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THE MASS MEDIA IN DISASTERS IN  
THE UNITED STATES

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This paper summarizes the major findings from about 15 years of research on local mass media operations during the emergency time period of both natural and technological disasters. Much of this study in the United States has been carried on at the Disaster Research Center (DRC), although increasingly other work is appearing (see Quarantelli, 1989). While the observations reported below are drawn from all the relevant DRC studies, greatest attention is paid to the conclusions from the most recent of the research undertaken; most of the statistics provided are from that study (see Wenger and Quarantelli, 1990).

(1). Disaster preparedness planning among 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 impacted or to the difficulties of coordinating coverage of a major story in an altered and turbulent social environment. In some DRC research focused mostly on disaster prone cities, only 33% of the radio stations had any disaster plans of any kind, and only 54% of television stations (15 out of 28), and 3 of the 5 papers studied.

Even where there is planning, it is of inadequate quality. Usually plans consists only of brief documents that specify systems of notifying and mobilizing personnel, and lists of phone numbers of emergency relevant organizations. But even such material often can not be located at disaster times, and the information is frequently outdated or no longer accurate. One DRC study found that only 37% of mass media organizations actually used their planning in their community disasters.

(2). 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 get differentially involved with only a minority providing special disaster coverage. One DRC study found that 19% of all stations did not cover the disaster in their own community (going off the air or continuing with normal programming). Another 30% never preempted local programming, and 28% 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% of stations preempted regular programming and 96% increased their news time during the disaster period.

(3). 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 impacted by disasters found the range of coverage was from 44 to 160 stories with an average of almost 90 stories in each newspaper concerning the occasion. Of these stories, 33% appeared on the front page and 55% appeared within the first three pages. In addition, a total of almost 700 photographs accompanied the 904 stories.

In another DRC study that did not include all outlets, the electronic coverage of two disaster impacted 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 preempted, and news coverage was extended to cover the disaster. Radio coverage during the first two days totaled 134 reports, or about 34 reports each.

(4). News stories on disasters is almost exclusively provided by local personnel who have a strong proprietary sense about the news of the disaster.

In a DRC study 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% of all the stories were produced by the local staffs 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 one percent of the coverage, even though 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 tensions 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 insure "their disaster" and "their coverage" is acknowledged.

(5). Field reporters have even more autonomy than usual in covering disaster related stories.

Reporters in American 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 disasters, field reporters have 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 scope of the disaster and the more difficult reporters have in office communication, the more independence they have.

However, what occurs is not distinctive 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.

(6). 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 upon traditional sources is that the activities of nontraditional 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 right 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. 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% of the radio, the television and the newspaper stories discussed search and rescue, making the task invisible in most coverages.

(7). Mass media organizations change their formal structures or division of labor 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 labor 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 newsroom there is a further division of labor between the news director, producer, assignment editor, editors, writers, reporters, photographers and anchors, etc.)

At times of disasters there typically are alterations in the normal division of labor with workers participating in the processing of news stories in ways they usually do not do on an everyday basis. In smaller radio stations and newspapers, workers often do 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 labor. Similarly, the larger an organization, the more likely it will have personnel for specialized tasks and this will continue during disasters except if the disaster is large enough, the division of labor will break down. Thus, the most drastic alterations in the division of labor 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% preempted programming, as compared in 83% of the seven large stations and 100% of the 12 medium sized stations. Furthermore, only 45% of the small outlets and 50% of the large stations increased their news staff in order to cover the disaster, while 91% of the medium stations had an increase in personnel. Finally, only 41% of the small stations and 50% of the large ones actually sent reporters into the field to report the disaster occasion, while 91% of the medium outlets did so.

(8). 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 mass communication area has been that of "gatekeeping". During normal times in all media, the gatekeeping process involves a number of stages or steps in which incumbents in various mass media organizations mold 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.

(9). Mass media organizations primarily use traditional sources of information even at times of disasters.

There is a heavy reliance upon 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.

One DRC study found that local governmental officials were cited in 14% of radio, 19% of television and 24% 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% of radio, 2% of television and 3% of newspaper stories. These patterns indicate the influence of traditional "beats" in the coverage of disasters. Those sources that are ignored are generally unattended to during normal day to day coverage. In addition, a reliance upon 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 toward their local disaster.

(10). A "command post" perspective is generally assumed particularly in the electronic media.

Some earlier DRC studies suggest the local mass media in disasters by obtaining information primarily from community officials generally located at the command post or emergency operations center tends almost exclusively to present a "command post view" of the occasion. 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 (Quarantelli, 1981).

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% of the reports used some command post sources; for television the figure was 54% of all stories. In contrast, only 21% of the newspaper stories relied solely on these type 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.

(11). Citizen sources employed more than usual are used in differential 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 differential 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.

Smaller organizations, lacking certain resources, rely more heavily upon 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 upon 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 televisions stations are less likely to use citizen sources. Furthermore, these media outlets are more likely to utilize citizens as sources for human interest and feature stories rather than for breaking, hard-news items.

(12). 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% of the stories in all media present these images.

However, the qualitative analysis indicates a different matter. 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.

A definitive answer to the question whether the above observations can be extrapolated to social systems other than the United States awaits systematic cross-societal studies. However, some preliminary research of this nature, including a specific Japan-United States comparative study (Quarantelli and Wenger, 1990), suggests that our findings probably can be extrapolated at least to highly industrialized and urbanized societies.

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