COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN:
When the crisis managers meet the news media

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Abstract

The mass media and emergency management personnel (especially crisis managers) lack a real understanding of each other's work. Closer co-operation, including regular two-way familiarisation courses, would help the groups understand each other, facilitate a realisation of similarities between the groups, and result in more efficient dissemination of information, to the benefit of society in general. Additionally, journalists and emergency services personnel need to understand the role that the reporting of "bad news" events plays in helping communities "rehearse" for – and so deal with – tragedies.

Journalism stream

Introduction

Disaster strikes. A landslide engulfs a ski lodge… A bushfire razes a suburb… A gas pocket ignites in a coal mine… A bridge collapses on a train… An airliner explodes… A football crowd is crushed against a barricade. After the primary victims and witnesses, the first to know are the local emergency services and the local media. As initial reports flow outwards through the media, the emergency response starts to converge on the site: medical assistance, firefighters, emergency food and shelter, and the first journalists. Representatives of the local media arrive, followed by those from the larger national newsrooms and, if the disaster is large or protracted, journalists from overseas.

There is interaction between the emergency services and the journalists. There may be media briefing sessions; journalists telephone their contacts in the emergency services; others go to the site looking for witnesses to interview and scenes to photograph. Members of the public telephone their stories to local radio stations, setting up a flow of talkback comment that is largely unmediated by journalists and out of the control of the emergency services. From their desks, editors and producers attempt to make sense of the event and to keep abreast of developments, deploying staff to satisfy audience expectations. Opinion writers begin to look at causes and to apportion blame.

This account is not intended as definitive; no two disasters are identical and the sequences of events vary. For example, on 27th September 1996 a limestone cliff collapsed on teachers and students at Gracetown, 300k from Perth, killing nine people and injuring two. The media arrived by helicopter, well ahead of the emergency management team, including the coroner, which travelled by car and arrived at midnight. (Palmer 2001)

A tense relationship

Research and subsequent official inquiries reveal that neither the journalists nor the emergency services are satisfied with the current situation. Crisis managers feel their public service and public safety messages are damaged by news mediation; journalists feel they have not been told the whole story by emergency services representatives. Both groups become wary in their dealings with each other – a wariness that damages the flow of information between crisis managers and the public they need to inform. In a worst case, this communications breakdown causes a lack of detailed, accurate and timely information, prolonging or even aggravating the crisis.

While not accurate in all cases, this negative characterisation of the relationship is true often enough to feature prominently in the literature of the emergency services and the mass media. As Simpson and Coté (2000: 2) point out, critics are calling for change in the way the media covers violence, while technological developments enable scenes of devastation and trauma to be published within minutes. The Heysel stadium disaster of May 1985 and the Hillsborough stadium of 1989 both involved supporters of the Liverpool Football Club and went to air in real time, provoking criticism from the police and the public (Harrison 1999).

While the criticism of the media is often justified, this paper will argue that the crisis managers should also be aware of the needs of journalists in reporting these events and of the need for these events to be reported. There are ways to make the relationship more effective in meeting the common ends of both groups and of society as a whole.

At least part of the problem stems from the nature of the work, which requires both groups to be in control of their individual situations. Both can argue this control is to the benefit of the public. Crisis managers need to control what happens at the site of the emergency; journalists need to retain a firm grip on newsgathering functions, especially interviews, so as to maintain the integrity of the news-editorial process. Both groups have been trained to develop a persona of professional competence to control situations like these, making a competition for control almost inevitable.

The relationship is also made more difficult by the culture the two groups share. Researchers have characterised journalism's culture as "macho/tough guy-gal" (Harris, 1993: 70). Characteristics of such a culture include a high-risk business environment with expensive outlays on risk, shared values of youth, intense pressure, fast pace, early rewards, and an individualistic attitude. Mitchell & Everly (1994: 27) report seeing some of those same characteristics in the personalities of emergency workers discussing their attitudes to stress management techniques – it is only for "wimps who should not be in the service anyway".

In the heat of the moment

The urgency factor at disaster scenes is another aspect of the nature of the work that can lead to misunderstanding. The emergency management team has an urgent need to normalise the disaster, ensure the safety of all personnel at the site, including journalists, at the same time

co-ordinating rescue attempts, searches, medical and logistic support. Some disasters entail forensic issues. Each journalist is working to a different deadline imposed by his or her organization, while looking for the latest commentaries, eyewitness accounts and changes in the situation, preferably able to be documented as they happen.

Emergency services organizations all have staff members allocated to deal with the media and, likewise, most media organizations have journalists assigned to rounds that include dealing with disaster organizations. The people involved on both sides are generally trained professionals who have worked together previously. In an emergency situation, however, the contact between those individual professionals will probably constitute only a small fraction of the interaction between the two groups. All staff participate, many as volunteers – news media staff as well as emergency workers and managers. The likelihood, therefore, is that inadequately prepared journalists with no specialist knowledge of crisis management will be dealing with crisis management personnel with little experience of the news media.

Studies of the second in a series of three explosions over twenty years at Moura mine (Harrison 1986) and the Thredbo disaster (Middleton 1988:28-30, Bilboe 1998) reveal that many journalists were out of their depth. In particular, younger journalists were often deployed or specialist journalists arrived at the scene (perhaps from the parliamentary press gallery) with limited knowledge of covering disasters and a limited knowledge of trauma and grief. This affected their coverage in numerous ways: from haranguing sources to treating the disaster efforts as an adversarial conflict.

In the heat of any crisis it is unlikely that completely accurate, up-to-date information will be disseminated to and by the media. We argue that, if news professionals and crisis management professionals understood each other's needs and capabilities, it should be possible to get close to the optimum. Information flows would be a lot more efficient if crisis managers understood what journalists were looking for, and journalists understood better what crisis managers were able to provide. The lack of understanding, and the wariness involved in the relationship, is evident when, for example, Jensen (2000: 179) refers to "managing the media response". The emphasis is on dealing with news media representatives as problems, rather than as partners.

The need for closeness

Crisis management organisations rely on their public affairs officers to deal with the media on their behalf. While that process is acceptable in theory, in practice the media officers are unable to deal with all queries during a major crisis. The contact often occurs directly between members of the news media and the crisis managers themselves. The media are then dealing with crisis managers, who have little understanding of how the media works and the media's motivations for pursuing information.

It would be facile to pretend that a series of two-way familiarisation programs would eliminate the information bottlenecks, but it certainly would free up the flow significantly. Relationships could be improved if some disaster coordinators spent time with journalists in a work-experience program and journalists could spend time following disaster coordinators.

Media familiarisation programs do already exist in some areas but are not universally available. In New South Wales, media members have attended emergency services

familiarisation courses that appear to be useful to both parties. They are, however, one-way events in which the media members come to appreciate the work of the crisis managers, but little is achieved in the opposite direction. A better understanding could be achieved if crisis managers attended media familiarisation courses, just as the media attend crisis management courses.

Shirley Harrison has a slightly different solution. She was chief publicity officer with Sheffield Council at the time of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster of 1989. That disaster forms the core case study of her book, which was written for managers and aims to improve relations between their organizations and the media by explaining the needs of each (1999: xiv). There are supporting case studies, comments and suggestions for change. As a result of the Hillsborough experience, her department changed from a publicity department to an in-house public relations consultancy (172). In other words, certain personnel are given media training instead of directing all media enquiries to the PR Department.

The goodwill to achieve a better level of understanding is not lacking. The primacy of good and reliable communication between the local population and emergency managers in times of crisis would not be denied by the managers themselves. Emergency Management Australia devoted a discussion panel to the subject at its Canberra conference in September 2003. When there is a crisis, the population needs accurate and reliable information upon which to make decisions that sometimes can be the difference between life and death.

Talking about the weather

US research also concludes that a closer relationship between crisis managers and the media results in better dissemination of vital information. Carter (1980) examines the relationship between news information flows and emergency services during typhoon situations, particularly the question of why weather warnings to communities battling typhoons were not timely and accurate. The weakness in the warning system, the research concluded, appeared to be at the local level. The link was strong and reliable between the National Weather Service and the news media, but at the local level it was inadequate:

> … Most people receive warnings either directly or indirectly from the broadcast media, so neither the local weather service office nor the local emergency service agencies issue warnings directly to the public. It is, therefore, important that reliable communication links exist between the local emergency service agencies and the local broadcast media. (Carter, 1980: 215)

Residents need to know who should evacuate, where they should go and by what routes. Only the local emergency services – not the national weather service – could know these details. Carter concluded that the capability to warn residents accurately and reliably was neither widespread nor used effectively.

The same situation can be shown to exist in Australian communities – the links between the local news media and the local emergency services organizations need to be improved. The will to achieve improvement exists in both sets of organizations, but some practices – especially newsgathering practices – need to be examined. The process of two-way familiarisation will help improve the situation, but there are other specific things that can be done.

The newsworthiness angle

If emergency management personnel were to become more familiar with the newsgathering and editorial process, they would gain an appreciation of the concept of newsworthiness. Timeliness and conflict are two of the major news values upon which the media prioritise news.

Conflict as a news value may be an alien concept to crisis managers. Any situation containing an element of conflict – actual or potential, physical or psychological – attracts journalists who know instinctively and from experience that conflict appeals to audience members. Disasters are conflict situations *par excellence*. They contain so many different kinds of conflict that news media do not even have to think about whether they should publish them – it is axiomatic that they should. We will attempt to analyse this phenomenon later in this paper.

The news value of Timeliness needs no explaining – all news organisations strive for the most up-to-date information possible and assume that it is in the public interest to publish it. While there are occasions when public safety demands immediate publication, there are many more occasions when the public would be better served by news organizations taking a more considered approach. Accurate, reliable information delivered to the public as quickly as possible is far more useful in a crisis situation than inaccurate, unreliable information delivered immediately and then corrected at some later date – possibly after considerable damage has been done.

As mentioned above, there will be occasions when journalists with limited experience of crisis reporting cover disaster stories, approaching the situation with the standard-issue news value of Conflict. This will often be inappropriate as other news values such as Consequence (how many people will be affected by this event?) make more sense. Emergency management personnel should emphasise the Consequence angle, especially for journalists whose training and experience has conditioned them for an entirely different approach.

Accuracy and fair dealing

Accurate and reliable information is of paramount importance at a disaster. Last year's fires in Canberra, the subject of three public inquiries, confirmed that the information disseminated to the public was not always accurate – and the reliability of the carrier could therefore be called in question. After observing and interviewing a number of journalists covering a bushfire near Port Lincoln, Jacqui Ewart (2002) also reports journalists complaining about the accuracy of the information supplied by the crisis managers.

Too often during disasters, misunderstandings develop when emergency workers say "I can't tell you" when they really mean, " I don't know." Honesty is a good start to secure working relationships. Journalists are generally reasonable people and do not expect sources to know everything. Disaster managers who attempt to conceal their lack of information, even when that lack is perfectly reasonable in the circumstances, behind bureaucratic authoritarianism are courting further disaster. Journalists tend to view authority with suspicion and if they consider that the authorities are concealing something, will go to extraordinary lengths to uncover it. Some will resort to unfair or unethical practices.

For this reason, it is unwise for organisations to attempt to micro-manage journalists covering disasters. Journalists will accept the need for reasonable control over access, movement of recovery workers and the necessity of media conferences, but the emphasis is on the word "reasonable". Journalists work to deadlines and must fulfil organisational objectives and the desires to find "different" news if possible. They must be able to find their own stories and will persist in looking for that "story with the edge."

Requiring journalists to pool can raise problems between individual journalists and news organisations. Pooling is a valid way for journalists to cover some aspects of disasters and certain kinds of disasters but coordinators must ensure that the pooling arrangements do not hinder some journalists or organisations. For instance, Bilboe (1998) reports that at the Thredbo landslip disaster, indiscriminate and inappropriate pooling meant some journalists did not receive information as promptly as others did, or were denied data from the field. When a particularly well known journalist arrived at Thredbo, the recovery personnel went out of their way to accommodate him, providing assistance and access that was not available to others. Both these practices created unnecessary resentment.

Following the 2003 Canberra bushfires, the suggestion that local media enter into a formal agreement with bushfire disaster coordinators and be given up-to-date information and more favourable treatment has been canvassed. This is a concern for a number of reasons. The information, selectively provided in the expectation that some journalists will be more compliant than others, should be provided to all as a matter of routine. There is danger in assessing compliance, whether it relates to journalists' activities, output or both. If implemented, this suggestion will also lead the excluded journalists or organisations to ask what they are entitled to and then demand equal treatment.

Dealing with unethical journalists

Just as it is now understood that there are firefighters who deliberately light fires, crisis managers should understand that some journalists will engage in unethical behaviour. The need to fill the news-hole will drive journalists find information from other sources, sensationalise a trivial event, or engage in unethical activities – especially if they are not supplied with information, their activities are restrained, or they are misled. (Bilboe, 1998). Inexperienced journalists may fall into this trap under subtle, or not-so-subtle, pressure from higher up in the newsroom. The pressure to act unethically will continue, especially with the move to smaller newsrooms staffed by younger workers.

Journalists who choose unethical practices are a cause for concern. Anecdotal evidence, such as Lower (1999) and Dorney (1999) suggests that the vast majority of journalists are simply doing their job in a professional manner. Others are not so complimentary. Trina McLellan (1999: 66) interviewed a number of local residents after the Port Arthur shootings, concluding that "journalists and decision-makers use deadlines and competition to excuse malpractice" and that "cynicism and competition are so ingrained in the media that little else matters". Ewart (2002) feels that "bad behaviours and unethical practices are tried, tested and entrenched during small disasters", while Richards (1998: 150) notes: "As ratings and circulation follow the content of the story rather than the manner in which it is prepared, there has been considerable pressure on individual journalists to 'bend the rules' to get the story with the most audience impact." Disaster managers should accept that unethical

behaviour is likely and there is little they can do at the time; punitive or retaliatory action against all journalists on site is likely to be counter-productive.

After the event, disaster managers should register their complaints firstly with the media corporation concerned, followed by the Press Council for print and the industry bodies, Commercial Television Australia and Commercial Radio Australia. The Australian Broadcasting Authority can hear matters relating to breaches of the licence conditions of radio and television stations or breaches of the codes of conduct, after a complaint to the media corporation concerned has not been resolved. Complaints may also be made to the Australian Journalists' Association branch of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance but this is only effective when the journalist concerned is a member. Membership is inconsistent across the industry, with few television journalists holding union cards.

The trauma of the source

Jolyon Sykes and Kerry Green's research (2003) into the reporting of critical incidents shows that reporting inaccuracies can be harmful to sources. The sorts of things that hurt people – things in news reports that sources see as mistakes – can occur in emergency management situations as well. For example, when sources say journalists published hurtful inaccuracies because they did not check facts, those claims can represent a number of reporting situations. They can represent exactly what they appear to represent – journalists got their reports, or at least parts of their reports, wrong because they failed to check their facts.

They also can represent misunderstandings – misunderstandings on the parts of the journalists, the sources, or the authorities dealing with the critical incident. In some cases, for example, the authorities may release what appear to be minor details of an incident to the news media but not think it necessary to inform, say, family members of the same detail. When those details appear in news reports, family members may well interpret them differently from either the police or the journalists and feel aggrieved as a result.

In other cases, journalists under deadline pressure may publish a report quoting police sources, without checking facts with family members. When some of those facts prove inaccurate, family members again feel betrayed by the news media. Sykes and Green's research indicates many journalists appear not to appreciate the anguish even the most minor errors of detail can cause – even errors such as misspelling a name.

Training journalists in the knowledge of trauma and grief processes, as well as training in concert with disaster co-ordinators could militate against poor or unethical journalism. Disaster managers, including the police, should exercise more care with information relating to victims and survivors.

Journalism's higher purpose

The ready acceptance by the public of disaster coverage mitigates to some extent the debate over its production. There is a need for these stories, some sociologists and psychologists believing that the processing of disasters is an important organizing factor in society (Herman 1992). The German poet Friedrich von Schiller recognised the importance of telling the truth about disasters in his *Ode to Joy* (1785), later used by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony, the music of which is now the European Anthem:

> From the truth's own fiery mirror
> On the searcher doth she smile.

> Up the steep incline of honour
> Guideth she the sufferer's mile.
> High upon faith's sunlit mountains
> One can see her banner flies,
> Through the breach of open'd coffins
> She in angel's choir doth rise.

One of the earliest attempts to report and analyse a disaster was by Thucydides, who completed *The Peloponnesian War* in 404BC. Written as the war unfolded, it documents the debilitating effects it had on the morale of the populace and the economy, fulfilling the community's need to make sense of a long series of events. Daniel Defoe's (1722) account of the London plague of 1665, which occurred when he was only four or five years old, was based on the recollections of a witness, H.F., but nevertheless remains a journalistic *tour de force.*

In William Coté and Roger Simpson's book, psychologist Frank Ochberg explains the need for these stories. Beginning in childhood, we need to absorb and store these memories as a survival strategy. They provide some inoculation against the effects of the real thing if it should happen to us. They also help us to develop good ideas of what to avoid. A non-threatening situation, such as reading a newspaper or watching television is a suitable place for this to happen. Ochberg does not advocate more graphic coverage – an inoculation is all that is needed, not an overdose. This explanation of the popularity of graphic coverage of tragedy is reinforced by the demand for such coverage over the history of illustrated print media, radio and television. (Coté & Simpson 2000: 129)

The psychology of disaster coverage

Complainants about the coverage of disasters by media organisations should consider this need. The Psychology of Tragedy (Bodkin 1934, Roberts, 1975) stems from the study of literature, especially the Greek tragedies, and elucidated by various psychologists, notably Vygotsky (trans 1991) and Maslow (1996). Maud Bodkin's book *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934) identifies 21 main types of tragedy with numerous sub-types. She notes that tragedy ultimately involves conflict between archetypal dominance versus subordination tendencies within the individual (especially the hero) as well as between the individual and destiny, nature, or God. She also noted that tragedy allows the human will, strength and courage to be viewed in the face of certain defeat.

Bodkin's central point is that "Tragedy always carries with it the suggestion of some continuance or renewal of the strong life that plunges downward into darkness." She continues: "Tragedy communicates in essentially religious exultation the sense of profound values that do not erase with the death of the mortal creatures that partially embody them". (1934: 215).

The psychologist Abraham Maslow, famous for his Self-Actualisation theory, concurs from a psychological viewpoint. He notes that tragedy confronts us with the ultimate values, questions and problems that we usually forget about in everyday life: "With tragedy we live on the highest plane". No matter what happens to the particular hero or incident, the "Being-Values themselves continue for they are eternal and last forever." (1996: 56) Maslow also notes the catharsis surrounding tragedy by which important and eternal philosophic issues rescue us from the mundane and trivial. In this way tragedy can give us some feelings of

inner cleansing and aspirations, to lift us out of the ordinariness of life and allow us to ponder deeper meanings.

Hence, coverage of tragedies by journalists may enable the community to experience these psychological constructs and may not be as destructive as some may think. Disasters and tragedy may help people rehearse for unhappy and bad emotions, allowing them to feel good about feeling bad. By watching, reading and partaking in mass mediated tragedy and disaster, people are rehearsing their response to grief and recovery, developing their individual emotional protection. We are all aware that disaster can strike anywhere, anytime.

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