



DISASTER REPORTING HANDBOOK



General

In the wake of any disaster, timely and credible information plays a pivotal role for an informed response, early recovery, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and long-term mitigation measures. The media forges a direct link between the public and responders, play a very important role in disseminating vital information. Disaster reporting by media provides disaster managers with necessary information for better preparedness and timely response. The booklet has been developed to help the media fulfill these roles and their awareness on “Disaster Reporting”.

Disaster Reporting Context

In February 1979, Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media of the National Academy of Science National Research Council held a workshop to discuss and review the state of the art in disaster reporting and media perceptions. The workshop concluded that there had been minimal research on disaster reporting, and that most of the existing studies had concentrated on media activities in disaster warning or immediate post disaster periods.

Shortly after this initiative, the Australian Counter Disaster College formed a study group to draft guidelines for media persons in relation to disasters. During 1980-95, several meetings were held, and publications came out for enhancing understanding on disaster risk communication.

In 1994, the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) Secretariat convened an international roundtable on The Media, Scientific Information and Disasters at the United Nations World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama, Japan. It examined important issues about the roles of, and the relationship between the media, scientists, relief organizations, and government officials, in generating, transmitting, and responding to disaster-related information. The outcome of the conference was the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World, which suggested engagement of media as a contributing factor in awareness raising, education and opinion building to increase recognition of the potential of disaster reduction to save human lives and protect property.

Dividends of Disaster Reporting

Media plays a pivotal role in saving lives of people, as it carries a great capacity to influence the role that holds society together and serves as a forum for public and community interactions. Significance of disaster reporting is evident from the following incidents: -

- ***Tropical Cyclones in Bangladesh:*** In November 1970, a tropical cyclone in Bangladesh killed more than 300,000 people and left 1.3 million homeless. In May 1985, a comparable cyclone again hit the same area, however due to better local dissemination of disaster warnings by media loss of life although still high, was 10,000 or about 3 percent of that of 1970. When a devastating cyclone struck the same area of Bangladesh in May 1985, 1000, people died. This was due to the effective risk communication.
- ***Tsunami Relief Asia- Africa (2004):*** In December 2004, a massive tsunami created by an earthquake hit Asia and Africa, devastating many coastal areas. Nearly 200,000 people in eight countries perished, while many more went missing. Over a million people were displaced, as their homes and livelihoods were swept away. To assist the victims of the tragedy, the Center for International Disaster Information (CIDI) used the media to help and educated Americans on how to provide the most effective relief by contributing cash donations. As a result of the media campaign, more than 4,500 individuals registered to offer technical assistance through the CIDI database.
- ***Hurricane Katrina, USA (2005):*** Hurricane Katrina was the sixth-strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, which killed 1,836 people and caused damage of an estimated US\$ 81.2 billion. The hurricane prompted widespread criticism of the federal, state and local governments' reaction to the storm, whilst the National Hurricane Center and National Weather Service were commended for accurate forecasts and abundant lead time. Hurricane Katrina illustrates how responsible reporting and coverage of events play a major role in promoting urban security and safety. The media backed the perception of poor governmental response to Katrina and showed the subsequent crime and violence in New Orleans. The media also suggested that the impact of the hurricane had been predicted and disaster could have been largely avoided through better preparedness.

PHASES OF DISASTER REPORTING

- **Non-disaster Phase:** During this phase media can take up issues pertaining to disaster related policy and legislation. Conduct interviews to highlight the significance of long-term disaster mitigation measures by public and private sectors. Undertake research and enhance understanding of disaster issues. Inform public and especially hazard-prone communities about the measures being taken by the government with regard to disaster risk management.
- **Pre-disaster Phase:** In a pre-disaster phase, media can emphasize the importance of disaster risk reduction and preparedness by encouraging the decision makers and the at-risk communities to undertake appropriate actions to reduce damage if not avoid future disasters. Media can also raise awareness on early warning, informing public about precautionary measures to avoid loss and structural / engineering measures to be taken.
- **During-disaster Phase:** During disaster phase of disaster the media actually work or act as a bridge between the affected community and the concerned relief organizations. The media can facilitate communication among survivors and their families. International standards focusing on minimal needs of the survivors like water, food, sanitation, shelter.
- **Post-disaster Phase:** In the final phase the focus should on early recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged infrastructure. Mobilization of financial, technical and material resources is an important requirement in the post-disaster phase. Undertake regular follow-ups on on-going early recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction work is also an import task of media during this phase.

POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS OF MASS MEDIA IN DISASTERS

Time Frame	Slow-onset Disasters	Sudden Disasters
Pre-disaster	• Redefining events • Agenda setting (bringing the events to public's attention; highlighting the event)	• Disseminating the preparedness information • Sending warnings to the threatened population • Speedily disseminating news of the event
Immediately post-disaster	• Informing decision makers • Monitoring the event • Estimating its seriousness • Providing relief information	• Determining its cause • Estimating its seriousness • Providing damage and casualty estimates (Perhaps challenging official estimates) • Detailing relief needs
Short-term relief	• Monitoring the event • Reporting relief operations and their effects	• Monitoring the event • Reporting relief operations • Locating defects and errors • Obtaining accurate information
Long-term relief (decreased media attention)	• Updating status reports • Reporting wrongdoing • Following long-term relief activities	• Updating status reports • Reporting wrongdoings • Following long-term relief activities

Source: *Disaster Communication: A Resource Kit for Media* by Bhatti A. & Ariyabandu M.

BASICS OF DISASTER REPORTING

WRITING BASICS

- What event of disaster occurred.
- Who got effected.
- Where the location of event.
- What was time duration of disaster.
- Why an event occurred casual, technical, social or political linkages that led to event.
- How is the government and communities prepared to cope with the disaster.
- Relevancy to readers.
- Who has been affected by the news.
- What do people need to do when threatening event occurs.

CLARITY

Reporting should be clear enough to understand what the reporter wants to say or deliver the message to readers and readers to understand the main theme or wording of reporter to get the message.

ARTICLE

Most important part in reporting is make a lead which attracts the reader into your story, cover only the main news in your story with facts and figures. Stick to the main headline of the news instead of diverging into secondary issues. Article or report should be written in concise words do not add irrelevant information, quotations and words.

SOURCES

The report you are going to write about disaster should have enough information with credibility to the readers that your sources are well expert or believable.

WRITING STYLE

Writing style should be clear and simple words which readers can understand easily and get the message of reporting by avoiding long sentences and misspelled words.

UNDERSTANDING KEY DISASTER ISSUES FOR EFFECTIVE REPORTING

HAZARD IDENTIFICATION

Hazard identification refers to the systematic use of all available information to determine which types of hazards might affect a community, along with their driving forces and typical effects. For instance, a district correspondent should be aware of the areas that can be hit by floods, landslides, etc. and he/she should file reports on potential hazards in the area he/she belongs to or is based in. Journalists can look at national and local governments' hazard identification surveys.

AVOIDANCE MEASURES

Crucial point for media in disaster situation is to inform the risk communities about the level of possible threat / disaster and what steps/preventive measures needs to be taken to avoid or minimize the level of damage to their properties and also to save their life and livelihoods.

RISK ASSESSMENT / COMMUNICATION

A qualitative or quantitative approach to determine the nature and extent of disaster risk by analyzing potential hazards/threat and evaluating existing conditions of exposure and vulnerability that together could harm people, property, services, livelihoods and the environment on which they depend

EARLY WARNING

The set of capacities needed to generate and disseminate timely and meaningful warning information to enable individuals, communities and organizations threatened by a hazard to prepare and to act appropriately and in sufficient time to reduce the possibility of harm or loss.

CODE OF CONDUCT ON IMAGES AND MESSAGES

1. Choose images and related messages based on values of respect equality, solidarity and justice
2. Truthfully represent any image or depicted situation both in its immediate and in its wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development.
3. Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalize or discriminate against people, situations or places.
4. Use images, messages and case studies with the full understanding, participation and permission (or subjects' parents/guardian) of the subjects.
5. Ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves.
6. Establish and record whether the subjects wish to be named or identifiable and always act accordingly.
7. Conform to the highest standards in relation to human rights and protection of the vulnerable people.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE MEDIA IN DISASTER REPORTING

Ethics deals with personal, institutional, and societal issues of right and wrong. Good media practice must be ethical - to know the difference between right and wrong behavior and to do what is right to the greatest extent possible. Applying ethical behavior in media practice is a powerful tool for public service, providing information to people in a responsible, truthful, independent and fair way. Ethical media practice can be realized by keeping in mind few key principles

TRUTHFULNESS

A media professional is expected to be well informed about the happenings around him, so as to inform and educate the public in a clear and effective way. Distorted, misrepresented, biased and opinionated information violates the ethics of journalism. Exaggeration must be avoided as it can lead to racial, religious or political conflicts leading to violence.

HUMANITARIAN APPROACH

It is important to maintain a decent and sympathetic attitude while reporting crimes, accidents and disasters. Use of bad language, obscene or shocking pictures should be avoided

INTEGRITY

Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.

HONORING THE SOURCES

Media professionals owe a responsibility not only to the public but also to the sources of information. If required, they need to maintain confidentiality of sensitive information and avoid any action that would compromise the safety and security of the sources.

SERVING PUBLIC INTEREST

Good media practice should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. They remain free of associations and activities that may compromise their integrity or damage their credibility, providing news and information that people need to function as effective citizens, seeking solutions as well as exposing problems and wrongdoing, providing a public forum for diverse people and views, and promoting the understanding of complex issues.

RESPECT FOR PRIVACY

People's right to privacy needs to be respected by media professionals. However, this should not be an obstacle to hold public servants like politicians or other individuals/entities accountable for their actions.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Mistakes must be admitted and corrected promptly. Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion of news stories is not permissible. Media professionals must clarify and explain the news or reports and invite dialogue with the public, as well as encourage them to voice grievances or submit their opinion.

APPLICATION OF ETHICAL PRACTICES TO DISASTER/CRISIS REPORTING

Reporting a disaster raises a number of unusual dilemmas for the media professional. These issues include whether to become a participant, to provide help for those afflicted, or to remain in the usual role of an observer. Other issues that require ethical considerations are on reporting death, intrusion with victim's and survivor's grief, interviews on survivors particularly on children, the extent of coverage of an emotionally fraught situation especially in photo opportunities when the subjects are not fully aware of its purpose or their rights. Another issue is the conflict between the priorities of emergency and response, medical, relief, or government agencies and those of the media during a disaster.

Another emerging issue is the effect of reporting disasters to media professionals. "Compassion fatigue" is a secondary traumatic stress experienced by media professionals and journalists who report on disasters, emergencies and crisis. Media organizations have an ethical responsibility to support their members in such cases. The BBC is one news organization that requires its media staff to undergo a "Hostile Environment and First Aid Training" course before covering wars or natural disasters. This provides training in, among other things, posttraumatic stress disorder.

It is important that media professionals acknowledge and respect the privacy of those affected by disaster. This includes protection against additional distress caused by intrusion or the use of graphic or explicit images and language. Caution must be exercised against intrusion into personal grief and distress. Interviews or inquiries must be carried out with sympathy and discretion and publication must be handled sensitively at all times. Report reality as objectively as possible but disaster reporting should also be as balanced as possible to avoid causing distress and anxiety. The use of appropriate language is essential.

Coverage of disasters should be done with compassion and empathy, not adding to the distress of survivors, relatives and victims. People already in distress must not be put under pressure. Ethical practices must be adhered to, no matter what the circumstances may be. Following are some practical guidelines in ethical disaster reporting:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and those grieving. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma in the US has guidelines on this point: "Children are more vulnerable to trauma because of their size, age and dependence. Prior trauma, past mental health problems or a family history of such problems may increase a child's risk. Traumatized children may want to tell their story, but it may not be in their best interests to be interviewed, and in some circumstances, it can exacerbate their exposure to trauma."
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief, as it may elicit traumatic memories and anxiety.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Respect the work of emergency workers, relief and rescue squads, public safety agencies or other authorities especially during the immediate onset of disaster. Do not press for information that may not be cleared for official release yet.
- Avoid reporting that may instill fear and panic. Ensure that stories presented will not offend public taste.
- Be open and allow survivors to access the media to find lost relatives or to make public service announcements.
- Do not expose media crew or the public to danger (in cases of disaster) just to get a story.
- Crisis reporting lead to a tendency to focus on "numbers" such as death toll and damage counts. Focus should also be given to make appeals for displaced survivors and future reconstruction.
- Understand trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, secondary traumatic stress, and victims' rights.
- Remember that "compassionate reporting need not preclude getting the story."
- Support other media professionals who become deeply affected by tragedy and needing emotional support.

Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) with support from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) is implementing the program 'Increased Locally Led Actions to Prepare for, Respond to and Recover from Disasters in selected high risk Countries of Asia' in 6 South and South-East Asian countries namely- Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Philippines and Myanmar.

The program utilizes a unique network approach by creating the Asian Preparedness Partnership (APP) - a multi-stakeholder regional partnership through the program. APP strives to improve inter-organizational coordination and dialogue between Governments, Local Humanitarian Organization networks and Private Sector networks for enhancing capacities through partnerships, knowledge resources, training and networking opportunities. The program's goal is to strengthen the emergency response capacities in these countries to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.



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