elsewhere. Radio stations have held back warnings—even when these were officially requested—for fear of causing panic. Television journalists have encouraged people to alter their behavior so visuals will match the myths. At Three Mile Island, they advised people to get off the streets because that confirmed their view of public fright (Sandman & Paden, p. 58). They also played down reports for fear of panic: "At Three Mile Island, reporters faced a pressure that was new to science reporting. . . . Overly alarming coverage could have spread panic; overly reassuring coverage could have risked lives" (Stephens & Edison, 1982, p. 199). The same concern showed up

after 9/11: "There is no point in allowing this thing to appear worse than it is, it is already horrendous, and we don't need to make it worse by misstating numbers and we want you to keep that in mind" (CNN anchor Aaron Brown). And: "Tom as you point out we try not to exaggerate . . . and yet in many ways it's hard not to exaggerate just the things we have been seeing and the things we are told." (NBC reporter Pat Dawson talking to Tom Brokaw [Reynolds & Barnett, p. 698]). The fact is that people find it easier to cope with the truth, with clear factual accounts of what is known. It is lack of clarity and confusion that makes persons uneasy.

AUDIENCE

The mass media can have enormous audiences. The 2005 Academy Awards attracted an estimated 42.1 million viewers in the United States alone. There are also huge audiences for top-rated shows such as "American Idol," "CSI," and "Survivor." Given this and the massive attention the media devote to disasters, it would seem that they would be the ideal way to inform the public. That is not always the case, for four reasons.

First, even those huge audiences represent only slightly more than 10% of the population and the audiences for major news programs are much less. Each weekday evening, for example, about 20 million Americans tune in to watch the evening news on NBC, ABC, or CBS. That's about 10% of the population. The other 90% won't see a story even if it is on all three networks. Of course, some people watch CNN or other 24-hour news networks but those audiences are much smaller. Even "Larry King Live" draws only a million viewers, one eighth as many as NBC or ABC news.

Second, those large media audiences are often specific segments of the public. The mass media make money by selling advertising. To do that they must be able to show advertisers that their audiences are the ones advertisers want to reach. That means they wish to attract audiences of interest to specific advertisers. Let's suppose a college or university decides to start providing special classes for retired persons. There would be little point in placing an advertisement on a radio station that plays the latest hits for a young audience. It must find an outlet that reaches retired persons who may be interested in continuing education.

Those trying to plan effective warnings and public information must understand local media and local media audiences. They must know which media outlets cater to the young and which serve a more mature audience. They must be aware that some television programs are targeted for specific audiences: for example, daytime programming may be aimed at women working at home, Saturday morning programming at children. And they must know how to tailor a message issued at specific times. For example, a warning message shown while cartoons are running would have to be capable of getting children to alert their parents. When *Sesame Street* developed educational broadcasts on coping with hurricanes, it designed its programs to get children to start asking parents about the family's plans for evacuation. Most important, they must realize that large audiences may be useful to advertisers, but unless they include the persons who need to be reached they are not of value for effective warnings.

Besides age—older people tend to have different listening and viewing habits than younger people—a number of factors affect the nature of an audience. One is occupation. Some persons, for example, farmers in tractors and delivery persons, can listen to the radio as they work. Others cannot. Another is time of day. Radio draws a larger audience in the morning, television in the evening. A third is language. In Canada, one fifth of the population speaks French at home. In the United States, the foreign born population is now 12% of the total and half of those persons

speak Spanish as a first language. Even those who are fluent in English may turn to their first language during emergencies.

A third problem is that the mass media, especially network media, tend to paint a broad picture—"Flooding has become more severe in North Carolina," "There's another snow emergency in Wyoming." These statements may be sufficient for a general news audience but they do little to inform persons in a specific community whether they should evacuate because of the flood threat or cancel a trip because of the snow emergency. They also tend to trigger inquiries from those who are unsure of precisely what areas are affected. This confusion can become a major problem for agencies trying to identify those who are missing in the wake of a catastrophe. Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs accepted calls from persons who thought a relative might have been in the World Trade Center. Many who called did not know the difference between New York State and New York City and would report the persons they were concerned about were in Buffalo, which is obviously a long way from the World Trade Center.

Officials need to encourage both the networks and, more important, local media to be as specific as possible about areas affected and not affected. A useful report might say, for example, that a plane hit one wing of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia but that neighboring buildings were not impacted and no buildings in the District of Columbia were affected.

A fourth reason why the media are not always an asset is that some media do not carry news reports even in a community struck by disaster. Wenger and Quarantelli found that while newspapers and television provided extensive coverage of disaster—83.3% of television stations preempted regular programming—many radio stations ignored even local disasters: "A total of 18.6 per cent of the radio stations [examined for the study] did not cover the disaster in their community at all. Thirty per cent of the stations . . . never pre-empted local programming, and 28.3 percent did not increase their normal time allocated for news" (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989, p. 39).

When a train derailed and spilled some chemicals in Petawawa, Ontario on a Sunday morning, the local radio station did not interrupt its regular religious programming (Scanlon, Prawzick, Osborne, Medcalf, & Cote, 1985). As news of what was happening spread by word of mouth, local residents began listening to an Ottawa radio station that *was* providing information about the derailment.

WARNINGS AND RUMOR CONTROL

As the incident in Minot indicates, the media are crucial to an effective warning. Quarantelli concluded that this is "without doubt, the clearest and most consistent role [of mass media] in a disaster . . . (Quarantelli, 1991c, p. 23). However, to be effective, warnings must be specific about the threat, about who is affected, and about what to do. Most important, they must come from all possible sources at the same time. That is because when persons receive a warning, they check with another source to see if it is credible. Perry and Green found that at Mount St. Helens, 80% of those who received a warning tried to confirm it (Perry & Greene, 1983, p. 66).

"Technically any single communication channel cannot meet the information demands . . . , a mix of channels should be used to send messages . . . the news media need to be systematically incorporated into this mix (Perry & Lindell, 1989, p. 62)."

If interpersonal sources come first, people turn to the media (Kanihan & Gale, 2003, p. 89). If the media provide the first information, people will turn elsewhere. A study of how persons

learned about two hurricanes showed that more than 60% first saw warnings on television, 17 and 25% heard first on radio (Ledingham & Masel Walters, 1989, p. 43).

In contrast, on 9/11, when persons were informed by word of mouth, they turned immediately to the mass media, especially television.

When a train derailed and spilled chemicals in Mississauga, just west of Toronto, Peel Regional Police Force made its warnings effective by following all the rules for effective warning. They not only announced that there had been a train derailment, that some cars were leaking chlorine *and* that there had been propane explosions and could be more, but also went door to door to make sure those directly affected were so advised. And they were very clear about what residents should do—leave! Persons were told to use their own vehicles or accept a ride on a Mississauga Transit bus. (Buses with police were coming along each street.) The warnings were reinforced by loud hailers alerting residents to the threat and the evacuation order.

In addition, instead of telling the media *when* they had ordered an evacuation, Peel Police told the media when they were *about* to do so—and provided maps so television could show precisely what area was to be evacuated next. Many residents received the evacuation message first over radio or television. Some heard first via a phone call from someone who had heard or seen a news report (Scanlon & Padgham, 1980). They were gone or at least ready to go when police arrived at their door. In contrast, after the ammonia spill in Minot, in the absence of information on radio 9-1-1, the police station was swamped with phone calls. Many had heard the train crash or the sirens or, perhaps, had smelled ammonia. They called to find out what was going on. Since there was nothing on local radio or TV, they had to search for some other source of information.

EMERGENCY INFORMATION

The mass media can also play a vital role in keeping people informed after disaster strikes. During a snow emergency, CFPL in London, Ontario turned its entire programming over to information related to the emergency. A study by Singer and Green showed that the station served as an intermediary between officials and the public. The station would take phone calls from the public and relay any questions to officials. It would then broadcast the answer so that all could hear. Similarly, when ice jams blocked the river and water poured over the dikes in Peace River, Alberta, everyone turned to local radio for information: 100% of a sample reported that was how they kept informed. Many said the only time they were really worried was when the local station temporarily went off the air. It had been evacuated and had to reestablish above the flood plain (Scanlon, Osborne, & McClellan, 1996). The mayor had arranged for it to relocate at the telephone building on high ground. It was off the air for only 20 minutes.

Sometimes, even more dramatic ways have been found to maintain media service. In the wake of Hurricane David, a British destroyer used its own telecommunications facilities to broadcast to the Island of Dominica. After Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin, Australia on Christmas Eve, 1974, the Director of Australia's Natural Disasters Organization ordered one of the first relief flights to bring in 2000 battery-powered transistor radios so he could reach Darwin's residents (Stretton, p. 61).

Many communities have a number of stations—some larger cities may have as many as 15 or 20—so it is useful to know which ones are most likely to provide information in a disaster. [There is evidence people drop their normal listening and viewing habits and will lock onto the station or stations providing the information they want.] If even one survives,

its presence is an asset. When a severe windstorm hit Nova Scotia, there was a rumor that the ferry between North Sydney and Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, had sunk. The mayor asked the one station still on the air to send a reporter in a mobile unit to interview the ferry captain. The captain said that the voyage had been rough but his ship was fine (Scanlon, 1977). That stopped the rumor. The mayor was aware of what was being reported. An efficient media relations operation will monitor what is being reported and—if there are errors—take steps to correct those as quickly as possible. Because the media are devoting so much time and space to the single incident, it is usually possible to have corrections reported faster than at any other time.

Media outlets may have plans for covering major incidents, though even that is rare, but they usually do not have plans about how they will continue to operate in destructive incidents. Yet the media need power. They need the ability to get staff to work and to move staff when transportation is disrupted. They also need to know that the Federal Communications Commission allows stations to maintain their daytime programming signals and remain on the air during crises and to do so without seeking advance permission (National Association of Broadcasters, p. 19).

Wenger and Quarantelli found that most media outlets do not do such planning and those that do are not very successful at it. They found that when planning was done, it was generally inadequate, outdated, untested, and in any case could not be located. (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989, p. 33).

When a power blackout hit New York City on November 9, 1965, *The New York Times* had to scramble to find a way to print at least part of a newspaper. As those on staff tried to determine the seriousness of the problem, some wandered around the newsroom with matches; others went to nearby stores to buy candles or to nearby Roman Catholic churches to borrow some. Eventually the paper made a deal with the *Newark News* in neighboring New Jersey to publish an abbreviated version of the *Times* and supply vital copy. For example, the stock listings in that issue were not produced by the *Times* staff but borrowed from the ones already set in type for the *News*.

On 9/11 the *Wall Street Journal* was ready for an emergency. The *Journal* had a backup facility with equipment installed and the decision to get it up and running was made as soon as the first plane hit the first tower. The facility has been outfitted in the 18 months prior to 9/11 and editors had done two test runs to make sure it worked. "The South Brunswick offices seemed from another world—a comfortable, modern, suburban campus with expansive green lawns. The two "emergency" newsrooms were ready to go (Baker, 2001, p. 13)."

The move was handled so well that the *Journal* managed to deliver to its subscribers all but 180,000 of its normal 1.8 million copies.

MEDIA, VICTIMS, AND RELATIVES

One action that often arouses criticism is the way journalists treat victims and their relatives. When Pam Am 103 went missing over Lockerbie, Scotland, journalists waiting for information were cordoned off near the first class lounge at New York's Kennedy Airport. Seeing them, a woman asked what the fuss was about. An official said a Pam Am plane had crashed. She asked for the flight number. He replied, "1-0-3." She collapsed on the floor, screaming, "Not my baby. Not my baby." While her husband tried to shield her, photographers and television crews recorded her grief. "All I remember is losing control. . . . I felt like I was being raped by the media. I felt violated. I felt exploited. And there was no one there to protect me" (Deppa,

Russell, Hayes, & Flocke, 1994, p. 29). When she finally left Kennedy airport, she noticed something on her taxi's front seat: She asked the driver if she could see it. It was the *Daily News* and on the front page was her photo on the floor of the airport. "I was actually appalled," she said. "I just couldn't believe it." (Deppa, Russell, Hayes, & Flocke, 1994, p. 33).

That type of incident explains why Everett Parker of the United Church of Christ was so critical of the mass media at the Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media: "Day in and day out, we see reporters bullying statements out of stricken people; they take pride in their ability to do so. . . . It is dehumanizing to stick a camera and a microphone in the face of an injured or bereaved person and demand a statement" (Parker, 1980, p. 238).

Yet the media are *not* as guilty Parker charges. The widespread perception that in the wake of incidents the media act as ghouls, harassing victims and the relatives of victims and showing no sensitivity is misleading. Both anecdotal and research data suggests some victims and relatives welcome a chance to talk to reporters. After the 1985 Gander air crash that took the lives of 248 U.S. soldiers, an officer was assigned to media relations at the soldiers' home base, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He told the media that the military intended to protect the privacy of the soldiers' families. To his surprise, a number of families wanted to speak to the media. Most agencies now make it clear to victims and victims' families that they will protect their privacy if that is what they want but they will also facilitate access to the media if that is their wish.

Though they may feel uneasy when they make the approach, reporters often discover they are made welcome by relatives of those who died. These relatives are anxious to talk to someone and the reporter is anxious to listen. When the Broadcast Standards Committee of the United Kingdom interviewed 210 victims of violence and disaster, including 54 who had been interviewed by reporters, three quarters said they were not offended. That was especially true of those in a disaster. Most who complained were upset with newspapers, especially tabloid reporters, but not with broadcast journalists. Survivors said they were prepared to talk if stories had a purpose, for example, "exposed the human frailties and negligence that had contributed to major disasters and so help to minimize the danger of such disasters happening again" (Shearer, 1991).

In the wake of the Kennedy assassination, it was television that bound Americans together. Television also provided a shared public platform during the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11:

> During the month following the attacks, these three magazines [*Time, Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*] told a cohesive story of the tragedy and its aftermath, a story that moved from shock and fear to inspiration and pride. They did so by using testimony from readers and mourners across the country, as well as from victims and witnesses of the attacks. These actors participated, along with the journalists themselves, in the performance of a ritual with symbolic visual representations of candles, portraits of the dead and the American flag. . . . Overall, this coverage corresponded with the stages of a funeral ceremony. In that sense, it provided evidence that journalism plays an important role in—and can in certain circumstances be a form of—civil religion. (Kitch, 2003, p. 222)

By writing about victims as individuals, the media "humanizes" events.[1] During the Viet Nam war, *Life* magazine ran the photo of every service person killed in a single week. After 9/11, day after day *The New York Times* ran photos and brief articles about those who died, material later incorporated into a book (*The New York Times*, 2003). This "humanization" can lead to a

[1] I am indebted to a former researcher, David Tait, for this idea. Tait is now a member of faculty at Carleton University.

distorted impression. Noting that "human interest" stories are staple items in disaster coverage, Wenger, James, and Faupel suggests they tend to focus on the most impacted:

> Such stories detail the plight of the individual who has been "wiped out" by the disaster, who has lost their family, or suffered great misfortune. However, these atypical cases are often presented as if they were typical. . . . (Wenger, James, & Faupel, 1980, p. 40)

Another aspect of humanization is the attempt to link an event to the perceived audience. Journalists call this searching for a "local angle." Events are more likely to be reported if they occur close to the place of publication and if nationals are involved. (That leads to bizarre headlines such as; "10,000 dead in mudslide, no Americans involved.".) When Gladys and Kurt Engel Lang reviewed the 139 disasters illustrating front pages from *The New York Times* up to that point, they found that of the 18 really big stories . . . those for which coverage ran over four different pages—five occurred within the New York area. Since only 7 of the 139 disasters were in the New York area, it seems evident that the local ones get special treatment in the *Times* (Lang & Lang, 1980, pp. 217–272). This was evident everywhere in the wake of the Sumatra tsunami. In Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the media focused on nationals.

SPECIALIZED AUDIENCES

As mentioned, one problem with the mass media—radio, television, and print—is that they are, in fact, mass media with mass audiences. It is impossible, except in a general way, to know whether they are reaching the specific audiences officials want. There are other effective ways to communicate, some very simple, others taking advantage of new technology.

When disasters occur in small communities or in specific areas of larger communities, one of the best ways of sharing information is a public meeting. If such a meeting is well advertised, most persons will attend and will therefore hear the same information at the same time, get to ask questions about anything that is not clear, and get answers. They will hear the questions asked by others and the answers they receive. They will not get information second or third hand. Such meetings are the ideal way to put down any false information or rumors. When a flash flood occurred in the rural Pemberton Valley of British Columbia, the province placed fliers in the mail boxes of all local residents announcing a public meeting, during which they reviewed exactly what was being done and kept answering questions until everyone was satisfied (Scanlon, Conlin et al., 1984).

Sometimes the most effective way to reach specific groups in a community is by identifying the leaders of those groups, whether in religious or social organizations or perhaps leaders in the business community. This may be especially important for reaching immigrant populations. Sometimes it is also possible to reach those who do not speak English through their children who do speak English and can be approached through the schools. Teachers may be aware of which families have language problems and which parents may be seen by others as leaders in a specific community. Coroners have learned that when sudden death occurs it is important to have knowledgeable contacts in the community so that ethnic sensitivities will not be inadvertently offended. Emergency planners need to do the same.

When an incident occurs, it is common to make special arrangements for next of kin. After the Swissair crash in Nova Scotia, the Canadian Admiral in charge—the plane crashed into the ocean—decided to be as transparent as possible. He visited the Lord Nelson Hotel, where most relatives were staying, and met with the families every day, told them what was

going on, and what would be released. No information was given to media before families were informed. When United States Navy underwater cameras secured pictures of the tangled wreckage, the tapes were shown first to the families, then, with their support, made public. The families were also kept informed on a daily basis by the medical examiner and individual families were notified when a family member was identified. The Swissair response team set up a Web site, and posted information on that Web site, including visuals such as the underwater photos as soon as they had been shown to the families. Families could update themselves by logging onto the Web and there was a readily available public record of everything that had been released.

Similarly, on 9/11 when many trans-Atlantic flights were diverted to Canada's Atlantic Provinces, the authorities realized stranded travelers would want to contact relatives by phone and by e-mail. In Gander, the telephone company installed a bank of phones outside its offices (the weather was excellent) and managed to bring in and install an extra telephone tower so that there would be sufficient capacity for cell phones. Shelters made certain that there was access to the Web. A group of executives from the Rockefeller Foundation actually ran their affairs working on line from a school in the village of Lewisporte. Because the travelers were in schools, churches, camps, and other facilities in several different locations, Gander also used its town Web site to provide information as quickly as it could. For example, it posted information about each departing flight so those waiting could see what was happening (Scanlon, 2002a).

Another way to deal with communication in crises is to establish call centers where members of the public can call to clear up their own personal concerns. These proved extremely effective in Ottawa Carleton during the 1998 ice storm. Every phone call to the region was answered and those answering were briefed hourly to make sure they had the latest information. In addition, those handling the calls noted the questions they were being asked. If it appeared a particular question was being asked continually, the information requested was covered at one of the twice-daily news conferences. The same sort of approach was taken in the Toronto area during the SARS outbreak. Some agencies establish call centers for the media, hoping, in this way, they can make certain the media are well informed. These call centers do not provide new information but they do guarantee that media personnel are up-to-date on what has been said (Scanlon, 1998b). These are now standard when the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta deal with health emergencies.

NEWER MEDIA

There is a perception that mass communication began with the advent of radio and television. It actually started long ago. Daniel Dafoe in his novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* reports, no doubt quite accurately, how news of the plague reached London:

> We had no such things as printed News Papers in those days to spread Rumours and Reports of Things; and to improve them by the Invention of Men, as I have lived to see practis'd since. But such things as these were gathered by Letters of Merchants and others, who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by Word of Mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole Nation, as they do now. (Dafoe, 1969, p. 1)

The flow of news, however, speeded up with the telegraph and telephone. When a French munitions ship exploded in the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, on December 6, 1917, the news spread across that province just as fast as news of the Kennedy assassination spread across the United States nearly half a century later. This occurred because of the efficiency of the railway

telegraph system—which linked every town on the railway—and because of the existence of rural "party line" telephones, which allowed everyone on a line to listen in on someone else's call. The "party line" was in effect a rural broadcasting system.

Incidentally, research on diffusion of news shows that news of truly major events—including ones of local importance—travels quickly and accurately and that much of it travels by word of mouth. For example, in Port Alice, a small mill town on the west coast of Vancouver Island, word of a threatening mudslide raced through the town even though Port Alice has no local radio yet alone TV. Similarly, news of rioting in Detroit spread extremely quickly by word of mouth despite a media blackout (Singer, Osborn, and Geschwender, p. 44).

Of course, the newer means of communication are also playing a role in the way information is shared:

- When a British Midlands aircraft crashed and blocked the M-1 auto route North of London, one vehicle in the subsequent traffic jam was an NHK Japan television satellite unit. It immediately uplifted visuals and sent them to Tokyo. The news thus reached Asia before it spread in England.
- On 9/11, when passengers on a hijacked aircraft used their cell phones, they learned that other aircraft had also been hijacked and had been used as missiles to attack the World Trade Center. On the basis of that information, they managed to force their plane to crash into a field instead of its target.
- In 2005, when the tsunami struck Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand, there were almost immediately reports humming around the world on the World Wide Web. There were also comments on the warning system or lack of it and on the problems in specific areas. Some of those affected used mobile phones to call Europe. Several foreign ministers got first word of the catastrophe by phone calls from Thailand and they got those calls before their embassy knew what was happening and well before the story broke on BBC News or CNN.

Today many Web sites known as blogs are targeted for specific communities and specific parts of communities. There is, for example, even a guide to blogs for New York City organized by subway line and stop. This map shows two blogs—"Sam's L.J." and "Tangled in the Web"—at the Old Town stop on Staten Island. If there was an emergency in that area it would be wise for someone to monitor those blogs in order to make sure any information posted was accurate—or quickly corrected—and to see whether there was information on the blog that had been missed.

Another modern communications system that needs to be included in emergency plans is the Amber Alert. At present, it is used for missing persons, especially children. But it could be equally important if there is a need to warn motorists of a toxic threat or that they may have been exposed to a toxic threat. In past incidents, persons transporting contaminated victims have become disoriented as they themselves began to breathe in the toxic fumes.

And the potential keeps growing. Tom Clancy's novel, *The Bear and the Dragon*, portrays a Chinese attack on Russia being picked up in detail on UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) drones, relayed by satellite to Washington, and then released onto the World Wide Web so that Chinese could see what was happening on their individual laptops. It is not a far-fetched idea. In fact, it was suggested recently that similar drones could be used by America's enemies for biological or chemical terrorism. Anyone at any time can log on to his or her home computer and watch the incredible number of earthquakes that are continually occurring off North America's West Coast. Most are relatively minor but if the big one hits it will be possible to have watched it on a laptop. The day this section was written, there were three minor earthquakes in the San

Francisco area. That information can be accessed within seconds; so there is no way it can be concealed from the media.

Despite all these developments and the fact many incidents affect those far removed from the impact area, news of some events is still slow to spread. The incident at Chernobyl on April 26, 1986, for example, even though it led to 31 deaths, 150 hospitalized with radiation sickness, and an evacuation of 130,000 persons, was not known world wide until scientists in Sweden and Finland began to notice unusual levels of radioactivity. Even then there was skepticism. The Swedes, for example, evacuated one of their own nuclear plants before they realized something must have happened elsewhere (Scanlon, 2001, p. 1). Eventually, most of Europe and North America recorded increased radiation, especially if elements from Chernobyl passed while it was raining.

DISCUSSION

If the mass media are to be useful before, during, and after a disaster, it is important that officials understand what media exist, what audiences they serve, when they are broadcasting, and how they can be reached. (This includes knowing how to reach off-duty personnel with the authority and the knowledge required to get a radio or television station on the air when it is normally not broadcasting.) It is especially important to know if some local media provide ethnic programming or broadcast in a language other than English. And it is important to know where there are concentrations of ethnic groups or language groups so a sensible decision can be made as to whether particular media are important in issuing a warning or providing public information in the wake of a disaster. Finally, it would be wise to have someone ascertain whether local media have backup power and the other resources they need to continue to operate in an emergency.

It is far more likely that the desired cooperation will be given if contacts with the various media are made well before incidents occur and if material is prepared and tested before it is needed. It would make little sense to have an announcement in Spanish read by someone who was not well liked in the Spanish-speaking part of the community. It would be far better still if there was a sustained effort to involve all media in disaster education so that the media and their audiences are aware of threats and what to do if those threats materialize. One of the tragedies of the recent tsunami was that coastal water receded before the tsunami struck but very few recognized the significance of this warning sign. Perhaps the best way to develop such education programs is to schedule them on a seasonal basis, especially where the threats come on a seasonal basis. In other words, hurricane-related education would best be started just before the beginning of the annual hurricane season.

Such an education program should start by making sure that various audiences, including school children, are taught about the community's disaster history, about the threats that face that community, and about the appropriate response to each threat. (Different threats may call for a different response: going to the basement for shelter might make sense for a tornado; it would not for a flood.) At the same time, the public and the media should be taught about human behavior in disaster and made aware of the myths that exist. This is especially important for the media because it might reduce the probability of faulty reports. Tied to such public and media education must be an explanation of why in the early stages of a widespread destructive incident, no one in emergency agencies will know precisely what is happening. Emergency response initially involves catch-up because rationale decisions cannot be made without adequate information—and gathering that information takes

time, especially if roads are blocked with debris and telephone and radio systems are down or overloaded.

Of course, if officials are going to make contact with specific groups they need to know not only how to reach those groups but also what is the appropriate way to make contact. They also need to be sensitive to things that might be acceptable to one group but unacceptable to another. And they need to know if a group is cohesive or split into segments. (Early in my research career I asked a person who spoke a particular language to make contact with a source, unaware that the country those two came from consisted of two distinct and antagonistic groups.) As part of the preparation, it is essential that census data be reviewed to ascertain what language and ethnic groups exist in a community and how things are changing over time.

It is also becoming increasingly important that some members of any emergency response team have sophisticated computer skills. These will be needed to monitor the various Web sites including relevant blogs, to post information on the Web, and to make certain errors are promptly corrected no matter where these occur. Such skills are also essential if a community is to keep its own Web site up-to-date and expand it if an incident merits that.

MEDIA SPECIALISTS

It makes sense even for a small community to have someone involved in emergency planning who understands how media operate. This might well be someone from local media, ideally someone nominated by the media community. In larger communities, there needs to be a public information specialist who can advise officials on dealing with media. A media specialist should develop policies and procedures for special media relations problems and explain those to the persons who will have to implement them. For example, persons in shelters should be guaranteed privacy but arrangements should also be made so that anyone willing to talk to the media can do so. Similarly, plans need to be put in place to deal with relatives of those who are killed or seriously injured in an incident. There must be some place for them to stay and some arrangements to guarantee them privacy.

Perhaps the specialist can also consult with the person running the call center about the way inquiries are to be answered. If a call center is created, inevitably some journalists will pose as ordinary citizens and ask questions about what is going on. The answers from the call center staff need to be the same as the ones being given to the media. Call center staff also need training and ideally some experience at answering public inquiries. Experience shows that some persons are not at ease in such a position.

In Ottawa Carleton during the January, 1998 ice storm call center staff noted the kind of questions that were being asked and advised those at the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) about these. They then discussed what sort of information needed to be made available to the public. At the same time, those in the EOC were receiving reports about problems in the community. The result was that the twice daily news conferences dealt with issues that people were concerned about:

- January 9 to 3 P.M. The Regional Fire Coordinator urges people to use extreme caution when either trying to heat or light their homes. We have already lost three homes in Ottawa-Carleton due to accidents with fireplaces and other heat sources. Never use a barbecue inside a building. Do not substitute one fuel for another as this can cause problems.

- January 10 to 3 P.M. Regional officials are advising that even without power, there is no present danger of frozen buried water pipes. . . . HOWEVER, if your home is without power and heat, and if the temperature inside the building goes down to zero or lower, you must start your water immediately to protect your plumbing from freezing.
- January 11 to 10 A.M. Hypothermia, food safety, and carbon monoxide poisoning remain the prime concerns of the Medical Officer of Health. We had three cases of carbon monoxide poisoning overnight due to fumes penetrating the house from the garage where a generator was running. The only reason these people survived was because of a detector. **Please do not run generators from inside buildings that are attached to living quarters.**

It is important that whatever happens and no matter how many outside media arrive to cover an incident, local officials remember that, when the incident is over, they will still have to deal with local media. And it is the local media that will write the editorials and host the hot line shows that may determine how the public feels about the way the emergency was handled. In Peel Region, during the Mississauga evacuation, the police provided special help for local media, even helping a weekly newspaper to move equipment so it could continue to publish.

When there is no proper planning, the job of dealing with the media is often passed off onto someone who has no media relations experience and is not well informed about what is going on—or is given to the mayor of head of council, because those persons are used to dealing with the media. Neither decision is necessarily a good one. The media can be an important asset in an emergency. They can assist with public education. They can make a warning effective. They can keep people informed throughout a crisis. But they can also create pressures that make officials feel uncomfortable and can perpetuate myths and spread rumors. That is why dealing with the media requires someone trained for that role, someone who is comfortable in front of a camera and microphone.

In today's sophisticated world, dealing with the media also requires a fair amount of knowledge about a community as well as significant technical skills. Unless someone understands the composition of the community—especially its ethnic and language makeup—messages may fail to reach significant groups. Unless someone understands how information is transmitted and consumed over the Internet and how such things as blogs work, inaccurate information will remain uncorrected. The media can be a useful ally in disasters but they can also be an unwelcome irritant. Which it is may be determined by how much preparation has gone into media relations planning.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The media can clearly be a major asset before, during, and after emergencies. They are crucial in fact for effective warning, for warnings must come from all possible channels at the same time. They are often the main way those in an impacted community learn what is happening, especially if they are forced to leave their homes. They are the single best way to get out public information to a mass audience and can be crucial if rumors are to be stopped. Yet they are also the main purveyors of disaster myths because they focus on emergency agencies and officials and ignore the role played by individuals. Yet in most destructive incidents, the initial response is by individuals and not by emergency personnel.

Although there is now a fair amount of literature about the role of the media in disaster, there is little research comparing what actually happens in a disaster to what the media report.

There have been attempts to analyze media content, for example, to see if myths are present, but such research has a serious weakness. One cannot establish whether media are accurate in what they report without knowledge of what has happened. What is badly needed is a study of what the media report during an incident tied to a study of what actually happened or, perhaps, as a starting point, an attempt to document what the media reports and check to see its accuracy. The few general studies that have been done in this area tend to show that the average news report contains factual errors and that many of those inaccurate statements are not tied to any source. It might also be helpful if it were possible to arrange to do participant observation study to observe how a reporter covering a disaster operates. There is also still room for case studies of media operations. The decision of the New Orleans television stations to relocate before Katrina stuck was a superb chance to see how the media performed in a major catastrophe.