

MEDIA COVERAGE OF DISASTERS: THE SAME OLD STORY

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The headline of the Daily News today reads BRUNETTE STABBED TO DEATH. Underneath in lower case letters '6000 Killed in Iranian Earthquake'...I wonder what color hair they had.

(Abbie Hoffman as quoted in Tuchman, [1978,] frontispiece)

It might seem essential that any paper presented at a seminar on earthquakes include material on earthquakes but, given the hypothesis on which this paper is based, that inclusion is not necessary. This paper argues that the mass media behave roughly the same way when responding to all major events whether these are natural or man-made disasters, criminal occasions such as assassination attempts, hijackings, hostage takings or other acts of terrorism or simply major, unexpected events. If that argument is correct, then it follows that in order to predict media behavior in relationship to one event, say an earthquake, one merely needs to know about media behavior in other events, say a hostage incident or a flood: the behavior patterns will be very much the same. (Other papers in this volume, particularly Dynes and Quarantelli, also argue that disasters are treated generically.)

Although this proposition, as far as is known, has not been stated explicitly before, it does fit with common knowledge about the media. Newsrooms are not filled with specialists on storms, earth movements, criminal acts or air crashes. Instead, to a considerable extent, they are the working places of generalists. It makes sense therefore that it is generalists who respond to incidents and that they will apply their generalist experiences in doing so.

It also fits with what research has been done about news organizations and their operations, research which, on the whole suggests media activity is far from an ad hoc reaction to unpredictable events [Tuchman, 1978, pp. 22-23] [Gans, 1979]. To quote just one such study-- Philip Schlesinger's book on BBC news:

The news we receive on any given day is not as unpredictable as much journalistic mythology would

have us believe. Rather, the doings of the world are tamed to meet the needs of a production system in many respects bureaucratically organized....Most news is really 'old' in the sense it is largely predictable, but a powerful occupational mythology plays this fact down.... [Schlesinger, 1978, p. 47].

Despite this general supporting evidence, the model advanced in this paper is tentative. It has been tested through interviews with journalists, through an examination of some journalistic memoirs and through an examination of some of the literature about media in crisis and disaster. It has not been field tested in the sense that the completed model has been checked against an actual event. Therefore, while the evidence to date does not seem to contradict the model's present form, it is far from clear whether all the evidence is in.

One further point. One of the authors is a journalist of some experience. His background includes coverage of such disparate events as racial unrest in the southern United States, a hijacking that ended in Brazil, a tornado in Ontario, two plane crashes in Quebec. He has also been present at two major hostage incidents, in one case spending several days with reporters covering the incident. This background of experience has been applied to the propositions in this paper. This seems perfectly reasonable given that we are developing theory rather than presenting certified fact.

What we have done, therefore, is list, point by point, some of the elements that appear to make up the crisis model. Then, in each case, we have tried to provide some supporting references and/or some expansion on the point being made. We have included contradictory evidence where that was available. We believe this form of presentation will allow individual discussion of the points raised. It will also allow testing of the entire model even those elements in it which are not, as yet, supported by any particular evidence.

It should be mentioned that the original idea for this paper was developed during a discussion at Boulder, Colorado. Those present included Tom Saarinen of the University of Arizona, Ed Epremian of the National Academy of Sciences, Paulette Gilliam, who had been involved in dealing with the media at Mount St. Helens and one of the authors of this paper. What happened is that it became apparent that much of the media behavior at Mount St. Helens paralleled media behavior at a number of Canadian hostage incidents. These similarities were later described in a letter to William Anderson of the National Science Foundation on August 1, 1980 [Scanlon, 1980]. It was hoped at that time that Ms. Gilliam would follow up on them. She has not been able to do so. The work reported here is, therefore, mainly the work of the authors although they have consulted informally with Ms. Gilliam on a number of occasions. Here, then, is the model.

1. The media will hear of an event.

When a major incident occurs, some citizens will usually call the media. Other will tell friends and neighbors and--as the word

spreads--the news will reach the media. The media also monitor the activity and communications of such key emergency agencies as police, fire, ambulance, etc. Any major disruption is bound to be noticed. Major incidents are difficult to conceal. Though this may appear obvious, there is considerable doubt whether this will always be the case. In some countries, disasters and criminal-type activities are not reported though this is changing, especially with respect to disasters. The media response in those countries will, therefore, be quite different than reported here.

(It seems best to suggest that what is described in this paper on the whole is the activity of the "western" press. This limitation is not mentioned as a form of criticism. It is stipulated in the hope the differences among press styles will be noted and accepted without debate.)

2. The media will try to obtain more information.

The moment an incident occurs the media will start to use whatever means are available to gather further information. Among other things they will call all available sources--official and/or unofficial--by telephone. They will also use radio links. The speed of this activity may be incredible. CBC broadcaster, Barbara Frum, reports what happened when Lynette Fromme took a shot at U.S. president Gerald Ford:

The moment the wires flashed the news...we were on the phone dialing for her room-mate and fellow Manson family member, Sandra Good Frum, 1976, p. 165 .

3. The media will use its files to add to the story.

Most major news agencies have substantial libraries--libraries which include their own reports and clippings from other publications as well as standard references. When an incident occurs they will use these resources to provide background stories. They will also rely on human sources from previous stories. This means accounts will be generated of previous comparable events and previous events in the same location. It also means past errors are extremely likely to be repeated since they will be included in the memory.

4. The media will dispatch reporters to the scene.

Even as some reporters try to get through by telephone, others will be en route. Christie Blatchford, a reporter for the Toronto Star, recalls how quickly she set out to cover an earthquake in Italy:

The day the earthquake happened we decided to go....literally within an hour a photographer and I were at the airport and flew to London and then to Rome. We rented a car in Rome and drove down to Naples.... Blatchford, 1981 .

The same sort of response took place when the New York Times learned--it had been monitoring the shipping distress channel--of the Andrea Doria-Stockholm collision:

...raced through the incoming bulletins. When he gauged the full impact of the disaster, he ordered a special American Airlines Convair to take reporters to Boston...He had von Hartz wake Meyer Berger, Milton Bracker and Peter Kihss at their homes; had them in the city within an hour...[Adler, 1966, p. 265].

5. All staff resources will be applied to a truly major event.

The staff, technical resources, transportation facilities, support staff will all be put to work. They will collect data, run messages, answer phone calls, make calls, arrange transportation, edit copy, etc. Describing how a local paper handled the Mount St. Helens volcano eruption, one of the staff reports:

The editors not only put their 11-member reportorial staff on the story but also drew on staffers from sports, the family page, the computer section and the composing room....[Stein, 1980, p. 105].

Harrison Salisbury reported much the same response for New York Times coverage of the Kennedy assassination:

In New York...the assignment sheet...shows at least 32 correspondents assigned to the Kennedy story. The entire working staff in Washington...was drafted for the task. So was the network of 10 regional correspondents....The principle foreign bureaus--London, Paris, Rome, Bonn, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and the United Nations staff--were also committed to the Kennedy story [Salisbury, 1965, p. 38].

6. The media will use all of its technical resources and ingenuity.

Journalists tend to have connections which will help them gain access to specialized vehicles (e.g., snowmobiles, helicopters, etc.) and communications equipment. At Mount St. Helens the media combined access, technology, and persuasion to get a rare report:

...NBC took a helicopter inside the crater at a time when the USGS (United States Geological Service) regarded such flights as unsafe then persuaded a geologist to view the invaluable resulting tape. The geologist was reluctant to help them at first, but when they started showing the tape he couldn't stop talking with excitement....[Scanlon, 1980].

At Three Mile Island, the Philadelphia Inquirer used an all-out effort by its staff to tap sources normally beyond its resources:

Reporters took down license numbers at each shift at the plant, got the names and addresses from the state motor vehicle department....Then the Inquirer started knocking on doors. Many employees were belligerent, most were exhausted but fifty agreed to interviews....[Sandman and Paden, 1979, p.48].

Numerous other instances of reportorial resourcefulness can be cited from the literature on Three Mile Island. The most striking perhaps, is that displayed by Rod Nordland, an investigative reporter for the Inquirer:

...parked directly across the Susquehanna from the plant, Nordland...tooled with his fancy scanner radio searching for TMI transmissions. Nothing on the utility band nor the police band. He switched to a frequency the instruction booklet said was reserved for 'federal interagency cooperation during nuclear war'. And there they were. [Sandman and Paden, 1979, p.52].

7. As information becomes available it will be reported.

Given the attention paid to immediacy as a canon of journalism it is evident news will normally be reported as available. In radio this means immediately, and this can be true in T.V. if the news seems to justify interrupting other programs. This appears to be the case however scanty or inadequate the information and however marginal the original source or sources. That perhaps explains why the disaster literature expresses concern about the accuracy of the original news flashes [Dynes, 1970, p. 26] [Baker and Chapman, 1962, p. 258].

8. Information will spread from medium to medium.

The various news media are intertwined in a way which makes information sharing inevitable. They also monitor each other in order to pick up information they may have overlooked. A story by one is soon a story for all.

To take just one example, CBC, Canada's public broadcasting organization, receives information from the main Canadian news agency CP, Canadian Press. CP is linked to Associated press (the U.S. co-operative), Reuters, the British agency, and AFP, Agence France Presse, the French agency. It gets news from and provides news to all three. CBC is also linked to two major U.S. television networks, CBS and NBC. And it has several minor connections. In addition, CBC news, as a matter of course, monitors its main rival, CTV, and watches the Toronto newspaper, the Globe & Mail, which appears on the street between CBC television's first and second evening newscast productions. Such interlocking and monitoring is common [Scanlon, observations] [Tuchman, 1978, pp. 22-23].

9. The media will attempt to fit the news into a framework.

News organizations expect disaster news to be reported in terms of loss of life, injury, persons left homeless, cost, etc. They will push very hard for this sort of information to be made available. (There is no perception that the confused aftermath of a disaster may make this almost impossible to obtain.) This desire for conformity is even laid down as a norm by Curtis MacDougall, author of a major text, Interpretative Reporting:

Regardless of what is played up, the occasion must be identified in the lead by the amount of loss, either in lives or in property [MacDougall, 1968, p. 282].

10. To give the news form and structure the media will demand official news conferences at which official statements can be recorded.

One of the maxims of journalism is that while it may be important to get a scoop (exclusive story) it is more important not to be scooped. It is always preferable therefore to have the news delivered in packaged form in some common place. If there are conflicts between sources, the media will try very aggressively to force the sources to clear up these conflicts. Reporters do not want to have to make their own judgments. They want to attribute their "facts" to others. The media will want news conferences to be held often, even if nothing new has happened and the official spokesman has no comment to make. This was certainly true of reporters covering a hostage taking in Oak Lake Manitoba in 1978:

When the police had something to give out, the staff spokesman would come to the hotel, the media would gather around, the TV lights would go on, and the spokesman would issue his usual 'no comment'. Many of these news conferences which led to the 'no comment' remarks were held because the media wanted some regular contact with the police...Sometimes the police officer would say he saw no purpose in holding a news briefing, but the media indicated they preferred to have a 'no comment' session to no session at all....[Scanlon, Taylor, and Tait, 1978, p. 258].

The demand for conformity even leads some agencies to insist material not be used unless it comes from more than one source. A truly exclusive story would, therefore, be suspect.

One of the persistent journalistic myths is that newspapers like to be 'first'....Few things could be farther from the fact....Nothing causes more alarm...than an unexpected, unasked for expose, or a story...that goes contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom...[Worthington, 1971, p. 68].

11. This overall structure of news will not prevent various national media from shaping the story to suit particular needs.

While this nationalistic style--a story is reported as having a Canadian, United States, Japanese or British angle--has been observed it has not been well documented. It is certainly clear that reporters will focus on their own nationals. It is far less clear how much shaping of the news takes place to satisfy local news norms. Blatchford describes Canadian coverage of an earthquake in Italy.

An awful lot of it was just trying to make people in Canada feel as though they were there--particularly Metro Italians remember the name of their village or picture their village again--how it was then and how it is now [Blatchford, 1981].

12. The location of an event will help determine its overall news significance.

Since news judgments are to some extent tied to the western and substantially caucasian characteristics of the main news agencies, it is hard to get documentation on this point. But it is clear news is to some extent tied to a story being seen as affecting "people like us".

Italy is easier to cover than Guatemala and more reporters are immediately available. But it is mainly because Italians are seen as individuals with physical and cultural characteristics familiar to Americans. Many editors and readers have been to Italy and they recognize place names....Guatemalans are seen, on the other hand, only as faceless residents of the underdeveloped world. The standard is part of the unwritten but well-understood sliding scale: a hundred Pakistanis going off a mountain in a bus make less of a story than three Englishmen drowning in the Thames. [Rosenblum, 1979, p. 124].

News values are not determined by physical distance alone. Such perceptions are based on a number of other factors in addition to physical proximity, particularly cultural and linguistic similarity.

13. The media will persuade people to act in such a way as to conform to news norms.

In a major strike situation in Canada, virtually every visiting television news crew insisted on filming pickets carrying the appropriate signs, etc. The fact was the company almost completely shut down and formal picketing was virtually non-existent. The media could not visualize a strike without pickets; so the pickets. The same sort of thing was reported at Three Mile Island: "TV crews asked people to move indoors so they could show deserted streets" [Volkman, 1979, p. 80].

14. The media will have trouble dealing with technical matters.

As the model suggests, most correspondents go from crisis to crisis. This means they are generalists rather than specialists. It also means they are easily in trouble when stories deal with technical matters. Jim Panyard, a veteran Philadelphia Bulletin correspondent, said sources at Three Mile Island seemed to speak in a foreign language:

You asked them a straight question about how much radiation is escaping and they answered with mumbo-jumbo about millirems, manrems, rads and picocuries. Once you had figured out what they were saying you discovered another source was saying something different--and without a nuclear physics degree, you couldn't come up with the right follow-up question.... [Sandman and Paden, 1979, pp. 44-45].

15. The various media--radio, television, and print--will act differently.

Each medium has its own news needs and its own technical and logistical problems. This will lead to differences in style. Television, for example, may have particular problems in shipping and/or satelliting film and/or videotape. Radio and print reporters have more concerns about the telephone. Print reporters, because print consumes far more news (there is more "space") than radio or television, tend to search for more background, more off-beat material. This has been expanded in Scanlon, Taylor, and Tait [1978, p. 9].

16. Despite these differences the foreign press tend to support each other and often antagonize local media.

Since the foreign correspondents travel from crisis to crisis, story to story, they are to some extent a group of associates, even if formally rivals. They are therefore likely to try to impose their own standards on an event and to support each other in demands that information be provided to satisfy their perception of what is important. This can easily lead them into conflict with local media, especially if officials are somewhat awe-stricken by the apparent importance of some visiting journalists [Scanlon, observations].

17. The media will make demands on communications, transportation and other local resources.

The arrival--during a crisis--of a group of persons who want to be able to move about, who want to communicate what they have seen and filmed, who want to talk to persons means that strains will inevitably occur on local transportation, communication and, perhaps, interpretation facilities. In situations where damage resulting from an earthquake or other natural disaster has caused a breakdown in the local communication and transportation systems, the media will create even greater problems. In the extreme case, their demands may completely tie up any surviving transportation and communication facilities. As a result, officials and

agencies may find themselves responding to the needs of the visiting journalists instead of the needs of the affected population.

18. The media will operate in cycles focusing on news highs then searching for less dramatic material to fill in less spectacular periods.

Reporters assigned to major news events--particularly if they have been sent to the scene at some considerable expense--are expected to produce news. If there is no major news on any given day they must find something to write about. Thus a failure by the authorities to produce "news" means reporters will search for something to replace it. [Scanlon, Taylor, and Tait, 1978, p. 7]. The idea of what is news can be very quickly distorted. Sometimes this search will include a search for someone to blame. In man-made events, there may be an attempt to blame someone for the event. In natural disasters, the focus will be on blame for perceived inadequacy of response. Given a dearth of other information, the media can always locate someone who will have complaints.

19. In a truly major incident almost all reporters will share what they have.

Tom Wicker reports that in the wake of the Kennedy assassination there was a great deal of sharing:

Throughout the day, every reporter on the scene seemed to do his best to help everyone else. Information came in only in bits and pieces. Every man who picked up a bit or a piece passed it on. I know no one who held anything out [Wicker, 1966, p. 28].

The same process occurred at Three Mile Island:

From the moment the Harrisburg press corps heard about the accident...we all shared information. We got drawings and pieced together events....We went out and got books on nuclear energy and compared them and discussed how a reactor works [Sandman and Paden, 1975, p. 16].

Despite these accounts, there is some evidence (obtained through interviews) that sometimes sharing does not take place. This may be especially true where reporters are employed by the same organization but work for different elements in that organization, say news and public affairs in television. They will have highly competitive instincts. (Reporters from newspapers in different countries are really not in competition with each other and thus can afford to co-operate.) In some instances, co-operation will exist in the field, but competition will begin as soon as reporters begin to phone in their stories [Tuchman, 1978, p. 77].

20. The media--whatever techniques they use to obtain information--will not publish it if they decide it could be harmful.

The media may sometimes even use discretion and block accounts that would be useful if reported. This decision-making process--what should be reported--seems to go on both in criminal type events and in disasters. According to Rodney Kueneman, the withholding of such information could be dangerous:

The withholding of information of potential natural disasters can result in the loss of life or increased property damage...faced with the problem of crying wolf, community officials occasionally refrain from warning of a possible flood so as not to generate panic and when the warning is finally given, too little time remains to move or protect property. [Kueneman and Wright, 1975, p. 16].

Despite this potential danger, Kueneman says the media continue to withhold information from the public.

21. The media will also co-cooperate with official requests that certain information be withheld.

Co-operation of this sort will continue so long as all media outlets honor the request. But if any one outlet should break the agreement, the others would follow suit. Lawrence Freiman makes this point in his autobiography:

I called my friends in the press...to a man, they agreed to co-operate...after about a week...the Toronto Telegram broke the story. The Ottawa press could hold their silence no longer. And our lives became a circus of inquisitive reporters and determined photographers [Freiman, 1978, p. 105].

Put all this together and the result is a scenario as follows:

An incident occurs in a particular country. Correspondents are rushed in from major news centers. Though they represent different media, these journalists know each other, have shared common experiences, have common news norms. They are generally unfamiliar with local customs, conditions, language. They will, very quickly, try to force definition of the incident in their news terms--how many dead, how many injured, how many homeless, cost. They will also strain the local transportation, communication and interpretation resources. They may demand official briefings and get into conflict with the local press. Yet, despite their common background they will interpret events from their own cultural and nationalistic

perspective. And if the news ebbs and flows they will fill in the gaps by digging out less spectacular stories, perhaps even creating some.

Where do we go from here?

This model is not yet complete. For one thing, it needs to be filled in with information on the pre-disaster situation. This would include both warnings of impending events and mitigation reports. This model also obviously needs field testing at a number of future incidents. In the meantime, however, an examination can continue of existing material and interviews can be conducted with other journalists. News agencies can test the model against their own experience, and agencies and governments can decide whether the model suggests a need for a re-examination of their contingency plans for media relations. They can plan their response because they know how the media will act.

There is one further point. While this model is presented as a crisis model of media behavior there is no reason to assume it would not be applicable under less dramatic circumstances. If the media do as suggested operate with a great deal of predictability this crisis model may be equally applicable in normal times. It may be a model of general media behavior in the coverage of unexpected events rather than a specific crisis-oriented model. As Ruth Leeds Love suggests, the behavior of the media in a crisis situation may not be all that different from the norm.

...Business was as usual in that the news department was covering a story via film, live telecasting and commentary. Business was as usual in that virtually everyone carried out his normal duties. There was virtually no pinch-hitting. Business was as usual in that the news division had a bank of accumulated experience to guide its responses....Finally, business was as usual in that the norms and values of the news profession were in force more or less in the same way as they are at any other time [Love, 1965, p. 77].

She was describing U.S. TV network coverage of the Kennedy assassination.

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