

MEDIA COVERAGE OF DISASTERS: THE SAME OLD STORY

T. Joseph Scanlon
and
Suzanne Alldred

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