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Tales from the Darkside: *Ethical Implications of Disaster Coverage*

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Disaster strikes and, today, media representatives are essential players. It took little exposure to the coverage of the 1986 Challenger explosion to agree with the observation in *Time* magazine that, "The deluge of TV and press coverage that follows a disaster has become an unavoidable feature of the media age" (*Time*, February 10, 1986, p. 42).

News coverage of disasters can have potentially positive effects. Warnings before a crisis may prevent some disasters by alerting citizens and public officials to dangers. News analysis both during and after a disaster can help people understand why the disaster happened. The coverage can help people decide whether future disasters can be prevented or made less devastating, and it can help people understand what the disaster means in a larger context.

However, if news media *should* do any of this, it is because media have a particular function in society. This is not to argue that the free press ought to be forced to do anything. The press is free to meet or not to meet societal responsibilities. This chapter is simply an attempt to flesh out what those responsibilities are in times of disaster.

It is reasonable to expect media to respond to disaster, like other powerful organizations in the community, by helping to mitigate harm. In fact, The National Research Council's Committee on Disaster and the Mass Media provides the fol-

lowing list of media responsibilities: (a) preparing the public to meet emergencies; (b) providing mitigation, warning, and coping information; (c) providing reassurance and a mode for grieving or assuaging guilt in the aftermath of a tragedy; and (d) providing a record of activities related to the natural hazard (Wilkins, 1985, p. 51).

Only the fourth responsibility fits with the conventional "documentarian" responsibility of the press. Disaster creates additional responsibilities for news media, including a demand for cooperation with official sources. Media and official sources form partnerships in times of crisis.

First, what of the role of government during disasters? Holton (1985) said:

The fundamental responsibility of all government is to ensure the safety and well-being of its citizens. That mission cannot be carried out in an information vacuum. The public must know if and when there is danger, and when the danger has passed. And people also have the right to know the fate of their neighbors. (p. 16)

If there were a U.S. government owned medium that relayed messages directly to the people, the privately owned press would not be needed to be the government's information arm. But, as it is, victims, support groups, and concerned citizens depend on media representatives and officials to work together during disasters.

FUNCTIONAL OBLIGATIONS

By definition, media communication and, by function, news media communicate messages that tell people how to work effectively in society. Although this functional duty is interpreted differently in different cultures, it is the responsibility of the U.S. mass market press to tell citizens what they need to know to make intelligent decisions for self-governance.

Communication of any message to a mass audience is a powerful function, a function often expressed in a cliché about media influence: The media may not tell people what to think, but they tell them what to think about. People are vulnerable to media; even the most cynical consumers of news get most of their information about the world from media. This power that media hold over the populace implies some obligations, ethically if not logically.

One of the few areas of agreement throughout 2,000 years of moral philosophy is that people in power have at least a *prima facie* duty to avoid harming those who are vulnerable to them. Some philosophers, such as Plato, have gone much further, arguing that those in power must promote good. Mass communicators, in particular, have a duty to do good for the community and individuals, according to the Platonic dialogue, *Gorgias*.

Whether we want to argue that mass communicators should work actively to promote a particular view of the perfect society, they should at least provide important information for people about their world. In addition, the morality of power dictates that news organizations must refrain from causing indiscriminate harm.

U.S. news media have even more obligations, based on promises made by individual news organizations to the audiences they serve. Through promotional literature and through more subtle means, news organizations both implicitly and explicitly have promised to provide accurate, complete, balanced, and relevant information to their audiences. This promise is so universally accepted that travelers can read any mass market daily in any U.S. city and trust that the account they read represents the local journalists' attempt to approximate the truth.

Thus, three basic obligations for the news media follow:

1. News media should give readers and viewers information that tells them what they need to function effectively in society.
2. This information should be given without causing harm.
3. News media should make every attempt to provide accurate, complete, balanced, and relevant information.¹

However, finding examples of media obligations in conflict is not difficult. For example, telling the public about corruption in the Nixon administration certainly caused harm to many administration officials. Yet, voters needed to know so they could make informed decisions. The *need* for the public to have the information justified the harm caused. It is often difficult to judge if news media are meeting their obligations because in meeting one, they may violate another. The question becomes even more difficult during disaster coverage with the forced interdependence between media and government and with the urgent public need for media messages.

TENSIONS OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Media representatives know they need official statements during a crisis, and officials know they need the media to get their messages out. Hazards researchers know that both media and government are crucial to the victims of disaster. Nevertheless, tension exists between government and news media during disasters.

Wilkins (1987) has pointed out that hazards researchers identify media as highly effective means of public education but that media can only be effective if reporters have access to information. However,

analysis of actual media messages about hazards indicate that some of the information the public needs to receive is never made available to the media or

that reporters and editors lack the education and training to understand information they do receive. (p. 9)

Many "community plans for disaster preparedness seem to place contact with the media in a somewhat secondary role" (Wilkins, 1985, p. 52).

If media representatives are treated as secondary during a crisis, it should not be surprising that, as noted by Scanlon, Tuukko, and Morton (1978), media representatives exaggerate the extent of the crisis, are confused, disorganized, carry conflicting information, and interfere with disaster response. These authors conclude that most disaster literature is

in agreement on one point: during a crisis or disaster, the media will be carriers of inaccuracies and rumors. Journalists covering such events will be, at best, a problem for those responding to the media of crisis-stricken communities. (p. 68)

If media interfere with governmental response to stricken citizens, it may be through the reporter's sincere attempt to discover what is really going on. There is ample evidence that officials want to manipulate information and public sentiment about disasters.

Blyskal and Blyskal (1985) point out that disasters lead to the public relations ploy of "crisis management." Management of the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear accident provides a good illustration. Stephens and Edison (1982) report that during that crisis, "the press briefings were tense and at times intentionally obscure, the sources often hostile and tightlipped" (p. 199). According to Friedman (1981):

A number of newspeople placed much of the blame for poor local coverage of (TMI) on Met Ed (Metropolitan Edison Power Company). Most felt that while Met Ed did inform the media of TMI events, it did so in a way that was not useful. The city editor at the Harrisburg *Evening News* accused Met Ed of hiding the seriousness of problems encountered and propagandizing when it could. With few exceptions, the reporters and editors agreed that Met Ed had misled them about the severity of events. (p. 122)

The Three Mile Island reactor had been far from trouble-free prior to the crisis. But reporters charged that the little information that was given to them was presented in a way that covered up the seriousness of the problems. The reporters' own lack of technical understanding allowed for official minimalization of the problem.

Similarly, reporters charged that officials misled them when the Soviets shot down Korean airliner KAL 007 in August of 1987. Boot (1983) explained:

...readers and viewers were overrun by a veritable stampede of reports and editorials—echoing the official Reagan administration line—which charged

unequivocally that the Soviets had identified the craft as an airliner but had deliberately destroyed it for straying into Russian airspace.

CBS asserted on September 1 that the attack was "a premeditated act of murder." *The New York Times* described the attack in its September 2 lead editorial as "cold-blooded mass murder."

It was frequently a case of write first, ask questions later—questions such as: Where was the unmistakable evidence that the Soviets had known they were shooting down an airliner? President Reagan insisted he had such evidence, but the administration later backtracked. After information leaked out that a U.S. spy plane had crossed paths with the jetliner, U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick said that the attack might have been an accident. (p. 27)

Official sources may have withheld information and lied in these cases, but journalists share the blame for inaccurate reporting. It should come as no surprise to journalists that officials may lie, and increasingly savvy public relations tactics allow for even greater possibility of deception. So, as Blyskal and Blyskal warn, "reporters, writers and editors must learn some new additions to the traditional five Ws: Who are the PR people behind the story? What are they not telling you? Why (and how) is PR attempting to manipulate and influence the story?" (p. 55).

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN DISASTER PREPARATION

The public, scholars, and officials alike expect that news media will help people prepare for disasters. In particular, Sorenson (1983) pointed out that scholars and officials

are typically quick to reason that public education and the dissemination of information will result in more adaptive behavior when disaster strikes. Over time, it is concluded, losses from hazards such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and other geographical events will be reduced. (p. 438)

Sorenson (1983) showed that people depend on the media for this public education. When he asked college students to decide what sources taught them adaptive behavior and preparedness for threatening natural disasters, he found that media topped the list. The students chose media over school, governmental agencies or family (p. 447).

Although this seems to affirm media credibility, news organizations do not capitalize on this consumer dependency. Journalists do not often write stories that prepare people for disasters.

News coverage of the 1982 Denver blizzard illustrates this. Wilkins (1985) found that 62% of the stories were concerned with disaster impact and emergency response. Not only were there relatively few warning stories for this predicted event, but many of the stories related to preparedness came long after they could

have helped people cope. "The media told Denver residents how to survive in cars that had become mired in the snow, what to put in the trunk of a car to avoid such an event...well after the blizzard and its immediate aftermath" (p. 56). While the reality of stranded people inspired such stories, the probability of these events during major snow storms is such that journalists should provide coping information along with storm predictions.

Unwilling sources can be an acute problem when media try to warn of potential disasters. Sometimes, as Kueneman and Wright (1975) noted, officials delay warnings because of the uncertainty that a disaster will strike. "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" (p. 674).

Officials may also minimize the threat of danger because of special interest groups, as seemed to be the case during the Mount St. Helens volcano eruption. If the media had raised questions about the officially designated zone, some of the 36 deaths might have been averted. One analyst noted, "Crucial sections of that 'red zone' (danger zone) did not follow predicted paths of devastation from a major eruption.... In areas where geologists accurately forecast that the danger could extend 20 miles or more, the boundary was less than 3 miles from the summit (Morain, 1983, p. 6).

Morain further suggested that reporters' attention on the "red zone" could have forced an expanded restricted area or, at least, "might have increased public awareness that land outside the red zone was not necessarily safe" (p. 6). Investigation after the disaster revealed that the "boundary on what proved to be the most dangerous side of the mountain simply followed the line dividing federal parkland from property owned by the Weyerhaeuser Company, the region's major employer" (p. 6).

Morain warned that reporters should resist what may be a natural tendency to doubt that the worst may happen and should examine emergency planning schemes with a eye toward the possible conflicts of interest in official decisions about safety (p. 10).

THE MEDIA MYTH OF HELPLESS VICTIMS

If people are not adequately prepared to deal with disasters, they will feel out of control when confronted with one. This feeling of helplessness leads to a weakened motivation to respond and greater emotionality (Levine, 1977, p. 100). Media emphasize helplessness.

Sometimes the nature of a disaster limits individual control, but media focus on devastation over prevention, and coping courts future crisis. According to Wilkins (1986), events like the 1984 Union Carbide chemical accident in Bhopal,

India, provide "an example of a new cultural myth in the making, a myth of mass extinction and individual helplessness which does not bode well for the policy decisions technological hazards will require of the world's citizens" (Wilkins, 1986, pp. 24-25).

Helplessness is reinforced in editorials like one that appeared in the *New York Times* after the eruption of Mount St. Helens. The writer called the eruption a tragedy with "no guilt." Statements such as, "You can't blame a volcano" (Morain, p. 6) fostered helplessness and diverted attention from culpability for poor disaster management and from planning for future disasters.

There was even helplessness in the coverage of Chernobyl. Seemingly, there was little to do but question the accuracy of Soviet body counts (because they were provided by the Soviets), track the radioactivity released into the atmosphere, and watch to see which of the world's citizens would be affected.

Are citizens and media better prepared to face nuclear disasters of the future in the wake of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl? As the Soviet accident illustrated, such a disaster potentially can touch every town in every part of the world. Virtually every news organization could prepare to empower readers and viewers in a world with nuclear accidents.

DEATHS IN LIVING COLOR

Without or without stories on preparedness, media are there either when disaster strikes or immediately after, when people and property are still in danger. In the midst of crisis, problems associated with accuracy, media self-censorship and putting the disaster into context come to the fore.

When faced with the choice between reporting uncertain information or reporting nothing, journalists often report what they have. Disasters are chaotic events. Media and governmental goals conflict. While government is responding to the physical needs of those affected, media are trying to get the big picture to meet information needs. Inaccuracies result in confused times.

In a paradoxical way, the journalist's motivation to cover the disaster in progress may lead to unintentional distortion. For example, on-site satellite transmission makes it possible for journalists to cover the blood, gore, and on-going chaos during a crisis. While such transmission is certainly "true" in the sense that the cameras are faithfully recording what is happening, the dramatic "happening" may not be the accurate, complete information that facilitates viewer understanding.

Accurate, complete, and balanced information is information selected and presented in a way that allows the best opportunity for the consumer's creation of meaning. Presentations of chaos and random dramatic events exploit victims without increasing consumer understanding of the disaster.

The journalists' lack of concern for the panic and confusion caused by such transmission is problematic, but so is the self-censorship that may result from too much journalistic concern. In an analysis of broadcast stations' policies on covering civil disturbances and disasters, Kueneman and Wright (1975) found that "the perception of public excitability was found to be strongly related to the withholding of information.... The perception of the anticipated audience response directly affects the release of information concerning such events" (p. 674).

Of the stations in Kueneman and Wright's sample, 72% treated information related to disaster in a special way.

The following comments from interviews are characteristic of their orientation. "You must be very careful that you don't overemphasize what's taking place." "I think you can create a good deal of panic if you're not very careful on the air; you can scare people out of their wits." "We are caught in a dilemma: we try not to minimize the danger, yet try not to create panic." (pp. 671-672)

Scholars analyzing the coverage of Three Mile Island echoed these comments. Stephens and Edison (1982) said:

At Three Mile Island reporters also faced a pressure that was new to science reporting. Residents of the area monitored news reports for hints of whether to flee. Overly alarming coverage could have spread panic; overly reassuring coverage could have risked lives. (p. 199)

During disaster coverage, then, journalists put themselves in an unusual role—that of releasing only the information that they believe will not lead to undue public reaction. Suppression of information can promote feelings of helplessness by allowing people to learn too little too late, focus on chaos and trauma, and promote feelings of helplessness as well.

The way out of this too much/too little dilemma is for journalists to determine what kind of information the public needs during disasters. For example, the more complex the story, the more help the consumer needs in defining unusual terms. During the Three Mile Island crisis, the *New York Times* did this, literally providing the reader with a glossary of scientific terms needed to understand the developing story (Kriehbaum, 1979).

Such attention does not always occur. Wilkins (1985) noted that in reporting the 1982 Denver blizzard, "about 94 percent of the stories did not contain any definition, either paraphrased or precise, of a blizzard.... While such definitions might have been superfluous in stories written weeks after the storm, initial stories certainly would have been more precise if they defined the term" (p. 56).

Reports of the April 1986 Soviet nuclear disaster provide more illustration of media not putting the story into precise context. A May 4, 1986, UPI story described the area around the Chernobyl plant as a "desolate wasteland" in the accident's

aftermath. Translating this description into specific affects on flora and fauna was left to the readers' imaginations. Readers searching for an understanding of the effects of nuclear accidents need to know details.

In addition, disasters, as reported in the media, are frequently reported without historical context. Just as comparisons between events at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl appeared long after initial coverage, the Three Mile Island story was reported initially without the reactor's own troubled history.

Wilkins (1987) echoed this lack of history in disaster reporting in her discussion of Bhopal.

Only one story, in Reuters, mentioned the green revolution or the fact that India has been able to feed itself for most of the past ten years. Only 2.6 percent of the stories discussed, in any detail at all, the economic and political reasons the plant was built in India. (p. 20)

A lack of understanding often limits the journalists' ability to cover a disaster as something people can cope with. If journalists see disasters as events that just happen, they certainly can not empower their readers. As Holton (1985) pointed out in his discussion of Three Mile Island, the journalists "had no prior planning to turn to, no memoranda of understanding, no disaster exercises to look back to. The result was a cacophony of conflicting statements, warnings, assumptions and explanations" (p. 15).

Media shy away from dealing with the hard issues raised by disasters. Wilkins (1986) characterized the event-oriented coverage of the Bhopal disaster as "knowledge without meaning" (p. 29). Yet, when television journalists quickly began speculation about how the Challenger disaster would affect government policy regarding future launches, questions were raised about whether media were reflecting or creating public opinion. Were media forecasting (as yet unvoiced) government intention or dictating governmental response? Perhaps it is more fruitful to discuss which role is appropriate for the media.

HOW MEDIA OUGHT TO COVER DISASTERS

How should media cover disasters? One basis for formulating guidelines is the set of minimal obligations presented earlier: News media should publish accurate, complete, balanced information that tells people what they need to function effectively in society without, as much as possible, causing harm.

Given these obligations and the special audience needs for news coverage of disasters, I suggest six guidelines.

First, journalists should become well versed in the context in which disasters occur and should be skeptical of information provided by official sources.

Officials may deceive out of self-interest. Journalists have an obligation to uncover the real story because that is what citizens require to be intelligent decision makers. The real story occurs in context. Prior to disasters, journalists should become aware of potential problems and should know the relevant context before a problem occurs.

Second, news organizations ought to help the public prepare for dealing with disasters. This requires that journalists fight their own disbelief and that of officials that "the worst" might happen. They should be willing to become active information seekers rather than reactive documentarians. Preparation can prevent disasters by alerting the public to problems and can help those effected have more control.

Third, journalists should provide as much information as possible during the coverage of a disaster.

Media can cause harm by omission as well as commission. Public panic is more likely to be caused by giving too little information too late than by crying wolf. Saying nothing when something should be said causes harm. Information should be given that enables citizens to take control.

Fourth, journalists must also provide accurate information, particularly during a crisis.

Acknowledged uncertainty makes for better reporting than the reporting of erroneous facts. Media credibility is vital during disasters. The most accurate media message may be the assessment that no one is really sure of the situation at the moment. Journalists are obligated to keep their promise of accuracy; there is no competing ethical principle to justify being first with possibly inaccurate information.

Fifth, media should focus on the contextual meaning of the event rather than on victims or drama during coverage of the disaster.

The audience needs a way to put the disaster into a context that helps them make intelligent decisions of how to cope with the disaster in progress and how to deal with the disaster after the fact as part of public policy. Victims do not want or need further victimization by media focusing on their trauma, nor does this focus fulfill reader/viewer needs.

Sixth, media knowingly and responsibly ought to participate in setting the agenda for public and governmental discussions on issues involved with the disaster.

News media comprise the one U.S. institution with the obligation of getting the issues out for public discussion. Informative reports are necessarily catalytic. Fear of swaying public opinion sometimes makes journalists hesitate to grapple with the big issues or put disasters in the context of policy discussions. Rather than deny this important agenda-setting function, news media ought to raise questions about disasters. There can never be too much public attention on questions of preventing and mitigating harm.