

University of Delaware
Disaster Research Center

PRELIMINARY PAPER
#86

A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF
LOCAL NEWSPAPERS AND DISASTER RELATED
CITIZEN GROUPS*

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September 1983

*A version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Social Science Association in Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 27-30, 1983. The work reported on in this paper was partly supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. CEF-8113191; however, any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

Introduction

With the probable success of USA Today (a nationwide newspaper whose content consists primarily of extremely brief news items), one could speculate that the future of the newspaper will rest in the hands of a society unwilling to devote time to reading, and/or not interested in journalistic details of news events. If so, it is simple to hypothesize that the print media will lose its important role in society compared to other forms of present and emerging mass media technologies. However, the history of the newspaper industry suggests that such an assumption may be unwise, for other instances of evolution in the past have failed to produce the expected demise or diminution of the social functions of the print media. A review of the media-related literature about the development of post-industrial societies, the spread of the urbanization process, and the advent of radio and television, easily show how newspapers have successfully adapted to these events, and maintained an integral role in the American mass communication system.

The study reported in this paper explores the relationships between local newspapers and the phenomenon of disaster-related grassroots community organizations. In doing so, it attempts to identify from selected case studies, situations and tasks that may be characteristic of specialized and significant press functions in contemporary society. The uniqueness of the organizational samples and situations used in the study, allows a micro perspective on role specialization and group interaction that have not been adequately addressed in past research: that which concerns the reciprocal relationships between local newspapers and community elements.

Research by social scientists and others on mass media functions in normative and non-normative social situations have produced volumes of literature over the years. However, it has been the rule, rather than the exception, that each study tends to turn up more issues for research, than resolutions. In the field of disaster research, attention has been paid to the print media; but that which has been studied has tended to deal with post-disaster newspaper coverage of selected disaster events (Weller, 1967; Hannigan, 1973, 1976; Kreps, 1980) and therefore, has not garnered as much of the attention as that given to other forms of media. As Kreps reasons: "Part of this emphasis relates to the fact that obviously newspapers and magazines have a less prominent role in local warning and emergency communications than the broadcast media have." (1980:36). In other words, the general rationale for the past trends in disaster/media research is sustained by the needs of disaster research to focus on more comprehensive and problematic disaster-related issues. However, a current nationwide study of emergent citizen groups in disaster preparedness and recovery activities being conducted by the Disaster Research Center (DRC) at The Ohio State University has created an opportunity for newspaper-related research in a disaster organizational context.

The Disaster Organizational Context

Within the framework of the DRC study, there are two key components that require clarification for the purposes of this paper: 1) the definitional parameters and time frame for the terms, "disaster," and

2) the construct of the term, "emergent citizen group."

First, the term "disaster" was operationalized to include both natural (e.g.: floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides) and man-made or technological (e.g.: nuclear plants, nuclear wastes, toxic waste management, hazardous waste transportation). The inclusion of these categories is based on the assumption that any perceived threat of a catastrophe and/or the experience of a catastrophe by individuals in a community setting, would constitute a condition for the potential emergence of a citizen group or organization (Quarantelli, 1983). As such, pre-disaster (perceived threat conditions) and post-disaster (experiencing conditions) situations, are within the threshold of what is being studied.

Second, the construct of the term "emergent citizen group," was designed to facilitate an organizational perspective, and is illustrated in the following four-fold matrix.

		Tasks	
		Regular	Non-Regular
Structure	Old	Type I: Established Org.	Type III: Extending Org.
	New	Type II: Expanding Org.	Type IV: Emergent Org.

Where (under the conditions of the threat or experience):

Type I are disaster organizations, institutions, or agencies conducting formalized tasks.

Type II are formal core organizations which have "planned" adaptive roles (i.e., use of volunteers) predicated on demand-response needs.

Type III are formal organizations which assume non-normative tasks.

Type IV are ad hoc groups formed to achieve perceived or actual unmet needs. (Dynes, 1974:Ch 6)

Organization implies a specific approach to resolve problems, institute change, or accomplish some common task. Fundamentally, the organization represents a concentration of power entrusted to make decisions in order to achieve these certain purposes (Stinchcombe, 1968). In the domain of disaster research, Type I organizations have been most studied; Types II and III less so. Theories of organization account for much of what is understood about these organizational types: their structures, functions, roles, networks, and so forth. However, Type IV groups have not been well accommodated in previous disaster research efforts and activities (Quarantelli, 1977), particularly for pre- and post-disaster situations.

The initial findings of the DRC study of disaster-related citizen groups, however, provides evidence that Type IV organizations or "subcultures" (Mileti et al, 1975) can be considered a normative feature of pre- and post-disaster situations at the community level.

The Mass Media Perspective

Disaster-related and grassroots organizational research views the newspaper and other media's primary function as an important resource factor in organizational mobilization (Dahl, 1960; Alinsky, 1971; Cobb and Elder, 1972; Goldenberg, 1975). Accessing the media, or the media accessing the event/activity, is perceived as important in a number of ways: legitimacy may be conferred, public assembling may be encouraged, a diffuse audience may be integrated, the issue or event may be magnified, the problem may be defined, information may be diffused, social control may be exercised. In sum, mass media is functionally elevated via its capacity to influence and set a socio-political agenda (Cobb and Elder, 1972; Goldenberg, 1975; McCombs and Shaw, 1976; Gans, 1980).

A major aspect of the DRC research on disaster-related citizen group organizations has involved the collection of data germane to the inter-relations between the sample studied and the media. One research question, roughly stated, asks: What is the role of the media in influencing the emergence and development of disaster-related citizen groups? Another part of the question asks: How do emergent citizen groups use the media? The preliminary answers to the questions, when generalized, indicate the following:

- A) Mass media organizations tend to visualize emergent citizen groups primarily in terms of the activities of core members or even just one or two members.
- B) Mass media stories about an actual or potential local threat or danger can serve as a "precipitating factor" in the formation of an emergent citizen group.
- C) Mass media attention, serving to define the issue as a problem, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to lead to the development of an emergent citizen group.
- D) While mass media attention is often important in the generation of an emergent citizen group, it is crucial in its development because it defines the issue and gives visibility to leaders.
- E) In conflict situations, some components of the local mass media, often operating covertly, frequently provide information, advice, and support to active core members.
- F) The perceived legitimacy of an emergent citizen group and the issues they raise depend to a great extent on the quantity and quality of news accounts in the local mass media. (Quarantelli, 1983)

These common patterns imply a significant dependency between the media and citizen group entities that merits examination and understanding beyond some of the generalized findings concerning the organizational

processes. Essentially, the question of "how generic the resource concept of the media is to differing situations of grassroots organization" comes into play when comparing distinctively different circumstances (i.e., urban vs rural; pre-disaster vs post-disaster; natural disaster vs man-made disaster; conflict group vs consensus group). Intertwined with this issue are the compositional and operational aspects of the media establishments.

Operationally, issues are seen as attaining agenda priority if the problem is magnified by the media. Thus, a major natural disaster (or something like the discovery of dioxin in a residential area) may catapult issues onto the public agenda, or raise the priority of existing issues like building/housing codes, flood plain management, safety services, and so forth (Goldenberg, 1975). The media pattern that has emerged from previous disaster studies (primarily during the emergency and immediate recovery periods) indicates the differential roles of the electronic and print forms of news coverage. Credit is given the electronic media for instant attention and dissemination of the disaster news, and to newspapers for supplementing and detailing the event (Deutschmann and Danielson, 1960; Scanlon, 1978; Lang and Lang, 1979). But during the pre- and post-disaster periods, information relating to the disaster issues tends to be routine information that has to compete with other daily routine information to garner media and public attention (Goldenberg, 1975; Kreps, 1980). As such, the news value of a pre- and post-disaster situation may be characterized by a rather low human interest priority at the national mass media level, and a more subjective priority at the local media level.

It is at the local community level that the current DRC study has focused. Consequently the media source of attention has been the local mass communication outlets, that is, the radio and television stations as well as the newspapers in the area. However, this paper reports primarily on the local daily or weekly newspapers in the community, making only passing references to other local mass media.

There are acknowledged functional differences between the national and metropolitan daily newspapers, and the local community/suburban daily or weekly newspapers. However, some activities of the national or metropolitan press may effect the interaction between the local newspapers and the local community. First, if the national or larger press establishes the agenda for a local community, the local newspaper is strongly influenced to pursue the issue (Sim, 1969). Second, there is some support for the argument that there are occupational aspiration or ascription patterns that may affect the motives of the local press personnel (Johnstone et al, 1976). And third, the initial reports of the national mass media system (including major newspapers) are incorrect or distorted (Waxman, 1973; Scanlon et al, 1978; Smith, 1981) to the extent that the local newspaper feels obliged to respond for the community and in an effort to provide the larger mass media system with a better account.

With regard to the local press, Lassiter summarizes:

When it comes to presentation of strictly state, national, and international news, the daily paper can scoop the weekly or semi-weekly every day. And the daily paper often is first in publishing news that originates in the territory of the weekly or semi-weekly. When that happens, credit the daily paper with a scoop if you will. It doesn't matter. What does matter is whether the weekly or semi-weekly papers develop distinctives. When these papers are published with imagination, they scoop the dailies--in the sense that they print local news and features the regional dailies don't print, or treat the local major stories in a way that cannot be matched by the typical daily limited by time and space. (1963:53)

In 1969, Sim wrote of the "Perception of the Weekly's Role," and outlined thirteen points relating to the function of the local newspaper. For the purposes of integrating the grassroots editorial perspective into the context of this study, eight of the points merit presentation.

- A) The press permits the expression of public opinion through letters to the editor and by means of interviews. Thus, all sides of a question can be debated.
- B) The press has a decision-forcing function. Everyone may be aware that a community has drifted into a bad situation, for example. Massive publicity requires each citizen to take a stand; the evil can no longer be ignored because it is a topic of conversation.
- C) Newspapers have a status-conferring function. Anyone picked for mention is recognized as standing out from the crowd.
- D) Perhaps the most important function is that of acquainting community leaders with the activities of other leaders.
- E) If the environment needs changes, the newspaper can assist citizens in crusading for improvement.
- F) The press is a sounding board for policy.
- G) The press attends to small wants...it brings people together to solve their problems.
- H) The suburban press has a function that applies to America's 50 million suburbanites. This is to give them a sense of identity. (1969:11)

What Sims states constitutes a functional model or theory of community print media which is postulated as necessary condition for the existence of the community newspaper. If so, the question of how this notion is related to the organizational or grassroots mobilization perspective about emergent groups bears attention.

Study Approach

The relationship of the local newspaper and grassroots disaster organizations presented in this paper was examined through four specific case studies done from data drawn from the larger DRC research.

The process of locating disaster-related emergent citizen groups began in the fall of 1981. The first step in the process entailed an extensive, systematic search of available sources and resources, including the research literature and the popular literature, and information obtained from state/local disaster officials, elected office holders, extension agents, media organizations, disaster agencies, academic institutions, and professional colleagues. An extensive effort was devoted to excluding highly formal, institutionalized or supracommunity disaster organizations from the study sample, and to including only local (non-networked) informal disaster groups. It was initially believed that high disaster risk states (i.e., Texas, California, Florida) would more readily yield cases for the sample than would low disaster risk states (i.e., Nevada, Utah, Vermont).

Groups located in the search process that exhibited the criterion desired in the study were examined in pilot studies conducted by DRC field teams. In some instances, the groups were not used as samples for the DRC study because it was found that there was no structural evidence of an emergent citizen group.

So far, 48 emergent citizen groups have been studied, and almost without exception, the local newspapers have been involved in their activities. The generalizations on the mass media presented earlier were derived from an impressionistic analysis of the data drawn from these groups. The four cases selected for this paper represent a part of the sample that was systematically and personally analyzed by the author. Table 1 provides a frequency and media coverage perspective for the selected case studies. Given such a limited number of community cases, this report represents only an exploratory attempt to generate some insights into the broad issue of the relationships between the local newspaper and disaster-related grassroots organizations.

Table 1: Frequency of Organization and Issue News Stories over the Period of Six Months from the First News Account

Community Alias	Media Category			
	National	Regional-Daily	Feature Magazine	Local Newspaper
Dumpberg	1	4	1	36
Hazardville	2	5	2	18
Slidetown	12	12	1	30
Shake City	0	2	2	3

Specifically, the analysis sought relationship patterning along the lines of the following perspectives and issues:

- A) The social organizational perspective--
 - 1) The agenda-setting and problem-defining function.
 - 2) The mobilization function.
 - 3) The social-control and legitimating function.
 - 4) The diffusion or awareness function.
 - 5) The career-ascription function.

- B) The editorial perspective--
 - 1) The community-forum function (letters to the editor).
 - 2) The decision-forcing function.
 - 3) The status-conferring function.
 - 4) The community-leaders-networking function.
 - 5) The needed-changes function.
 - 6) The policy-sounding-board function.
 - 7) The solidarity of the public function.
 - 8) The community-identity function.

In effect, the analytic attempt was not to create or destroy notions of operational media; rather, it attempted to describe in some detail a small corner of unattended media logic¹ and/or organizational strategy that has surfaced in the domain of disaster-related research.

Method of Analysis

Qualitative analysis of the data on a case-by-case basis is employed to depict characteristics and behavior of the local newspaper and the grassroots organizations. The second step in the analysis compares categorical findings between cases to facilitate the generalizations of difference and similarity patterns.

Sample Characteristics

The communities from which the grassroots organization cases come have a population range from approximately 10,500 (smallest community) to 37,000 (largest community). All of the communities supported a local weekly newspaper and had access to metropolitan dailies, as well as radio and television from large metropolitan centers. Pseudonyms have been given to the communities discussed in order to maintain promised anonymity. The following table illustrates the communities in relation to the four differentiation factors mentioned earlier.

Table 2: Community and Group Characteristics

Community Alias	Setting:		Disaster Type:		Period:		Group Type:	
	Rural	Urban (SMSA)	Natural	Man-Made	Pre-	Post-	Conflict	Consensus
Dumpberg	X			X	X			X
Hazardville		X		X		X		X
Slidetown		X	X			X		X
Shake City		X	X		X			X

Data Collection

The data from the four communities were collected during the year 1982. DRC personnel conducted on-site systematic interviews with emergent citizen group members (core and non-core), community officials (elected and appointed), disaster agency workers, mass media personnel, non-group professionals (attorneys, physicians, religious leaders, etc.), and resident non-members. Over forty interviews ranging from one half to two hours each were obtained. In addition, data for a measurement scale estimating perceived influences on the emergent groups were gotten during each interview. When available, documents such as organizational rosters, newsletters, news clippings, pictures of events/activities, official regulations, and the like were collected for content analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

Table 3 (see the next page) presents the case-by-case interpretation of aggregate response sets of data divided according to functional attributes of mass media and grassroots organization interaction.

This and other data make it clear that the local newspaper plays two important roles in the disaster-related grassroots organizational process. The first involves the drawing of attention of a mass audience to the community setting. However, the local press plays an equally important role in informing the larger mass media system of the situation. Secondly, the local newspaper provides some degree of community identity for both local residents and the outside audience. As often as not, the situation portrayed to the outside audience by other than local sources is perceived as inaccurate or unfair by the local residents. In such cases, the local newspaper attempts to make amends from an inside position by publishing the "real" story and allowing the larger mass media system to become aware of local perceptions. Regardless of the outcome, the exposure of the community provides a necessary stimulus for the local residents and the local newspaper to give greater priority to the controversial issue.

Table 3: Functional Attributes of the Media System and Grassroot Organizations in Each Community

Functional Item	Community Alias			Shake Cit
	Dumpberg	Hazardville	Slidetown	
) THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:				
1) The Agenda Setting and Problem Definition Function				
a. Attributed to the local newspaper	X			X
b. Attributed to other mass media		X	X	
2) The Mobilization Function				
a. Attributed to the local newspaper	X	X	X	
b. Attributed to other mass media				X
c. Organizational strategy employed (group accessed newspaper)	X		X	
d. Journalistic strategy employed (newspaper accessed group)		X		X
3) The Social Control and Legitimizing Function				
a. Local newspaper evidenced social control position			X	
b. Local newspaper evidenced organizational legitimizing position	X	X	X	X
4) The Diffusion or Awareness Function				
a. Local newspaper viewed as important and effective		X	X	X
5) The Career Ascription Function				
a. Local newspaper indicated mobility and status motives		X		X
) The EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE:				
1) The Community Forum Function				
a. Documented high level of letters-to-the-editors	X	X	X	
b. Documented editorials in the local newspaper	X	X	X	
2) The Decision-Forcing Function				
a. Evidenced from the organizational strategy (group demands to decisionmaking bodies)		X	X	
b. Evidenced from the journalistic strategy (newspaper demands on the group to act in exchange for consistent coverage)	X	X		
3) The Status-Conferring Function				
a. Attributed to the local newspaper	X	X	X	X
4) The Community Leaders Networking Function				
a. Attributed to the local newspaper		X		
5) The Needed Changes Function				
a. Evidenced editorial perspectives calling for change		X	X	
6) The Policy Sounding Board Function				
a. Cases involving policy or the introduction of policy				
7) The Solidarity of the Public Function				
a. Local newspaper targeted the opposition for the grassroots organization		X		
b. Other mass media targeted the opposition for the grassroots organization	X			
c. The grassroots organization provided the rationale for solidarity to the media			X	X
8) The Community Identity Function				
a. Other mass media provided identity	X	X	X	X
b. Local newspaper attended to "real" identity issue	X	X	X	
[Data Gathered from Direct Interviews]				
1) Perceived Influence of Non-media Respondents of the Media on the Organization:				
a. Significant influence	X	X	X	
b. Little or no influence				X
2) Perceived Influence of Media Respondents of the Organization on the Media:				
a. Significant influence	X	X	X	
b. Little or no influence				X

The local newspaper appears to be important also on a number of other points. Its role in the mobilization processes of the citizen group is perceived as significant, irrespective of any particular organizational or journalistic strategy. The newspaper tends to legitimize rather than to induce social control for the emergent citizen organization. The newspaper is viewed as an important diffuser of news and educational information regarding the issue. Given that grassroots organizations typically want to make community residents aware of the problem or controversial issue, local newspapers are seen as especially relevant for this purpose.

From the editorial perspective, the local newspaper tends to serve as a community forum (however, in one particular case examined, there appeared to be some screening of letters-to-the-editor, so that the reporters of the paper could develop feature stories on the issue). The role of the local press in conferring status on individuals involved in the grassroots organizations is quite clear. And, as already noted, the local newspaper helps to develop the "real" community identity.

Findings which were not clear-cut imply that necessary or desired conditions might be attained via alternative means. The "decision-forcing functions" involving strategies and the "solidarity functions" illustrate findings which are not consistent with the pattern of functions with the generic characteristics shown in Table 2. Although the conditions were present and relevant to the media and grassroots organization relationship, the adoption of these functions appear to be based on a factor (or factors) which is not situationally or characteristically dependent.

The data provided by respondents in the sample cases on influence perceptions indicate a mutual esteem on the part of both the local press and emergent citizen groups. Members of the groups tend to view the local press as a significant resource that can aid their specific cause, whereas newspaper personnel tend to view citizen groups as acting on behalf of a viable community issue or interest. Local newspapers also tend to see citizens as skillfully exercising their claim as citizens to press coverage.

In conclusion, it can be said that the local press still maintains a number of important roles in the efforts of collectivities of citizens to carry out actions to produce social change. The relationship between the local newspapers and grassroots organizations appears to be interdependent; one which produces a positive enhancing effect on the careers of both entities. On the other hand, while there is an indication of a dependency relationship between the local press and grassroots organizations, it does tend to be very specific and possibly short-termed in time.

It is obvious that when the DRC research found emergent groups, it also found a local press interest in their activities; in fact, newspaper personnel found such groups not only interesting but also something highly relevant to the operations of local community newspapers. Our look in the disaster area suggests that the local newspaper is not going to fade away, but will adapt to community needs in the same way it frequently has done in the past.

Along with future studies of local newspapers and other mass media, there ought to be research into extra- or supra-community mass media, such as the national networks and newspapers. Examination should also be made of the relationship between local mass media outlets and the more national media operations. If this work is joined to the impressive research currently being conducted on "high tech" media, we will be able to move towards obtaining a comprehensive view of the mass communication system in American society.

Footnotes

¹Media logic consists of a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information. For a detailed explanation see Altheide and Snow (1979).

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