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Keynote Address

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The Media in Disasters: Help or Hindrance?

keynote address by

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One of the earliest lessons I learned as a disaster manager was this: when a disaster strikes the first thing to do is to look around for somebody else to blame. It’s human nature isn’t it? Recently The Spectator said: “while rescuers dig for survivors, reporters shovel rubbish for saleable stories”. Was there not a grain of truth in that? The most saleable stories are of suffering old people, women and children, and of muddle, incompetence and corruption in the local authorities, relieved only by cohorts of international
rescue teams who look so impressive on television back home rushing to board relief aircraft dressed in their fluorescent jackets. In fairness, it should be said that the converse also applies - local authorities accuse the international community and the media of doing as much to add to the problem as to relieve it. As is so often the case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

You have probably heard of the strategy for personal success in the UN. On taking up your post develop an institutional blamework; then, when you have identified all the participants, develop a blameplan. Finally, when the inevitable trouble strikes, use a blamethrower.

As media people you know far better than I do that what you want are hard facts, a story (preferably human-interest) and cooperation. Your needs vary greatly, depending upon whether you work for a newspaper, TV or the radio. You are under pressure to get a story out by the next deadline and to "beat" the competition. You have little time to check your facts. If you cannot get a story from official sources you will find one elsewhere. You are opinion leaders, sometimes biased, working under pressure and, like the rest of us, human. You will always have full control over your story, the chance to put words into people's mouths, the last word, the power to interpret and to
distort, little control over editing or headlines, and no great desire to print retractions. You dislike "no comment", have limited respect for "off the record" and have little patience if you suspect people are stalling or evading. No matter who you are, you demand respect, attention and patience! In short, you are powerful and influential.

But what about the other actors? The victims, the relief workers, the people organizing the relief operations, government officials and so on. They too are working under great stress and under enormous political pressure to be seen to be doing something. Of course, there is muddle and inadequate and inaccurate information; there is bound to be after any major disaster. Official spokesmen have an obligation to you, though it has to be said that they do not always meet it satisfactorily. However, the standards of accountability you demand from them are rarely the same as those you apply to your own reporting. One of the hallmarks of a good disaster manager is the ability to work under such circumstances to "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, and blaming it on you". Please bear in mind that relief workers are seldom practised spokesmen, adept at media relations. To misquote Kipling once again: "If you can meet the Media and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same"!
How can we reconcile the priorities of disaster managers with those of the media? How can the Media's power and influence be utilized for the common good, not just in disaster relief but also in pre- and post-disaster activities? I'll come back to these points in a few minutes.

First, however, I would like to scotch a few myths about disasters. In so doing I shall quote extensively from the writings of Dr De Ville de Goyet who for more than twenty years has been the Chief of the Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program at the World Health Organization's Pan American Health Organization Regional Office for the Americas.

Firstly, there is the myth that the victims are too shocked and helpless to do anything for themselves. The truth is that many find new strength, individually and collectively, to organize rescue and to rebuild their lives. Helping them to help themselves is a crucial part of the process of rehabilitation.

Then there is the myth that after a disaster order breaks down. The truth is that, while there may be isolated cases of anti-social behaviour (seized upon...
by the media), the majority behaves spontaneously with decency and generosity.

Then there is the near-myth that successful rescue and relief is largely dependent upon foreign rescue teams. In fact, most survivors are rescued by their neighbours and local rescue teams. Only a handful ever owe their lives to foreign rescue teams. This is particularly true of casualties. By the time foreign medical teams arrive most of the physically accessible injured have already been received some form of medical treatment. Furthermore, foreign medical personnel are not necessarily the most appropriate for local conditions and the needs of the victims.

There is the myth that the best response to disaster is immediate international relief. Of course, international assistance can do a lot of good when properly directed to real problems. Too often, however, it is mounted as much for the “benefit” of publicity in the donor country as for the needs of the victims. Experience shows that hasty international response provided without proper understanding of local conditions and of the need to complement national efforts only contributes to the chaos. The supply chain can become clogged with useless impedimenta – inappropriate food, clothing or shelter, time-expired medicines or medicines with the instructions in a foreign language. This process is sometimes known as...
dumping. International relief workers can be very demanding on local resources – transportation, accommodation, and interpreters – sometimes far beyond the value of what they contribute. Figures published by the UN show that the international relief is seldom as much as 10% of the total relief effort. Often the best form of international assistance is in cash not kind.

There is a prevalent myth that dead bodies are a major risk of disease, a myth propagated by the media after almost every disaster. It is just that, a myth. The bodies of victims from earthquakes or other natural disasters do not present a public health hazard of cholera, typhoid fever or other plagues as so often suggested by ill-informed medical doctors. In fact the bodies of the few unfortunate people who were carriers of these diseases are a far lesser threat to the health of others than the people were when they were alive. Often overlooked is the unintended social consequence of the precipitous and unceremonious disposal of corpses. Such action is just one more blow to the morale of the survivors, depriving of them of their wish, indeed their right, deeply rooted in their culture, to honour their dead. The lack of a death certificate can cause suffering and legal difficulties for years to come. Moreover, the effort expended on summary disposal, superfluous "disinfection" with lime, and mass burial or cremation requires human and material resources that would be much better employed for the benefit of the survivors.
The myth that things get back to normal within a few weeks is especially pernicious. The truth is that the effects of disasters often drag on for a very long time. Consider, if a coconut tree is blown down it will take six or seven years before its replacement starts fruiting; how is the farmer to subsist during the interval? On a small Pacific island ravaged by a typhoon the damage can amount to the equivalent of several years GNP. Financial and material resources are depleted in the immediate post-impact phase and this can adversely affect long-term development plans and foreign exchange reserves. Disaster response is not just relief, it is also rehabilitation and reconstruction; but by that time international interest has moved on.

So, to return to the questions I raised earlier: How can we reconcile the priorities of disaster managers and the Media? How can the Media's power and influence be utilized for the common good in pre- and post-disaster activities? Here are a few suggestions:

- **Pre-Disaster:**

  > Support public awareness programs for disaster preparedness, prevention and mitigation, particularly at the community level.

  > Publicise local initiatives.
➢ Do investigative reporting on safety in the workplace.

➢ Help in public information programs for the dissemination of warnings.

➢ Get to know disaster managers, if you can, and build a rapport with them. This requires a sustained commitment rather than the ephemeral interest created by the disaster itself.

➢ Publicize the importance of Government funding for preparedness and prevention.

➢ Help to educate the donors.

➢ Act as fora for local citizens to air their concerns and views.

• Post-disaster:

➢ Recognize that the official in charge of relief operations is probably a local administrator whose technical disaster management expertise may not be all that strong. Like you he is under great stress and struggling. He himself is therefore a human-interest story.

➢ As information experts, you understand the importance of good, timely, information. Perhaps you can actually contribute to the decision-making process.

➢ Consult reliable sources, not self-appointed whiz kid “experts”.

➢ Recognize the difference between good and bad practice.
> Work with the authorities to help inform the public.

> Encourage relief in cash rather than kind.

> Pick up, and publicize, inappropriate aid.

> Don’t automatically classify women, children and the elderly as passive victims. They could be human-interest stories.

> Look for heroes not villains.

> Help people to learn from the experience and apply the lessons learned in the future.